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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* BY CARSON MCCULLERS

Duan Zhang

Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, Beijing CHINA.

\*Corresponding Author E-Mail: [m8851a6b766@163.com](mailto:m8851a6b766@163.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Spiritual isolation and loneliness have always been the main topic of the works of the southern American writer Carson McCullers. Her superb literary creation lies in that, she not only integrates the theme of loneliness between lines of her works, but also strongly echoes and deepens that theme by use of brilliant narrative skills. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is such a masterpiece on loneliness, decorated and permeated with exquisite narrative strategy. By means of the narrative theories of Gérard Genette and Shen Dan, and with NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE as the starting point, the present paper tries to study the unique narrative strategy framed within this work. This paper points out that, McCullers' portray of characters from many aspects, and her narration from multiple perspectives in this work, not only greatly exalt the work's narrative tension and aesthetic effect, but also deeply reflect the internal perplexity and solitary state of mind of those people living in American South after the Civil War.

## KEYWORDS

Carson McCullers, narrative strategy, narrative perspectives, loneliness.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (hereafter referred to as *Hunter*) is the debut novel by the famous American writer Carson McCullers. The moment it got firstly published in 1940, it received good reviews whether from the critics or readers, achieving a great literary sensation and enjoyed a quick stepping into the top of the bestseller lists of that year. In 1998, The Modern Library ranked it seventeenth on its list as one of the 100 best novels of the 20th century; In 2005, *Time* selected it as one of the top 100 English-language novels published from 1923 to 2005. The author Carson McCullers is one of the most important writers in the southern United States in the 20th century. In her short life, she has written a total of 5 novels, 20 short stories, 2 dramas, and some essays and poems, four of which have been adapted into plays and movies, leaving a precious spiritual wealth for future generations.

The British short story writer and critic V. S. Pritchett once highly acclaimed her, "The most remarkable novelist, I think, to come out of America for a generation... She is a master of peculiar perception and an incomparable storyteller...a writer of the highest class" (qtd. in McCullers, *Collected Stories* 68). Tennessee Williams also said that she was in his opinion that the greatest living writer of her country, if not of the world (qtd. in Bray 96). Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that Carson McCullers can be considered as one of the important writers in contemporary American literary circles. Her novel *Hunter* tells a story happening in a small town in the southern United States in the 20th century. It centers around John Singer, a deaf-mute who becomes a so-called "God" in the inner hearts of those other four characters as Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Mick Kelly and Dr. Copeland.

These people have various social status, yet they are interconnected with each other because of Singer. They all pour out to the mute about such subjects as love, dreams, equality and freedom. And their talks with Singer also become the only comfort in their repressed and lonely daily lives. While, Singer's final shooting himself completely shatters their hopes. The current study of *Hunter* in the academic circles are mainly manifested in four aspects. Among them, being focused on certain character (almost all studies center on the character John Singer) to interpret the thematic concern is the most common. Under this aspect, scholars closely analyzing the character of John Singer, all coincidentally point to *Hunter's* general idea to a variable extent, that is, men's inner isolation and spiritual loneliness (Jan, 1992; Laurie, 1991; Wenwen, 2019; Louis, 2005).

Meanwhile, Sarah Gleeson-White skillfully switches the study focus on Singer to another character Biff Brannon, starts from the perspective of femininity, and aims to explore McCullers' attitudes towards gender (Sarah, 2008). A second aspect usually embraces diversified theories or theoretical horizons to deal with *Hunter* (Charles, 1999; Lenviel, 2013; Heidi, 2008; Jack, 1965; Kassia, 2017). By use of related profound theories, these scholars make their study of *Hunter* full of fresh points and new ideas. For example, Jack B. Moore focuses on the 13-year-old girl Mick, thinking that Mick's life growth tracks conform to human beings' oldest myths, that is, initiation, which is very interesting (Robert, 2007). Another aspect, in general, can be said to lead a relatively fresh research trend: by doing comparative analysis of this novel with other works like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, James Baldwin's *Another Country* and so on.

Through the contrast research, and by adopting the "going out" strategy, such a good way of appreciating the novel, scholars have found certain

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inter-relationships between the novel and other works, which further deepen the far-reaching significance of *Hunter* (Michael, 2005; Benjamin, 2013; Eileen, 2011). The last aspect of studying *Hunter* is based on its artistic features mainly including its narrative arrangement, plots structure, the much more complicated pattern of character relationships, symbol, language (use of dialect), the grotesque form and so on (Joseph, 1971; Emily, 2011; Echevarria and Gustavo, 1991; Jennifer, 2004). Scholars under this research direction resort to Hunter's structures and forms and are dedicated to exploring how the thematic concern is shown and strengthened.

These four research trends have doubtless jointly contributed to the multiplicity of the study of Carson McCullers and her *Hunter*, yet they seem to a little bit indulge themselves in their own "world" without integrating the other three research trends into their own creation. It means that, it would be better if those scholars who focus on studying *Hunter*'s thematic concern could include the structural analysis or be based on certain kind of theoretical background. Now that Jennifer Murray in her article puts forward a kind of community approached in *Hunter* among those unifying elements as symbolic representation, structure and narrative, then why not interpretations of *Hunter* are achieved through a unity into which related theoretical horizons, structural analysis, thematic essence, and so on are wonderfully integrated? What's more, in Jennifer Murray's study of the narrative voice in *Hunter*, the key theoretical bases of this paper are found by the author.

In Murray's only five-line discussion of the third-person narrating voice used in *Hunter*, she profoundly digs out that internal and personal narrative perspective of each character, playing very significant roles in pushing forward the plots of *Hunter*, which enables readers to easily grasp the main tunes of *Hunter*'s narration and then further their better understanding of the inner isolation of characters. However, her analysis of the narrating voice of this novel is less thorough enough, or the author may say, lacks some depth and width. It should be noted that in *Hunter*, the third-person internal voice is not the only perspective being used. Instead, diversified narrative perspectives are employed by the author. As McCullers states in *Author's Outline of "The Mute"*, "general ideas are felt through the characters and situations. Much will depend upon the insight of the reader and the care with which the book is read" (McCullers, *The Mortgaged Heart* 140).

Obviously, McCullers enlightens readers: this novel is endowed not with the only third-person internal perspective held by Jennifer Murray, but with rich narrative structure and narrative discourse which pose the very necessity for readers to do close analysis, and only by this can readers figure out the theme throughout the novel. From this sense, being based on related narrative theories to study the narrative structure of *Hunter*, is very necessary, and meaningful. Therefore, narrative theories of Gérard Genette and Shen Dan being as the theoretical basis, the present paper focuses on the changeable NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES which are throughout the novel, aims to study the unique narrative strategy framed within *Hunter* by Carson McCullers, and further explores the effects of narrative perspectives on thematic meanings of this novel, helping readers better enjoy the charm of this novel which integrates narrative theories, narrative structure and loneliness, the thematic concern into an excellent unity (Carson, 1971).

## 2. CONCEPTION AND GENERAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES

PERSPECTIVE is originally a term for art of painting, and later is borrowed from literary narration. Then POINT OF VIEW, PERSPECTIVE, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE, FOCALIZATION is gradually acknowledged as commonly exchangeable terms in narratology. As for the definition of NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE, various scholars have given their own illustrations. In general, it is widely accepted that NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE refers to the angle of observing the story during narration. It not only refers to the angle of the narrator and characters who observe the story but includes that of the author which does not appear directly but serves to operate the whole narration behind the scenes. Monika Fludernik believes that those established modes of narrative perspective are very confusing (Monika, 2009).

That is true. Just have a look at those most influential models of narrative perspective in academia, readers can get diversified classifications of focalization. Even so, readers can still achieve a basic knowledge of general classifications of narrative perspectives. Here, in this paper, the author chooses modes of narrative perspectives from two famous scholars in the academic circles, Gérard Genette from the foreign circles, and Shen Dan from the domestic circles, as the theoretical basis. The reason this paper

resorts to Genette is that, he plays a key role in leading the new narratology trend of paying close attention to the narrator's depending on the main protagonist's eyes to take up narration since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which precisely provides a marvelous theoretical paradigm for studying *Hunter*.

While for Shen Dan, she is an outstanding academic leader in the field of domestic narratology study, and meanwhile, a well-known non-Western narrative theorist in Europe and America. With her narrative theories' further great support, a study of *Hunter* from the point of narrative perspective is surely full of depth and validity. By shackling the fetters of the traditional modes of focalization, Gérard Genette classifies narrative perspectives into three types: nonfocalized narrative, or narrative with zero focalization; narrative with internal focalization (which is subdivided as FIXED, VARIABLE, MULTIPLE); and narrative with external focalization (Gerard, 1982).

Based on Genette's classification of narrative perspective, Shen Dan makes further detailed classifications, mainly manifesting in that, she makes a differentiation of Genette's so-called narrative with external focalization as two different kinds, that is, the first-person external focalization versus the third-person external focalization (Dan, 2001). So, from Gérard Genette to Shen Dan, it can be seen that the classifications of narrative perspective get unceasingly consummated. After a deep analysis of their theories' similarities and differences, this paper generalizes the most common modes of narrative perspectives within their theories, and thus apply them into the analysis of *Hunter*'s narrative strategy.

## 3. CHANGEABLE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN HUNTER

It is believed that there exist three narrative perspectives used in the narration of this novel, namely narrative with zero perspective, narrative with internal focalization (VARIABLE-type) and the third-person narrative with external focalization. It should be noted that the applications of these three types into this novel are not separate from each other. Instead, these three perspectives blend with each other throughout the novel, and jointly contribute to the multi-angle and multi-level narrations of this novel, reflecting the structural splendor of the novel. Meanwhile, while enriching the text contents of the novel, it also expands this novel's narrative tensions.

### 3.1 The Third-Person Narrative with External Focalization

This type classified by Shen Dan is equal to Genette's so-called narrative with external focalization. According to Genette, the narrative with external focalization means a formula, "Narrator = Character (the narrator says only what a given character knows)". By this type, the narrative does not carry any emotional color. The narrator outside the story is with an outsider's perspective, just like a monitor which generally presents characters and events objectively without showing their inner activity in front of readers. Such kind of narrative makes the narrator lose the subjectively emotional color, and makes the narration be without any personality characteristics. It just PRESENTS those objective phenomena as accurately as possible. The PHENOMENA here are the pure facts without including any social or moral values, which is relatively easy to produce true and credible feelings among readers.

In the very beginning of *Hunter*, the narrator uses a large amount of the third-person narratives with external focalization to introduce the two mutes Singer and Antonopoulos, completely with a witness's perspective to do observations and records, without any comments or personal feelings.

"IN THE town there were two mutes, and they were always together...The one who always steered the way was an obese and dreamy Greek...The other mute was tall. His eyes had a quick, intelligent expression. He was always immaculate and very soberly dressed" (McCullers, *Hunter* 1).

After reading it, readers may spontaneously have some questions such as what is the story of such two different partners? What do they rely on for their livelihood? What kind of people are they? What is the relationship between them..., which will easily arouse readers' great interest in this novel. The cleverness of this strategy which on purpose keeps readers a distance from characters in the story is that it can make characters in the novel have a sense of mystery, thereby attracting readers to do further explorations. In addition, because this type of narrative is not mixed with any commentary and emotional color, it makes the narration more objective. Sometimes, its calm and indifferent narration quality can highlight the theme and add ethical implications. Let's see the narration on

Singer's death:

Singer left his luggage in the middle of the station floor...He returned to his room with swollen eyes and an aching head. After resting he drank a glass of iced coffee and smoked a cigarette. Then when he had washed the ash tray and the glass he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest (McCullers, *Hunter* 285).

Here, Singer's despair and death is quickly, coldly, and quietly presented, which is very penetrating. At this point, the loneliness conveyed by the novel reaches its extreme. And this effect precisely owes to this third-person narrative with external focalization, which constructs a text with its own indifference and impersonality, just like the cold reality. Sometimes, the narrator acts as a recorder, just faithfully recording the dialogues of characters without any explanation, but behind those dialogues actually hide the very subtexts, and exchanges of characters' emotions and ideas. This narrative perspective by Shen Dan is actually equal to what Genette calls narrative with external focalization. When showing the inner loneliness of the black Doctor Copeland, McCullers takes the contradiction between Copeland and his daughter Portia as the starting point, and the basic expression means is through their dialogues:

'Willie and Highboy and me have backbone,' said Portia angrily.

.....

'You all the time using that word--Negro,' said Portia. 'And that word haves a way of hurting people's feelings. Even old plain nigger is better than that word. But polite peoples--no matter what shade they is--always says colored.'

.....

'I am not interested in subterfuges,' said Doctor Copeland. 'I am interested only in real truths.' (McCullers, *Hunter* 68)

This hand-to-hand combat vividly plays the contradiction between father and daughter to readers, and the more profound contents and intentions outside the dialogue need to be examined by readers themselves, that is, Dr. Copeland's loneliness comes from racial oppression, the callousness of his own race, and he hopes to change the backward and oppressed state of his nation through education. Such a narrative perspective makes the novel much readable, much attractive.

### 3.2 Nonfocalized Narrative or Narrative with Zero Focalization

Conforming to the formula Narrator > Character (where the narrator knows more than the character, or more exactly says more than any of the characters knows), this narrative type is also called "God-like perspective", that is, the narrator has God's perspective, being omnipotent and omniscient, and his or her perspective can also be changed and moved at any time. From this perspective, the narrator can at any time enter the inner heart of characters in the novel, peek into the secrets hiding within their hearts, and get in touch with the characters at the closest distance; sometimes it can also play an ironic role.

When the novel portrays Singer as the central figure, it is often displayed through the perspective of other people. Singer's own feelings and ideas are not clear. In the previous writing, readers can only look at Singer from the perspective of the other four characters, while the inside of this character is only the constructed images of the other four, full of mystery and uncertainty. However, in the last section of Chapter 2, the narrator uses nonfocalized narrative to fully present the thoughts and inner minds of Singer in front of readers, giving such a mysterious character the very exposure:

He closed his eyes.....For a while his thoughts lingered in the town he was leaving behind him. He saw Mick and Doctor Copeland and Jake Blount and Biff Brannon.....but each of them had on several occasions broken out into a bitter tirade against the other, the absent one. He had agreed with each of them in turn, though what it was they wanted him to sanction he did not know (McCullers, *Hunter* 280).

In the previous narration, everyone thinks that Singer could understand his or her own words. However, Singer actually does not understand what he or she has said at all. Here, the nonfocalized narrative plays an ironic role. When readers read most of the previous contents of this novel, their understanding and feelings of Singer are mostly obscure. However, after readers have read this, they will get Singer's true feelings on everyone. After knowing such truth from the narrative with zero focalization, I think, people will not get a sense of satisfaction, instead, they will feel a sense of

vanity and disappointment, which complements the LONELINESS theme of the work and enhances the artistic expression and appeal of the novel. In the novel, sometimes the narrator is endowed with the God-like point of view by the author, omniscient and omnipresent. And the narrator, who knows very well the past, present and future life of characters in the novel, can do narrations from any space and any angle, which shortens the novel's distance with readers. Meanwhile, when this narrative with zero focalization is used to express the innermost world of characters, it is selective and arbitrary. At this time, the focalization of this omnipotent narrator and any bystander is mutually converted. The narrator outside the story, looks on the characters from the sidelines, and makes related comments, which enables readers to better understand those characters, and adds unique tension and narrative effects to the novel.

ON a black, sultry night in early summer Biff Brannon stood behind the cash register of the New York Café...His eyes were intent. He watched especially a short, squat man in overalls who had become drunk and boisterous. Now and then his gaze passed on to the mute who sat by himself at one of the middle tables, or to others of the customers before the counter. But he always turned back to the drunk in overalls...What he had said to Alice was true--he did like freaks. He had a special friendly feeling for sick people and cripples (McCullers *Hunter* 9, 18).

In *Hunter*, the New York Café owner Biff Brannon is such a calm onlooker, observing silently various people in his café who play their own lonely life drama on the town stage. Here, the narrator first stands in Biff's viewpoint to look on every character in his café, and then in turn gives an objective attitude towards Biff, which let readers easily have a general knowledge about Biff's personality. Not only can the narrator sometimes penetrate into characters' inner world, but it also could transcend the limitation of time and space. No matter in the town, the New York Café, Mick's inside room or in Singer's house, such various narrative spaces all seem to exist for the narrator to casually switch back and forth. In chapter 2 of this novel, the narrator switches the narrative space to Biff's café:

The place was still not crowded--it was the hour when men who have been up all night meet those who are freshly awakened and ready to start a new day. The sleepy waitress was serving both beer and coffee. There was no noise or conversation, for each person seemed to be alone. The mutual distrust between the men who were just awakened and those who were ending a long night gave everyone a feeling of estrangement (McCullers *Hunter* 25).

Here, the narrator is with a God-like perspective to portray that unique café. A café, is originally a place for communication among people from all walks of life. While, in McCullers' pen, it becomes an isolated island full of the very loneliness. The café in the early hours of the morning presents that unutterable indifference, depression and loneliness. Living on such isolated and desolate soil, each character every day is confined by the evil surroundings, and tries their utmost to live their life hard. The anxiety, confusion and isolation among characters are all their resistance and accusations against their living environment. The overwhelming surrounding conditions cannot be changed, the result of which is that, loneliness is so intense throughout the novel that all characters hardly have no chance to escape. The theme LONELINESS is once again reinforced by this narrative with zero focalization.

### 3.3 Narrative with Internal Focalization (VARIABLE-type)

Narrator < Character, such a formula embraced by Genette, means that the narrator says less than the character knows. It refers to the perspective adopted by the characters in the story when they assume the task of novel narration. Narrators of this type know as much as the characters in the story and observe the world from their eyes. Under this internal focalization, it is further subdivided by Genette into three types as FIXED-type, VARIABLE-type and MULTIPLE-type. By VARIABLE-type, as the word VARIABLE shows, it should be understood that this narrative perspective is constantly changing and always has big leaps, that is, there is more than one narrator. Meanwhile, what calls for special attention is that, this variable-type narrative can appear in the form of the first-person narrative as well as the third-person narrative. The point is, no matter in which form the narrative appears, the viewpoint of the narrator would be limited, and the narrative perspective changes from one character to another. Indeed, in *Hunter*, the narrator variably rotates among these five characters, Singer, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Mick and Doctor Copeland. Each part of the narrative discourse is thus branded with different imprints of the narrator.



In the novel, McCullers tells the stories of five protagonists of different ages, genders, backgrounds, and beliefs. Their respective worldviews, attitudes towards life, and inner values are different. Judging from the title of this novel, it seems that Singer is the central character. However, with the plots proceed, the novel brings to shining light the images of other four characters. It should be certainly awe to McCullers' unique usage of the narrative with internal focalization. Guided by this narrative strategy, these five protagonists frequently observe each other to reveal their inner world. In demonstrating the mental activity of the mute Singer, McCullers employs the form of correspondence, such a first-person direct speech to expose his inner heart:

He cleared his bench and began to write. He loved to shape words with a pen on paper and he formed the letters with as much care as if the paper had been a plate of silver.

My Only Friend: I see from our magazine that the Society meets this year at a convention in Macon. They will have speakers and a four-course banquet. I imagine it...And when I imagine the convention I think of all the guests being like you, my Friend (McCullers, *Hunter* 185-186).

From this excerpt, it is clear that there are two psychological perspectives: the narrator's analysis of Singer's mentality and Singer's own psychological awareness. Gradually, the narrator disappears, and comes Singer's own psychological description. The person also changes: the narrative changes from the third person to the first person. The subtlety of this transformation lies in that, readers understand Singer's loneliness more clearly because of his having lost his beloved partner. Singer patiently receives all the four characters who reveal their innermost feelings to him, just because they have taken away his certain loneliness due to losing partners. While, behind his quiet and gentle appearance in fact overflows his deep loneliness and sorrow that no one can truly understand.

In the third part of *Hunter*, After Singer's shooting himself, McCullers arranges series of narratives with internal focalization from various characters. Standing in the viewpoint of Doctor Copeland, the narrator narrates his feelings when he is to leave his old home, "Most of the furniture had been moved to Portia's house, and the rest was tied to the automobile outside. All was in readiness except his own mind. But how could he leave when there was neither beginning nor end, neither truth nor purpose in his thoughts?" (McCullers, *Hunter* 285). Doctor Copeland is reluctant to leave because of his unfinished mission: struggle to do all that he can to change the terrible condition of his fellow black men. However, people around him can hardly understand his true feelings except Singer. As for Singer's sudden death, he cannot figure it out and feel greatly sad. Then the narrator switches his focalization to Jake Blount, by whose eyes the narrator observes things happening around Jake:

He remembered all the innermost thoughts that he had told to Singer, and with his death it seemed to him that they were lost. And why had Singer wanted to end his life? Maybe he had gone insane. But anyway he was dead, dead, dead. He could not be seen or touched or spoken to, and the room where they had spent so many hours had been rented to a girl who worked as a typist (McCullers, *Hunter* 296).

Jack has pinned all his hopes on Singer, but Singer's final death makes his inner filed with great feelings of emptiness. He is almost worn out deadly, feeling too much terrified. In the eyes of outsiders, Jake is just a drunkard, being at the bottom of the society. He is all the time longing for a better working environment and a harmonious society where social injustice can be solved successfully, but in vain. As a result, Singer's death makes him totally lose hope and leave the town, much lonely and distressed. When Mick hears of Singer's death, she also plays the role of the narrator, "There were these two things she could never believe. That Mister Singer had killed himself and was dead. And that she was grown and had to work at Woolworth's" (McCullers, *Hunter* 305).

Mick has her own dream of being a great musician, yet she could not be understood and supported by her family. What's worse, she even suffers from bitter irony from those so-called God's followers. As a consequence, confused and disillusioned, Mick has to give up his desire for her dream. Therefore, with Singer's suicide, other characters like Doctor Copeland, Jake Blount and Mick all loses their spiritual meat and drink. Without new life faith, all of them in *Hunter* eventually cannot be free from their destined fate of LONELINESS. The inner worlds of these characters in the novel take turns to project and observing each other in a narrative with internal perspective, which strengthens readers' experience of life and enables him to understand the world from a new perspective, thus once more further deepening the theme of LONELINESS in *Hunter*.

#### 4. FUNCTIONS OF CHANGING NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES IN *HUNTER*

Traditional novels generally use the narrative with zero perspective, that is, God's perspective to tell stories. Of course, such narrative perspective has a certain degree of authority, but the narrative under this perspective lacks communication with readers. And readers are only passively accepted. While in Carson McCullers' *Hunter*, multiple narrative perspectives are used to do narration (Carson, 1971). In the beginning of this novel, the third-person narrative with external focalization are used to arouse readers' interest by narrating the appearance, talks and movements of characters, leading readers to gradually go into the novel; Then the narrative perspective rotates within the five main characters, and naturally switches to the narrative with zero perspective; Meanwhile, the VARIABLE-type narrative with internal focalization is throughout the novel making characters speaking their own voice, which increases the truth of the narration, and easily resonates with readers.

Such overall stereoscopic narrative perspectives are equivalent to the 3D technology in movie art, which brings a very fresh look and visual impact to the "viewers". And the point of view is converted by McCullers very naturally and without traces, thus achieving the best combination of narrative perspectives and narration; More importantly, by portraying characters from multiple aspects and narrating them from multiple angles, McCullers finally achieves the purposes of deepening the theme LONELINESS, enhancing the narrative tension of the novel and artistic appeal.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Narrative perspectives are not only related to the creation of the entire value of literary works, but also have the function of expressing certain ideology. It is a carrier on which a work can get lay-out and vitality. By means of related narrative theories held by Gerald Genette and Shen Dan, this paper has classified and analyzed the narrative strategy used in McCullers's *Hunter*. By inserting three narrative perspectives above naturally and skillfully into the novel, McCullers succeeds in achieving a unity between narrative structure and the thematic concern LONELINESS. Narrative perspectives can be certainly said a major highlight in *Hunter*, and are also an indispensable part of McCullers's research that is worth digging into. From this sense, it's McCullers's excellent use of these three narrative perspectives that the novel *Hunter* can convey the LONELINESS theme too much vividly and truly, thus winning high remarks from the intellectual field.

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