

September 28, 1970

Dr. H. N. Cleckley
3025 Brasford Road
Augusta, Georgia

Dear Dr. Cleckley:

Although you do not know me, I know of you through your excellent and revealing portrait of The Three Faces of Eve and through your fine professional reputation as a practicing psychiatrist. However, this letter is not meant as an accolade of praise, but rather to enlist your aid: I understand that we share a mutual interest and intimacy with Carson Smith McCullers.

Last year I completed a Ph.D. dissertation on Mrs. McCullers, a labor of love and dedication which I entitled Carson McCullers and the Search for Meaning. It was a problem of Mrs. McCullers' own search for meaning in life and of the search of her fragmented characters throughout her fiction, as well as my own search for meaning through and in Mrs. McCullers. I both absorbed and reacted against and succumbed to--at various times--that existential vacuum to which so many of her characters fell heir; yet I, like Malone, her dying druggist in Clock Without Hands, found meaning and livingness again.

Now a colleague, Professor Aimee Alexander of Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky, and I are under contract with a New York publisher, David Lewis, Inc., for a book on Mrs. McCullers, her life and works. Enclosed is a copy of the letter accompanying the contract, based upon a reading of my dissertation, so that you can better understand our intent and the sensitivity and compassion with which we view Mrs. McCullers.

Now, in an effort to be as thorough, accurate, fair, and objective as we can in our work, we are contacting all of the people we know to have had some relationship with Mrs. McCullers. And Mrs. Alexander and I have been told that Mrs. McCullers visited you in the fall of 1953 after her rather depressing visit to Clayton, Georgia to see Miss Lillian Smith, who was suffering from cancer. May I ask if your relationship to Mrs. McCullers was both personal and professional? I know that professionally there may be much

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that you would not be at liberty to share with us for our book, but we hope that what you can share, you will. We feel that Mrs. McCullers was far ahead of her times in depicting with compassion yet accuracy the so-called aberrant ones of society, and indeed, she was the master diagnostician in her fictional portrayal of the malaise of the South, both of its black and its white peoples. Truly, she deserves a far greater place in American letters than she has heretofore been accorded.

Dr. Cleckley, will you help us, please. Anything you can tell us of a biographical, critical, or clinical nature that would help us depict Mrs. McCullers with greater accuracy we would appreciate so much. Were you her psychiatrist at one time, or was your relationship merely one of friendship? And in any case, may I ask how it developed and over what period of time it spanned?

When she saw you in 1953, did she talk with you about her husband's death (I believe he had committed suicide shortly before her last visit to Georgia), and did she express a sense of guilt or responsibility for it? Or a sense of personal guilt that she felt no more remorse than she did, but rather, a sense of relief that his unhappy and tumultuous life had finally ended? Mrs. McCullers' one critical book-length study, The Ballard of Carson McCullers, by Oliver Evans, asserts that Reeves, a heavy drinker, grossly mistreated her, threatened her life, invited her into a 'double' suicide pact, and often threatened suicide himself. Do you know if this is true? I also have been told by a member of her family that Mrs. McCullers once attempted suicide (after a miscarriage in the early 1950's, before her visit to you). Can you verify this?

Are you acquainted personally with Dr. Mary Mercer, a practicing child psychiatrist in Nyack, New York, who was Mrs. McCullers' psychiatrist and then intimate friend for the last ten to twelve years of her life? Mrs. McCullers was indebted to Dr. Mercer for helping to instill in her again the will to write, for she had said to Dr. Mercer, "Darling, I have lost my soul." And through Dr. Mercer, soul, and will, and livingness again burned in Mrs. McCullers. Did she suffer this same sense of loss when she visited you? And did she talk to you or seek advice of you for the psychology of any of the characters in her stories and books who were groping for meaning?

Anything diagnostic that you might be at liberty to say of Mrs. McCullers or her works in an effort to help us portray her more accurately, fairly, and sensitively, Mrs. Alexander and I would be deeply grateful for.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Virginia S. Carr, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, English