
The Narrative Device of Narrative Focalization in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, a Book by Carson McCullers

Narrative Focalization in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is the first book written by Carson McCullers. In her book, McCullers traces the dynamics that occur between Singer and the other four protagonists: Biff Brennon, Jake Blount, Doctor Copeland, and Mick Kelly. In explaining how these characters relate to Singer, McCullers also develops and analyzes each character's personality through the eyes of a third person narrator. However, as argued by the professor Nicole Seymour in her article "Carson McCullers: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*," the third person narrator often becomes a first-person narrator that gives a "focalized perspective" of each character (3). This narrative device is technically defined as "narrative-focalization," which consists in using or excluding information according to what the character knows through specific language that reflects his or her traits (Seymour 3). The use of narrative-focalization is particularly evident in the chapter in which McCullers analyzes the character of Mick. Instead of showing the transition from innocence to experience through the narrative focalization, McCullers shows how innocence and experience coexist in the same character.

Mick Kelly is a thirteen-year-old girl who is obsessed with music and usually spends her time alone. She is the fourth character introduced in the book, after Singer, Antonapoulos, and Biff, and the first one in which narrative focalization is evident. In fact, as soon as she is introduced, the language used by the third narrator changes. While in the previous passage about Biff, McCullers uses the terms "the morning light" to refer to the sun, in Mick's passage she uses the word "sun" (33). Here, the narrator uses the more common word to emphasize that Mick, being so young, does not have the polished vocabulary typical of an adult person. Similarly, the narrator says, "she had stayed out mighty late," instead of simply saying very or extremely late in order to emphasize Mick's southern vocabulary. Then, the narrator uses the informal expression "to mess around" to explain that she did not have any planned activity for that specific moment (9). This informal expression is used to stress the southern dialect he or she has used in the sentence before. In the same paragraph, the use of a mix of informal and regional vocabulary helps the narrator to shape the personality of the character. Furthermore, the narrator refers to the comic strip calling it "funnies" and uses the word "Dad" instead of father (9). The broad use of a childish language highlights the young age and innocence that characterizes Mick's age. In this first pages in which Mick is introduced, the narrator combined most of the elements that will characterize her character through the whole story.

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However, Mick's innocence counterpoises her experience. Despite her young age, Mick's behavior and responsibilities are typical of an adult. She has already started to smoke and drink alcohol, and she goes around in the night time when a thirteen-year-old is supposed to be home. The narrator explains that at night time, "Girls were scared a man would come out from somewhere and put his teapot in them like they was married," yet Mick was not afraid at all (93). The use of the word "teapot" is crucial to the understanding of narrative focalization. The word "teapot" is used to recall the male sexual member, but it also recalls the famous children's song "I'm a little teapot." The word "teapot" would not have been used by the narrator if he or she was describing the same worries experienced by one of the other characters (93). If the character analyzed in a similar situation was Doctor Copeland, the narrator would have used a more specific and polished term such as genitalia. Similarly, if the character analyzed in a similar situation was Jake, the narrator would have simply used the colloquial term penis. The use of the word "teapot" suggests that Mick is at the same time an innocent child and a girl with more experience than her peers. This same idea is conveyed by the narrator when he or she uses the expression "like they was married" (93). The narrator implies that Mick has the knowledge needed to understand what the other girls fear; nevertheless, her young age makes her perceive the sexual act as something that concern only adult and married people.

In Mick's chapters of the book, the narrator alternates the use of a childish language with the use of more mature terms. For instance, after Etta has lost her work, and the family could not afford to pay the installments for George's toy, the narrator cries, "it was money, money, money all the time" (270). The repetition of the word "money" alludes to a child who throws a tantrum. The use of such informal language breaks the barrier between the third person narrator and the character, so that readers may have trouble in recognizing whose voice they are hearing. Moreover, by the end of the book when Mick is sitting in the New York Café, the narrator observes that, "the sundae was O.K, covered all over with chocolate and nuts and cherries. And the beer was relaxing" (307). Extrapolating this sentence from the whole paragraph, readers cannot distinguish who is speaking. Through the use of narrative focalization, the narrator is highlighting how Mick is at the same time a child who likes the sundae's ice-cream and an adult who likes drinking beer. Furthermore, the narrator reveals that, "the beer had a nice taste after the ice cream" (307). This sentence may be read as a metaphor that create a stronger description about Mick, so the narrator compares Mick's childish and adult behaviors to the sundae and the beer to underline that Mick peculiarity is the synthesis of her adult and childish characteristics that make her unique.

When Mick is alone with Harry, the narrator informs the readers that, "there was a warm boy smell about him" (219). Being the third person narrator omniscient, it is obvious that he or she knows exactly what the character is feeling or thinking; however, the language used to explain the character's thoughts to readers is more appropriated to the language used by two teenager-

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girls who are sharing their secret than to the vocabulary used by an omniscient narrator. Yet the use of a so peculiar vocabulary is directly linked to the perception of the character that the narrator wants to convey to the reader. Furthermore, the narrator does not describe the smell in a more detailed way because the character of Mick does not know how to define it. The narrator blends in so much with the character he or she is describing that he or she can no longer use a different vocabulary from Mick's.

A further example of narrative focalization is evident in the way in which the narrator refers to the different characters. For instance, in Mick's chapters, the narrator refers to Mick's younger brother as "Bubber" (89); however, after Bubber has shot Baby and has decided that he would start using his real name, the narrator starts referring to him as "George" (210). The narrator acquiesces to the will of this young boy and calls him as his family and friends do. Similarly, in Mick's chapters, the narrator refers to Biff as "Mister Brannon," while in the other characters' chapters he or she refers to Biff as "Biff Brennon" or just "Biff" (153, 109, 110). By adding the title of Mister to Biff's surname, the narrator is highlighting the different age of the character and the relationship that occurs between them. While in the role of Mick the narrator is showing respect to Biff's character because, as an adult, he represents to her an authoritarian figure, in the other character's chapter, the narrator refers to Biff simply with his complete name or with his first name.

As stated by Seymour, "McCullers's novels convey meaning not through dialogue or action, but through thoughts and emotions. This attention to the inner self is the first component of what we might call her empathetic stylistics" (3). Indeed, McCullers succeeds in showing how difficult is for a young girl to grow up facing the problems of everyday life. She is concerned about both the typical problem of her age, as being accepted by her peers, and the problem of adulthood, as the economic problem her family is facing. As a consequence of the economic difficulties her family is experiencing, and the fact that she has to give up on her dream to start working, Mick is struggling to find her place in the world. Through the use of narrative focalization, McCullers analyzes how lonely Mick is since she is not understood neither by children nor by adults. The language used by the narrator reflects the difficulties Mick faces in her daily routine, so that the words used by the narrator show how Mick's childish and adult's characteristics are perfectly balanced between them. Consequently, that neither of them takes over on the other and how naivety and maturity coexist in the same character.

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