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“the most fatal  
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Collective Individualism in Carson  
McCullers’s *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

*Rebecca Peterson*

In her novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), Carson McCullers depicts fragmented characters who struggle to connect and communicate with their community—a struggle which hinders their ability to establish their identities and feel whole. Set in a 1930s Southern town, *Heart* follows deaf-mute John Singer who, through sign language, speaks freely with his deaf-mute friend Antonapoulos. After Antonapoulos leaves town, a group of misfits begins visiting Singer, divulging their lives to him. One of these is Mick, a tomboy aspiring to become a musician. Another is Biff, a gender-neutral man who owns the local diner. Though these characters idolize Singer, Singer feels no connection to them and eventually commits suicide. While Singer, Biff, and Mick struggle to articulate who they are, they present a range of ways to cope

with their fragmented selves. Engaging with Hegel's and Feurbach's explorations of how the self relates to others offer a better understanding as to how these characters navigate their fragmentation, as well as why Biff, Mick, and Singer feel isolated. Particularly, Hegel's and Feurbach's theories elucidate why communication is vital for these three to understand their ipseity and feel connected to those around them. In context of Hegel's and Feurbach's theories and my analysis of identity and communication in *Heart*, I contend that only by learning to "commune" will Biff, Mick, and Singer feel a part of their community and be able to reconcile their "fragmentation," discovering their identity and escaping the fatal consequences of standing alone.

In *Heart*, the term "identity" is formed by integrating the multiple aspects of an individual's self. It is a "multiety in unity," in which the different and sometimes contradictory aspects of a person create a unified and whole individual. In simple terms, a person is typically not wholly mean or nice. The individual may identify more with one trait or the other but still possesses a portion of both. This unity of different traits, experiences, ideas, and principles creates a complete, dynamic, and whole individual. Biff, Mick, and Singer, however, struggle to recognize that complete identity encompasses different and sometimes conflicting aspects of a self. Marshall Berman explains this concept of unified differences as he argues that the modern condition is "pregnant with its contrary" and is a universe full of "fragments," "paradox," and "disunity" (23, 15). He further states that "in the modern world 'Either/Or' is replaced by 'Both/And'" (24). Berman's paradigm is present in Biff's, Mick's, and Singer's being—they are full of contradictions and paradoxes but do not need to choose a single aspect of their selfhood. As the three deny their multiplicity or attempt to hide it, they are caught by the "Either/Or," believing only a single aspect or portion of their being should make up their identities. Berman states, though, that it is only through embracing the "Both/And," and the fragmented self that we can progress and "see that there is more depth in our lives than we thought" (36). In acknowledging and articulating their multiplicity, Biff, Mick, and Singer can reconcile their fragmentation and be whole, thus establishing their identity. *Identity* conveys the idea of having "sameness; oneness" ("identity"). Thus, paradoxically, they can have a cohesive and single identity, or a "whole" identity as they reconcile the fragments of their character to allow themselves to be "both/and."

Biff, Mick, and Singer deny their ability to be "both/and" by withholding their identities and selves from their communities and thus restrict their

growth. Hegel engages with these ideas of the self and community, arguing that people experience self-division, much like the fragmentation Mick, Biff, and Singer experience, because they are unable to reconcile different parts of their identity. Hegel argues that while the self-consciousness will attempt to exist wholly for itself as it recognizes this split, the self-consciousness cannot exist merely for itself or merely for others (*Phenomenology* 50). He argues that everything must exist in a duality of for itself and for another because identity's very existence depends upon recognition by the community (Hegel, 17; Forster 83). Recognition requires both a transmitter and receiver to understand each other. McCullers similarly advocates the idea that community is necessary for a being to exist by using Dr. Copeland, who states, "The most fatal thing a man can do is stand alone" (*Heart* 302). By isolating one's self from the community, a person cannot fully realize his or her identity but must remain fragmented, in a state of either/or, and unable to reconcile seemingly contrary aspects of his or her identity. While Hegel argues that this recognition comes through language, language's function to communicate with others demonstrates that besides voicing a concept, one must make it understandable for others.

Language is the means to convey self; however, if the person receiving a speaker's message does not understand, identity cannot be expressed. Ultimately, a transmitter must understand another person well enough to communicate a message in a way that the receiver will understand. Hegel writes, "[The power of speech] is the *real existence* of the pure self as self; in speech, self consciousness's autonomous individuality comes into existence as such, so that it exists *for other*. Otherwise, the 'I' . . . is non-existent, is not *there*. . . . Language contains [the 'I'] in its purity, it alone expresses the 'I'" (qtd. in Forster 84, emphasis in original). According to Hegel's discussion, there are two reasons why speech is powerful. First, the autonomous self only exists as far as it can be expressed. Second, language "exists for others" and for the purpose of connecting to others. While communication implies transmission of ideas, identity cannot be articulated or recognized without reception. In Hegel's words, two people must recognize, and thereby, understand each other; therefore, two-way communication extends beyond language and words to understanding and communion. The word "commune" comes from the root "common": "to make common with others to oneself; to communicate, impart, share" ("common"). Language is insufficient to communicate self if the communicator has no commonality with the speaker. Thus, if a transmitter wishes to be recognized, the transmitter must first recognize the receiver.

Biff's, Mick's, and Singer's struggles to communicate demonstrates that they must be concerned with both conveying their own identity while receiving another's self. They must be aware of the person to whom they are communicating and allow for two-way reception. By withholding aspects of their being from others, they deny themselves the ability to understand their own identities and simultaneously deny recognition to those close to them so that neither they nor those with whom they speak develop their being. The three are imposing "either/or" on their beings and are not allowing themselves to be "both/and" and to experience the depth of uniting their variegated self.

Biff struggles to understand his wife and express himself to her, which indicates that just as identity can be fragmented, community can be fragmented, requiring reconciliation for both. In order to communicate with his wife, Alice, Biff must reconcile his opposing masculine and feminine sides. However, Biff rejects the paradox of releasing part of himself to understand an "other" in order to both build himself and build his community. Biff allows shame to prevent him from communicating both sides of his being. While Alice is alive, Biff vacillates between his masculinity and femininity and largely hides his feminine side. At times, Biff attempts to communicate with Alice. However, Biff "was sorry he had talked to Alice. With her silence was better. Being around that woman always made him different from his real self" (*Heart* 15). Perhaps Biff concedes to Alice and does not wish to bother attempting to speak with her or to help her understand him. Conversely, he possibly does not attempt to understand Alice. As Alice falls asleep, Biff "watched her with detachment" (*Heart* 15). Because he does not feel invested in Alice, Biff does not attempt to find commonalities between them. Ultimately, the rift in their community prevents Biff from understanding himself and feeling comfortable with himself.

As Biff struggles to speak in a hostile community, Mick's strained relationships with her family members also indicates that communication cannot be selfish. While Mick attempts to communicate with her family, they do not listen to her. Their failure to listen complicates Mick's attempts to share her self with her family, demonstrating that Mick must learn to take part in two-sided conversations. Such conversation requires Mick to look outside of her music as a means to identify her self. Mick separates herself into an "inside" and "outside" room, and hides herself in her "inside" room. Music is an essential part of her "inside" room, and Mick contemplates, "It was a funny thing—but nearly all the time there was some kind of . . . music going on in the back of her mind" (*Heart* 35). Music works as a language and articulates the person Mick aspires

to become, a person diametric of her “outside” room self. Because Mick thinks her rooms oppose each other, she struggles to express both sides to her family.

Mick seeks her own recognition whether by listening to music alone or by transmitting only her self when speaking to her family without receiving an “other.” Mick feels closer to her older brother Bill than to other members of her family, but he largely ignores her. When she attempts to speak to him, “Bill [goes] on reading” (*Heart* 43). As she tries to commune with him about her violin—an attempt to share the music of her inside room—Bill gives noncommittal replies: “He was still reading—‘Yeah—?’” (*Heart* 45). Because there is no one to listen, Mick cannot fully express herself and is unable to share her “inside” room with others and reconcile her “inside” and “outside” selves. Hegel writes that consciousness “flees from the universal and seeks its mere existence-for-self”; however, “a singular ego may not exist through its own recognition” (*Phenomenology* 14, 27). While Mick wants to articulate herself and exist-for-self by listening to music alone, she cannot exist as a singular ego, hiding from the difficult task of learning how to overcome conversation barriers with her family and learning to listen to them. It seems easier to isolate herself, but Mick cannot reconcile her inside and outside room without the help of others.

Singer ultimately struggles because he relies solely on Antonapoulos, suggesting that a sense of community and recognition can be created, even when the two parties are completely dissimilar. Singer is “quick,” “intelligent,” “immaculate,” and “sober,” while Antonapoulos is “sloppy,” “shapeless,” “dreamy,” and “stupid” (*Heart* 3). Though he has nothing in common with Antonapoulos, Singer talks only with Antonapoulos and secludes himself from everyone else. Though he allows his “followers” to visit, Singer does not engage with them and usually does not understand what they tell him. Though Singer believes that Antonapoulos, polar opposite from Singer, understands everything Singer tells him, Antonapoulos’s apathy suggests Singer imposes understanding and reception on his friend. For instance, as Singer’s “hands shaped the words in a swift series of designs” and “told Antonaploulos all that had happened during the day,” the novel reads that “it was seldom that [Antonapoulos] ever moved his hands to speak at all” (*Heart* 4). Thus, considering Antonapoulos’s silence, Singer does not connect with an “other,” nor does he truly attempt to understand an “other.” Unconcerned with communing, which entails discovering commonalities by sharing ideas and self, Singer simply wraps his entire self in Antonapoulos. Wrapping his self in Antonapoulos implies that Singer imposes his ipseity on Antonapoulos without establishing his own identity. By cutting

himself off from others, Singer destroys the possibility of establishing his identity. In effect, Singer creates a sense of communing without achieving mutual understanding.

Mick and Singer impose recognition on others and communicate with them through prayer-like language, falsely creating a sense of community and wholeness. To establish identity, Mick and Singer must find commonalities with their communities and commune with others. However, Mick imposes on Singer and Singer enforces on Antonapoulos their own likenesses. Thus, neither Mick nor Singer must struggle to find and build commonalities with others. In his *Essence of Christianity*, Feurbach argues that “a God . . . who does not reflect our own emotions . . . is nothing to us, has no interest for us, does not concern us” (282). If compared to human relationships, finding a God—or “friend”—who reflects the self is selfish. Instead of looking outside the self and learning to understand others, people create the idea that another person mirrors themselves. McCullers extends this idea in an essay on *Heart*, contending that to overcome isolation, man creates a personal god, “a reflection of himself” (*Mortgaged Hearts* 141). Therefore, those who create gods do not work to find commonalities or learn to communicate ideas, but create someone just like themselves. Ultimately, by creating personal “gods,” communication becomes pure transmission with no reception. Thus, Mick and Singer do not commune with others. Instead, they create a sense that they are able to articulate their identity by engaging in almost prayer-like language with their personal gods. Through their articulation and seeming recognition from another being, Mick and Singer think that their multiplicity is being recognized and reconciled. In their study on communication through prayer, Baesler, Lindvall, and Lauricella argue that prayer “bolster[s] an individual’s sense of . . . identity,” and that people who pray regularly have a higher degree of spiritual health and feel a close relationship with God (198, 205). Read in conjunction with Hegel, higher spiritual health comes because, in communicating their self-consciousness to a god through prayer, Singer and Mick articulate their selves through language. The word “health” is rooted in the word “whole” (“health”) which implies “good condition, sound” (“whole”). Thus, prayer, by improving “spiritual health,” helps not only in establishing “identity,” but also specifically in constituting a “whole” identity, an identity of “oneness.” Prayer creates a close relationship in which Singer and Mick may feel connection and a sense of identity; however, because they establish an artificial connection, their personal gods never recognize

them. Thus, they only create a false connection in which they inform their “god” about their identity and yet never listen for reception or response.

As Mick and Singer become too dependent on their personal gods, this relationship turns negative because it destroys communion. The purpose of communicating the self through language to community is that it removes isolation through connection and requires the communicator to understand his or her multiplicity, the aspects that make up the communicator’s being, well enough to put it into language in a way that another person understands. For example, if Mick were to articulate her identity to her brother Bill by sharing her “inside” and “outside” rooms, she would have to understand each room well enough to describe it in language and would have to understand Bill well enough to know what words to use. Thus, she better grasps her and Bill’s identities and personalities. Through this struggle between the self and language, Mick would be able to grow and better understand herself. Creating personal gods who are all-knowing and understanding, however, falsely creates a connection. It destroys the dynamic between language and discovering self and also becomes a safety net for when she avoids trying to understand and communicate with others.

Without communing, Mick and Singer simplify their identities by imposing not only understanding, but a reflection of themselves on their personal gods. When Mick and Singer rely solely on personal gods and make those personal gods a reflection of themselves, they deny their multiplicity and exist as a single fragmented part of their selves. Thus, they do not experience a fullness of identity from interacting with different members of their community. Also, they are unable to recognize, and will not learn how to explain to an “other,” how diverse their character is. This simplification is evident in how they objectify their exalted friends. Mick claims that music articulates who she is; however, she cannot have a relationship with her music, neither can she interact with that music. In a similar vein, Mick’s and Singer’s gods are mirrors who reflect the self that Singer and Mick want to see; however, in so doing they do not allow themselves to engage with an “other” and develop a full and whole self. This behavior actually further fragments their identity because it allows them to push away parts of themselves they do not want to learn how to reconcile. For example, because she believes Singer comprehends her “inside” room perfectly, Mick does not have to help others understand it, and thus does not have to understand her “inside” room well enough to articulate it.

Singer’s relationship with Antonapolous exemplifies how relying on a personal god destroys the self. By communicating only with Antonapolous, Singer



speaks to a mirror of his self. Singer molds Antonapoulos to suit his needs and is thus accustomed to communicating with his own flat, static identity. By not recognizing Antonapoulos's as a separate entity and by imposing understanding on Antonapoulos, Singer's being is wrapped in Antonapoulos. However, while denying any multiplicity in his own character, Singer senses a need to articulate himself and let another person be aware of his being. When Antonapoulos is gone, his restless hands reflect his need to speak:

His hands [Singer's language] were a torment to him. They would not rest . . . when he was alone and his thoughts were with his friend his hands would begin to shape the words before he knew about it. Then when he realized he was like a man caught talking aloud to himself, it was almost as though he had done some moral wrong. The shame and the sorrow mixed together and he doubled his hands and put them behind him. But they would not let him rest. (McCullers 206)

While he is filled with shame and sorrow at talking to himself, Singer has only ever spoken with a flat and simple version of himself, the mirror image he created in Antonapoulos. Tragically, though he wants to speak, he does not know how to begin to understand himself or others. This is indicated when people visit him and he is "always the same with everyone" (*Heart* 92). He views others to be just as uncomplicated as he has created himself to be. Singer is lost without Antonapoulos because even if it was a simple identity, Antonapoulos's presence was Singer's articulation of himself. Instead of reaching to others after Antonapoulos leaves, however, Singer's hands remain in his pockets, refusing to communicate (*Heart* 92). When he eliminates his language, Singer removes any method to connect with others and effectively cuts himself off from others. Hegel states about those who detach themselves from community and live for themselves, "It took hold of life, but instead it thereby took hold of death" (qtd. in Forster 69). Forster clarifies Hegel's pun, which may translate to take "its [share in] life for itself" or may translate to "commit suicide" (69). An identity is made up of multiple parts brought into a cohesive whole. But the further Singer pulls away from his community, the more he destroys his person. When the single aspect of himself—Antonapoulos—dies, Singer does not understand how to live. Thus, by wrapping his "communion" in one individual, when his only source for communion dies, Singer's person dies before he kills himself.

Personal gods inhibit growth and destroy the self; however, in some ways Mick is able to utilize her false communion with Singer to learn the process of

true communion. Mick feels torn between the different sides of herself that she wants to express. Particularly, her “inside” room is the “real plain her” and she struggles to reconcile it with all other parts of herself (118). Singer’s presence helps Mick to feel she is reconciling these different aspects and bringing them together. Poignantly, McCullers places Singer in both Mick’s “inside” and “outside” rooms so that he is navigating her multiplicity and uniting her dual natures within himself, helping her to feel whole. For instance, after sexual intercourse with Harry, Mick becomes severely fragmented (“It was like her head was broke off from her body and thrown away”). The experience breaks Mick because she does not understand the new dimension to her multiplicity that the experience creates. She contemplates afterward, “she was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not” (276). She wants to explain to her family the deep change that has taken place in her identity so that she can reconcile it and make it part of herself. Though she cannot tell anyone about Harry, Mick addresses difficult topics when she speaks with Singer. Because Singer is a representation of her “inside” room and difficulties in her life are her “outside” room, Mick pulls her rooms together by talking with Singer. Mick’s salvation, however, is that she does not rely solely on Singer as Singer did on Antonapoulos. While she does wrap her self in Singer and views him as a reflection of herself, Mick persists in trying to connect with her community.

Because she begins communicating different sides of herself to Singer, Mick begins to reconcile her multiplicity as she lives for others instead of solely for herself. Mick does not transmit her ideas to her family but she begins to receive the ideas of those around her. McCullers portrays Mick continuing to struggle to find her place and connect, particularly as Mick moves outside of herself. At Vocational “everybody seemed to belong to some special bunch”; therefore, Mick throws a prom in order to find her “bunch” (104). Though the prom ends badly, it demonstrates that Mick attempted to connect. In another attempt, she begins a relationship with Harry that ends poorly and leaves Mick fragmented and discouraged. Significantly, Mick does not allow these experiences to discourage her but continues to try to communicate. At home, Mick attempts to connect and understand someone else as she asks her ill sister, “How you feel this morning, Etta?” . . . ‘A lot you care,’ Etta said.” Mick simply replies, ‘You needn’t try to pick a fight’” (265). Mick passively acknowledges Etta’s remarks and patiently communicates. Despite failures and being pushed away by family, Mick persists in trying to establish a relationship with her community.

Therefore, Mick learns the process of communicating all sides of her self while simultaneously living for others.

Just as bringing opposing parts of the self together into a cohesive identity can seem a paradox, establishing community is built on a paradox of partly building identity and relinquishing it. In her progression, Mick finally learns to connect and become an integral member of her family community by beginning to work and assisting in their survival. Granted, this does not allow Mick to complete the process of becoming whole because she has not yet communicated her “inside” room to them; however, she is focusing on receiving her family’s message and not on transmitting her own. As Mick decides to help the family and work, she sacrifices her desires and will to her family’s needs. Thus, Mick exemplifies better understanding of what her family wants from her. As the family discussed Mick going to work, she “felt excited. They were all talking about her—and in a kindly way . . . Of a sudden she loved all of the family and a tightness came in her throat” (316). Because of her understanding and their reciprocation, Mick feels an intricate member of her family. Though she has not yet shared her inside room, she is progressing toward the ability to share herself because she understands that she no longer lives purely for-herself of for-another, but both.

While Mick progresses towards establishing a whole identity and coming together with her community, Biff demonstrates that to establish a whole identity, he must confront and recognize himself. Biff asks himself difficult questions and acknowledges discouraging answers. By boldly facing himself, Biff learns more about his multiplicity so that he can bring his different parts together. He questions, “What did he understand? Nothing. Where was he headed? Nowhere. What did he want? To know. What? A meaning. Why? A riddle” (237). Though unsure of his knowledge, he is aware that he wishes to understand. This understanding takes place as he considers how he wants to adopt children, make their clothes, and nurture and care for them (235). With realizing he wants to be a full person, Biff allows his feminine side that he formerly stifled to have free reign. He decorates the bedroom: “Before it had been tacky and flossy and drab,” but it is “his entirely now. . . . He loved the room” (224–25). He also uses Alice’s old perfume and shampoo (226). By consciously and actively reconciling different parts of himself and allowing himself to be the person he wants to be, Biff learns not only how to recognize himself but how to share it with others and, in turn, recognize others.

Biff's curiosity about his and others' identities depicts how developing and sharing an identity establishes community. As Biff explores his self, he no longer needs to hide features of who he is. In being himself and openly communicating that self, others are able to recognize him. He says, "That's a compliment" when Lucille tells him he would be a good mother (230). When he expresses gratitude, he accepts and recognizes his feminine side. Significantly, Lucille sees and acknowledges Biff's united self because he is no longer ashamed of this essential aspect of his being. By learning others have multiteity, Biff becomes comfortable with himself and more closely analyzes others. He observes, "By nature all people are of both sexes" (*The Mortgaged Heart* 132). Through recognizing these similarities, Biff comfortably expresses himself and, because he has brought his identity into a whole, reconciles himself with his community. Applying the questions he asks himself, Biff inquires after and considers other people, seeks to understand and communicate with them, and thereby is able to feel at whole with his community. Further, he understands that communication brings greater understanding. After watching a man named Blount, Biff "wanted to talk to somebody about [Blount], because maybe if he told all the facts out loud he could put his finger on the thing that puzzled him" (32). Biff recognizes the power of vocalizing Blount's identity, but it is only by his inquisitive observations that Biff recognizes the need to communicate to understand Blount. Observing Biff's interest in others elucidates why Mick struggled longer than Biff in communicating. Though she was continuously attempting to communicate herself, she does not attempt to observe and learn about others in order to connect with them.

At the close of the novel, Biff's and Mick's experiences demonstrate that becoming whole requires constant evaluation. At any time, either could fall back into living for the self or living for others, which would hinder him or her from being whole. They obtain wholeness by uniting with their community and uniting the different parts of themselves. Anytime they focus on only community or the self, they pull themselves apart. Sitting in his empty diner, Biff envisions himself inhabiting two spaces, a space of both/and: "Between two worlds he was suspended . . . One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness" (359). Symbolically, Biff's precarious balance between blackness and light may represent two spheres, the divide between living for the self and living for others. Biff stands in a safe place during his vision because he can see

*both* the darkness *and* the light by balancing his self and his community. Singer, contrarily, remained in a dark sphere unable to recognize his need for others. While Singer represents extreme isolation and Biff represents balance, Mick continues to struggle for her balance. At the close of the novel, she no longer escapes to her inside room; however, she contemplates “[setting] aside a little for a secondhand piano,” indicating that she has not destroyed her inside room (353). Her last words are that life is “some good” (354). Similarly, Mick is some whole. She is not in the both/and area Biff occupies yet, but she is closer than Singer was and is closer than she was at the opening. Ultimately, Mick moved closer to the center by learning to bring out her inside room and by connecting with her family when she relinquished her wants for theirs. As she continues to grow—if Mick will examine herself and how she changes, recognize similarities with others, and learn to articulate her self—she can commune and reach a balance.

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