Jake Blount: 
Escape as Dead End

“But was this flight or was it onslaught? Anyway, he was going. But he would not go too far away. He would not leave the South.”
Of all the escapers discussed thus far, Jake Blount, the radical agitator in Carson McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), seems to be the most outlandish and the most alienated from his fellow men. In this respect he differs little from so many of the other characters in Mrs. McCullers's first novel; yet, if alienation is Jake's condition, it is a condition that not only is exemplified most obsessively in the novels and stories of Carson McCullers, but one that has been a persistent theme of many of our southern novelists. Indeed, alienation is one descriptive term that may well be applied to most escapers in the later American novel; for it seems to be in the nature of those who escape that one requirement of their condition is a restiveness, or discontent, which itself grows out of their alienation. This has certainly been characteristic of escapers like Theron Ware, George Willard, and John Andrews. But where these three were connected, no matter how tenuously, with a community of sorts—whether as in Theron Ware's congregation, George Willard's townfolk, or John Andrews's army buddies—Jake Blount is, by comparison, an escaper more in the tradition of Melville's isolato.

Jake Blount, transient and radical, is the "stranger" in this novel whose theme is alienation, for "the world of Carson McCullers is a world of outcasts." But Blount is an outcast even among outcasts. Thus, what exacerbates Jake Blount's condition is the rejection he suffers at the hands of the very people he is trying to help.

Blount is not only an outcast within the town he has taken up residence in; he is a chronic wanderer, an exile, a stranger wherever he finds himself. This is apparent when we first meet him recently arrived in the town. On that occasion he asks Biff Brannon, proprietor of the New York Café, "Say, what kind of a place is this town?" Although he has been in countless towns like it before, he is as ignorant of the nature of this
town as if he had come from some remote land; nor will Blount ever really get to know the town. When he leaves it, he will depart no wiser than he was before coming to it. His question, addressed to Brannon, "Which direction is Main Street?" (p. 45), shows him to be a stranger in town on his first arrival; and although he knows the direction of Main Street when he leaves a year later, he is still a stranger. He has succeeded in communicating, or communing, with no one other than the deaf mute Singer, who, when Blount finally leaves town, is dead, a suicide.

Because of Blount's status as a stranger and a wanderer, we cannot know for sure what his origins are; indeed, it is their very vagueness that establishes him as a stranger and an outcast. Perhaps Blount himself is partly responsible for the very condition from which he is trying to free himself. When Biff Brannon asks him where he comes from, Blount's answer is a terse "Nowhere." He admits, after some badgering on Brannon's part, to being from one of the Carolinas—it is no more definite than that—but, consciously or not, he may be lying. For Blount's whole life has been a history of going from one "nowhere" to another—usually to the next town down the road.

Being a wanderer, however, Jake is homeless—not merely in the literal sense but in the sense that he seems to have little or no affiliation with a community, even the radical community where he would presumably feel more at home. Arthur Koestler, a "homeless" radical himself, once applied the term to those unaffiliated radicals who, for one reason or another, doctrinal or psychological, have severed their ties to organized radical movements of the Left ("New" or old) and gone off on their own. Blount, as we shall see, certainly fits Koestler's description. On his arrival in town he leaves his suitcase for a few days with the mute Singer: this not only points up Jake's trust in
this stranger—a trust others also have for Singer—but also underlines his homelessness.

Blount does not seem to have any plans for himself or a destination he can name. He does not speak of his stay in town as a temporary or permanent one, though we become progressively convinced by his actions that it will not be permanent. For Blount is a voyager without a specific port of call. We get this impression from the conversations, laconic as they are, that he has with Biff Brannon about places (real or imagined) he has been to—Texas, Oklahoma, the Carolinas, and so on. He spouts the names of towns and the places he has passed through like a drunken Walt Whitman (with whom, incongruously, he has been compared).

But this very habit of "spouting" effectively limits Blount's ability to communicate, a common failure of many of the characters in the town. Possibly one reason for Jake's alienated status—most people he comes into contact with avoid or resent him—is his self-education, biased and distorted though it is. This self-improvement places Blount beyond the pale of the mill-workers, white and black alike, many of whom are illiterate or semiliterate, the very people he would want to help. He is, as he proclaims himself to be, "a stranger in a strange land" (p. 18).

Once, Singer questions Blount on his politics by writing on a slip of paper: "Are you Democrat or Republican?" (p. 54). Jake's answer is to crumple the slip in his hand. The question, by Jake's standards, is meaningless, for Jake's apocalyptic politics—if "politics" it may be called—thrusts far beyond conventional party lines.

Blount is not only a homeless radical; he is a one-man organization, a leader without a following, a true "minority of one." The only person who seems to understand him as a person is Singer the mute; yet even Singer is hardly a supporter of
Jake’s ideology. Nevertheless, the transient creates in Singer a kind of secular father confessor when he explains (or complains about) his failure to stir up enough people to follow him:

“I been all over this place. I walk around. I talk. I try to explain to them. But what good does it do? Lord God!”

He gazed into the fire, and a flush from the ale and heat deepened the color of his face. The sleepy tingling in his foot spread up his leg. He drowsed and saw the colors of the fire, the tints of green and blue and burning yellow. “You’re the only one,” he said dreamily. “The only one.” (p. 118)

Thus, in this status—Jake Blount as one-man organization—the theme of the book is sounded; for Blount is alienated from the very people he would wish to help. The heart is indeed a lonely hunter! Blount’s alienation expresses itself in the various schemes he dreams up—some of them hare-brained, such as writing chain letters—for organizing the workers for the coming revolution; sadly, though, this brand of radicalism is itself a form of alienation, cut off, as it is, from the mainstream of most radical movements of the time. His schemes are those of the crackpot. Even in his radicalism, Blount is too solipsistic for a group like the anarchists—perhaps the most alienated of radical groups in the Communist-dominated thirties; for though the anarchists were moribund at the time, they still managed to function, if only weakly, in isolated enclaves of large cities. But Blount is too eccentric even for this most far-out of radical groups. The result of this isolation is that, with true monomania, Blount believes that he can overthrow the prevailing political, social, and economic system by writing chain letters to individuals who, so he hopes, will follow his example. That he never gets beyond talking about the project is some sort of indication that Blount’s program for revolution appropriately fits his personality; for his talk never leads into anything more
substantial than talk, or never succeeds in accomplishing the
first concrete step toward a change in the social order. Indeed,
it is doubtful whether a changed social order would make
Blount happier, for he is an isolato who would be a stranger
in any society, even one of his own making.

Dr. Mady Copeland, the Negro physician in the story, him­
self isolated among his own people because of his education,
suspects that Blount may be demented; Copeland’s suspicion
does not arise from any antagonism toward Blount’s philosophy
—not initially, at least; indeed, there is the suggestion that,
under other circumstances, he would support Blount’s cause.
(He has even gone so far as to name one of his own sons
Karl Marx!) But Copeland’s interest in Blount is the clinical
interest of the physician who sees a pathological condition in
the man’s ravings. If Blount is not psychotic, he verges on it—
so Copeland suspects. He is extreme in almost everything he
does—even too extreme to make common cause with those
who think as he does.

In order to avoid thinking about his own defects, Blount
adopts the gospel of labor. In this respect he resembles Casy
in The Grapes of Wrath, though in Casy’s instance, the
preacher is not attempting to escape anything except a former
confused self. Like Casy, though, Blount had once also preached
a form of evangelical Christianity. Yet if he can think in terms
of society, concern himself with the mass larger than the individ­
ual, he can in effect escape from those unpalatable truths about
himself. In this respect there is also some similarity between
Jake Blount and the grotesques of Sherwood Anderson’s
Winesburg. Other than by the accident of geography and the
scheme of time, Blount might have walked right out of the
pages of Winesburg; here he reminds one of the Reverend
Curtis Hartman of that work, the Godseeker who, to avoid a
traumatic confrontation within his own weak soul, also ex-
presses his religious belief in terms of the compensatory fanaticism that makes up his personality. Thus, Blount too avoids the home truth of his condition by embracing the "Truth" of the social condition.

Blount also is an ambiguous and ambivalent figure, for there are elements within him of the typical and the atypical escaper. In the first instance Blount is a kind of distorted Everyman, even though his claims to identity with humanity are (at least in the way he looks at that identification) preposterously self-delusive. These claims of Blount, however, are exaggerated and, one suspects, deliberately so. Given to hyperbole, Jake is a boaster and a blusterer; and if he were not so tragic a figure, one might be tempted to call him a buffoon. But his buffoonery, his use of hyperbole, his shrill boastings—these may all well be part of his "sickness," a sickness that extends far beyond the clinical complaint of solipsism, or the social complaint of alienation. Blount not only indulges in these boasts, but he does so in a spirit of hilarity. When Blount walks into Biff Brannon's New York Café accompanied by a black man, someone challenges him: "Don't you know you can't bring no nigger in a place where white men drink?" Blount's answer, characteristically, is, "I'm part nigger myself" (p. 18). Jake Blount is not interested in spearing just the bourgeoisie; his whole reason for existence seems to be predicated on shocking anyone and everyone he comes into contact with, and this, in a large measure, seems to be a possible reason for his failure to win converts and influence followers.

Unlike most of the escapers dealt with here, Jake is a habitual escaper. He is always on the move, always running. When we first meet him, he has just arrived in the nameless town (modeled, allegedly, on Carson McCullers's hometown of Columbus, Georgia), presumably after a flight from a town he has just left behind; and when the book ends, he is on his way out of
town, this time his flight possessing a more serious reason (he
may have killed a man). He has first fled home as a ten-year-
old; as a full-grown man, he is still on the move—full-grown
physically, but emotionally still very much the ten-year-old who
left home years earlier.

Unlike other escapes—say, Huck’s, George Willard’s, or at a
further remove, Theron Ware’s—those of Blount do not seem
to bring about in him any spiritual regeneration; he seems to
remain what he was before the escapes—even to the extent of
suffering from the same delusions (or illusions) he had suffered
from before his final escape becomes necessary. When he leaves
town at the end of the book, he still thinks of organizing the
masses in a great crusade to overthrow capitalism; he seems to
have learned nothing from his experiences in the town. Again,
unlike those of other escapers, Jake’s escapes are neither resur­
rective nor initiatory: they are the chronic condition of his life.

Like so many escapers, Blount is isolated by his own pecu­
liarities and eccentricities as much as by those who react to
those eccentricities. However, there is the paradox that when
Jake does have the opportunity to escape, or leave town under
somewhat more auspicious circumstances than those of his final
departure, he doesn’t grasp the opportunity. When spring
comes, Blount, purely in terms of fantasy, feels that it would
be a good time to go out West—one traditional egress for the
American escaper—or south to the Gulf of Mexico. But he does
neither. It is almost as if he were suffering from a kind of
paralysis that keeps him in the town until something drastic
enough should come along to free him from that paralysis.

Jake Blount is also a walker and a talker, although it is the
first of these traits that seems to be more typical of most es­
capers. As with them, walking and talking for Jake become
ways of escaping an untenable self. His compulsive need to
walk the streets of the town is brought about by his restlessness,
his inability to stay put or to settle down. It is a common complaint so many escapers seem to suffer from; we have seen it in such diverse characters as John Andrews, Theron Ware, and George Willard. For example, when the room Blount sleeps in becomes, in its lonely isolation, too much of a burden for him—that is, when it becomes too peaceful, too comfortable—he must get out to walk by himself for a while. When the five o'clock whistles blow and workers are on their way home for the night, Jake “usually [does] not stay at home [but goes] out into the narrow, empty streets” (p. 119).

But if Jake is a walker, he is certainly more active, if not very effective, as a talker. As a talker, Jake has the philosophy of the itinerant radical, a type long familiar on the American scene, whose roots go back not only to the Wobblies and the Knights of Labor but to those who, with something of the same intensity of fire and zeal—the gospel revivalists—campaigned up and down the land in an earlier century. Indeed, as previously suggested, before Jake had discovered the gospel of labor, he had persuaded himself that he wanted to preach the gospel of Christ. However, when he discovers the principles of the radical labor movement “It was like being born a second time” (p. 117). In spite of the secularization of Jake’s concerns for the welfare of humanity, the religious overtones are constantly present, even in Jake’s talk:

“The things they have done to us! [he tells Singer]. The truths they have turned into lies. The ideals they have fouled and made vile. Take Jesus. He was one of us. He knew. When he said that it is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God—he damned well meant just what he said.5 But look what the Church has done to Jesus during the last two thousand years. What they have made of him. How they have turned every word he spoke for their own vile ends. Jesus would be framed and in jail if he
was living today. Jesus would be one who really knows. Me and Jesus would sit across the table and I would look at him and he would look at me and we would both know that the other knew. Me and Jesus and Karl Marx could all sit at a table."

(p. 122)

The further irony of Blount's status as a talker is that he is unable (or empirically appears unable) to communicate his gospel of labor to those whom it would most seem to benefit—the laborers themselves. Yet one difficulty that Blount seems to have is his status as a "performer," an exhibitionist, yelling in the street at the top of his lungs, challenging everyone he comes into contact with to find a false note in his message. Unlike the King and the Duke in *Huckleberry Finn*, Jake Blount does not have the power to attract people to his pitch. Either people have become less naïve, or Jake is simply ineffectual; there is the suspicion, however, that it is Blount's ineffectiveness that is more to blame than any lack of perception on the part of his audience. But if Blount is unlike the King and the Duke in his greater sincerity, he too, like them, is eventually forced to leave town, in flight from what he believes to be a pursuing law.

Further, Jake's status as a talker shows us a man who seems to possess the "gift of tongues"; but unlike preacher Casy in *The Grapes of Wrath*, there seems to be no one around for him to preach to, or whom he can reach when he does try to preach—unless it be Singer, who, in any event, is not particularly interested in Jake's message. Since no one of any consequence to Jake's cause seems willing to listen to him, he must finally talk to himself, or break out into those wild shouting marathons so characteristic of his periodic drunken binges.

This walled-in feeling, of being cut off from the world, produces in Jake a feeling of desperation, which finally bursts forth in belligerence. For Blount is the Unrequited Lover, a frustrated quester, even, as has been suggested, a "tragic
savior.” Perhaps he fits into all three categories, especially since his love for the working class is rejected by that class; like so many rejected suitors, Blount suffers from the frenzies of these rejections and slights to his vanity. He would, of course, like to be loved, or at least admired, by the exploited workers. But they fail to accommodate Jake; indeed, on one occasion, they even turn their full fury upon him.

Blount is certainly a would-be savior of sorts, but a savior without a people to save, for he has been rejected (by the people) in that role. He is, however, as much a Christ figure—in his own perverse way—as is Singer (who is generally thought to fulfill that role). Apart from the symbol of his “stigmata,” caused by an act of violent self-destruction years earlier, Jake’s message is that “the truth shall make you free”—Jake’s brand of truth, that is. Like Jesus, though certainly not for the same reasons, Jake is rejected and “despised of men”; he is cast out by the people whom he would save—in a sense “crucified” by them. Jake certainly echoes the Christ when he tells Copeland, if not very originally, “It’s this way. This is how I see it. The only solution is for the people to know. Once they know the truth they can be oppressed no longer. Once just half of them know the whole fight is won’’ (p. 229).

Although Jake shares with the other characters in the book the sense of alienation and isolation, and the need for love that grows out of that condition, what is most characteristic of him, and least characteristic of the others, is his condition of chronic itinerancy, his constant need to light out, to escape his previous place and condition. Although each of the characters in this book of loneliness is searching for something, none is an escaper in quite the formal sense as is Jake. For Blount’s first escape is, at one level, quite literal and real: it is a physical escape; indeed, a flight from the forces—specifically the law—that seem to threaten him in the town. At another level, however,
it is also an escape from the hopelessness that the town represents for him. As an afterthought one might add that of the eight escapers dealt with in this study, six, including Jake, attempt in one way or another an escape from the law as part of their larger escapes. These are, of course, Huck (even if he is not an official fugitive from justice); Frederick Henry (from the Italian military police); John Andrews (from the American military police); Tom Joad (from both Arkansas and California lawmen); and Bigger Thomas—discussed in chapter 9—(from a Chicago police dragnet).

One of the individuals with whom Blount may be able to make some contact is Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, the Negro physician. Yet in almost every instance in which Blount attempts to make such a contact, his effort is doomed to failure. Both Jake and Copeland even go so far—begrudgingly enough—as to get together over the common need to organize blacks and whites. But even here, Copeland's blackness and Jake's whiteness prove a barrier; Copeland distrusts Blount the white man, whom he has come to think of as synonymous with oppression; and Blount in his blindness would ignore the ethnic problem as needing a special approach as distinct from that of the larger, more generalized political and economic struggle. To Blount, Copeland as a Negro is—to borrow Ralph Ellison's term—an "invisible man." Since color, in Blount's eyes, has little or no substantial reality or relevance in the class struggle (that is, the exploited black man is the brother of the exploited white man; therefore, why should one stress the very thing that separates them?), he refuses to see it as having any reality or pertinence in the greater struggle for freedom. Blount sees the struggle purely in terms of class; Copeland, in terms of race.

One person with whom Blount seems to have established some sort of relationship is Singer, the mute. Once Singer re-
moves himself from the scene—his suicide toward the end of
the novel—the world flies apart for Jake, who, in spite of his
social concerns, is ultimately conquered by the understanding
(or apparent understanding) and love of an individual. It is
only after Singer’s death that Jake’s real troubles commence,
for the mute’s death releases a wildness in Blount that causes
him to steer straight for his own disaster, as though he were
trying to compensate for the loss of Singer. As he does for most
of the characters, Singer represents for Blount all of the under­
standing and compassion that Jake cannot find in others. It is
of no consequence that Singer may not be any of these things;
it is enough that Blount feels that he is.

Relations between Jake and some of the other characters are
less ambiguous. Though we do not for a certainty know
Singer’s opinion of Blount, except that he has the sort of pity
for him that one would have for a helpless child, we do get a
more substantial notion of Biff Brannon’s opinion of him.
When Alice Brannon, Biff’s wife, accuses Blount of being a
bum and a freak, Brannon’s rejoinder is, “I like freaks” (p. 12).
But, thinks Brannon, a little further on:

Blount was not a freak, although when you first saw him he
gave you that impression. It was like something was deformed
about him—but when you looked at him closely each part of
him was normal and as it ought to be. Therefore if this difference
was not in the body it was probably in the mind. He was like
a man who had served a term in prison or had been to Harvard
College or had lived for a long time with foreigners in South
America. He was like a person who had been somewhere that
other people are not likely to go or had done something that
others are not apt to do. (pp. 16–17)

In Brannon there seems to be not only a compassion, which
Singer seems to embody, but an understanding—blurred as it
is—that we are never sure Singer has, in spite of his much-vaunted sense of "penetration" into the town's characters.

The drunken brawl, which turns into a race riot at the carnival grounds where Jake works as the operator of a flying jinny, leads directly to Blount's escape from the town. Although there are probably more subtle reasons for Jake's flight, it is the riot that finally acts as the immediate trigger mechanism of that flight. The battle that Blount gets himself into doesn't even involve a principle. In its drunken precipitousness it reminds one of the brawl that Tom Joad got himself into, in which he kills a man. But in Tom's second involvement—his killing of a California deputy sheriff—he strikes out as much from principle as from anger. Blount's involvement in the riot is a blind striking-out, having no more principle than Blount himself has when he is wallowing in his drunken bouts. He flails out blindly and wildly at anyone, black or white, who happens to be within easy reach of his fists. And the riot itself, in its purposelessness and insane idiocy, seems to symbolize within Blount the degeneration of his purpose: at the risk of producing what is most likely a bad alliterative pun, Blount's purpose has been "blunted," perhaps by the very bluntness that seems to be characteristic both of his inspiration and his misfortune. At this point his revolutionary aims—if they were ever clear-cut to begin with—have degenerated into a free-for-all. There is now, if indeed there ever has been, no order to his revolt against the meaning of the social order, which, according to Blount, lacks all order. And when he sees close by on the fairgrounds a dead Negro boy, Blount, perhaps as a result of the general confusion, panics. Realizing all too clearly the possibilities of a frame-up—especially since his handwritten handbills carrying his revolutionary message are scattered about the fairgrounds—Jake makes his escape from the town.

The arrival of the police at the fairgrounds acts as an im-
mediate spur to his decision to run away—blindly, hysterically, down the dark twisted streets of the town. He has no destination, no plans, his flight being a stark, panic-stricken run to get out of the immediate area. And so when he finally determines to escape the town itself, that decision is made precipitously—as it has been in most of the escapes—on the spur of the moment, on impulse. There is little, if any, conscious planning involved. When he finally does leave, Blount doesn’t have the slightest notion of where he is bound.

There is another ingredient in Jake’s escape: his false hope. Apparently he has not learned anything significant from his experience, either in terms of survival or enlightened self-interest. Even at the moment of his departure, he still carries the hope—to be sure, somewhat battered by now—that he will eventually succeed in his effort to get the people to rise up against the venal social order; thus the hope is both self-consolation for his previous failures and nourishment for Jake’s self-delusion. Yet as hopeless as that hope is, Blount is both the master and the slave of the vision that drives him on and that eventually will lead to a dead end—for himself if not for his dream.

With the blindness of the fanatic who will not learn from his previous experience, and with the same infinite ability to rationalize, Blount tenaciously hangs onto his apparently unshakable faith. In this respect it is a grotesque parody of the faith of previous generations in the future of America. For in spite of his optimism—and he is still an optimist when we last view him making his exit from the town—that optimism is an ironic commentary on Blount’s condition, since optimism in this period of national crisis is no longer a viable position nor a salable product.

Thus, when Jake leaves town, his faith in the future is an illusory one, and it will probably serve him as falsely as it has thus far served him. Naturally, that obsessive—monomaniacal?
—hope is projected upon the town that lies up (or down) the road where, again, so he desperately trusts, the people will hopefully give him the hearing they have thus far denied him in all of the towns he has left behind. Blount, however, fails to see that all the towns are alike, for they inevitably project back at him the image he constructs of them. That his contempt (for the people in those towns) is an ingredient of that image can plainly be seen in his experiences in the town he has lived in for the past year. In this respect Theron Ware, in his year’s stay in Octavius, also sees the small town in terms of mutual rejection; but where Theron has some substantial notion of where he is bound, Jake hasn’t. In this, of course, what once held an ingredient of hope now shows us despair, even though it is disguised as the slenderest of hope.

Further, the scene of his departure is not one that would under ordinary circumstances encourage such optimism, for it takes place against a backdrop of poverty and desolation—a southern wasteland:

He walked until he reached the railroad tracks. On either side there were rows of dilapidated two-room houses. In the cramped back yards were rotted privies and lines of torn, smoky rags hung out to dry. For two miles there was not one sight of comfort or space or cleanliness. Even the earth itself seemed filthy and abandoned. Now and then there were signs that a vegetable row had been attempted, but only a few withered collards had survived. And a few fruitless, smutty fig trees. Little young-uns swarmed in this filth, the smaller of them stark naked. The sight of this poverty was so cruel and hopeless that Jake snarled and clenched his fists. (p. 266)

Why things should be any different in the next town only Jake could possibly know. But it seems to solace him that the poverty that taunts his failure in this town will only inspire him further in the next. Hope—attenuated though it is—remains where faith has fled.
Unlike those of so many escapers, Jake's escape seems to be a rather tame and unimaginative one; for unlike those escapers who have gone before, Jake no longer has the urge to move completely out of the immediate geographical region he has always presumably lived in, the South. Unlike Theron Ware who, at the end of his stay in Octavius, is Seattle bound, Jake doesn't really seem to wish for a new start that a complete change of scene might make possible. Instead, his escape seems feeble compared with those previous escapes we have examined, an escape essentially turned in on itself. It has led into a dead end geographically, physically, and spiritually:

But where would it be this time? The names of cities called to him—Memphis, Wilmington, Gastonia, New Orleans. He would go somewhere. But not out of the South... It was different this time. He did not long for open space and freedom—just the reverse. (p. 261; italics added)

Like so many escapers, Blount is an embodiment of the aspirations of the American dream; but now the aspirations, if not the dream, have gone sour. Jake Blount is, and has been for a long time, a self-appointed "circuit rider" of the class struggle; in another time he might literally have been a circuit rider, a preacher of religious revivalism, which had indeed almost been his destiny. But now he is a Jim Casy without that individual's gift for attracting followers. What is even more ironic (and bitter) for Jake is that he proves to be a failure at the very kind of preaching—of the revolutionary Word—in a time when that Word possessed a great potential audience, in the days of the Great Depression. Yet even under these "felicitous" circumstances, Jake Blount is a failure.

Blount's job as a flying-jinny operator in a carnival outwardly seems to reveal and symbolize his inner condition, for neither as preacher nor as dreamer has Jake been particularly successful. Even his job seems to parody the original bright
dream, to be seen in the details of that job. He must run the machinery that rotates wooden horses; but as part of that job he must keep the crowds from getting out of hand. Yet he proves a failure even in this. Further, the job lacks color or a sense of adventure. As such, it becomes a grotesque parody of the earlier promise of the American dream whose horses saw vaster visions than those circumscribed by the limits of a fairground. Jake’s horses are gimcrack and wooden—steeds for children, drunks, and tired mill-hands to ride on.

Thus, the end of the American dream for Jake Blount also leads to his own dead end. In Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* the Joads at least have some small initial hope. But in spite of his implied affirmation of hope on leaving town—“There was hope in him”—Jake Blount is truly in a hopeless predicament. Whatever hope is left in him is ultimately a mocking echo of a lost dream, designed to instill in him the necessary fortitude for what lies ahead. When Huck Finn, George Willard, or even the flaccid Theron Ware light out, the escape takes the form of an aspiration—to reach a territory, to go to a big city, to head west to sell real estate or go into politics. This cannot be said of Jake Blount. He is forced out of the town before he can construct a plan or a program for himself for the destination that lies farther than down the road. Thus, for Jake the American dream has truly faded, and all he can ever do, or be capable of doing, is to rant against the status quo that the dream has become.

Blount’s defeat may therefore be seen as the defeat of a greater dream that once gave America and Americans the necessary hope and courage to rediscover new values in the discovery (or rediscovery) of a new land. If the defeat is not to be permanent, then a new life and a reason for living must be infused into those escapers who are to come, who will attempt not only to escape their own untenable predicaments, but to aid their fellow Americans to do so: if there is to be, as Sinclair
Lewis once put it, “a passionate escape there must be not only a place from which to flee but a place to which to flee.” Today, in America, the escape has become more than simply a geographic quest; it has become a spiritual one—and not alone for the individual but for the nation. Thus, escape, if it is to lead to the rebirth of a greater hope, must not only be away from something, but a thrust toward something incomparably better than the landscape of the past or the shores of the present.


2. Carson McCullers, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (Boston, 1940), p. 17. Used with the permission of the Houghton Mifflin Company. All further quotations are taken from this edition.


4. The anarchists of pre–World War II years were totally unlike the current crop of Weatherman enragés, tending more toward the heated cafeteria table talk than to the kind of mindless violence of recent years. Indeed, many prewar anarchists were actually gentle, dreamy souls.

5. As an instance of Blount’s half-digested knowledge, his quotation, or paraphrase, is slightly, but critically, off-center: what Jesus is really supposed to have said is that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

6. It is a perverse “gift” in Blount’s case, since it drives people away from him instead of drawing them to him.

7. Harry Minowitz, Mick Kelly’s young seducer, may be thought of as an escapee too. But his is an escape through panic—ill-founded—that he may have made Mick pregnant; besides, his role in the story is a minor one, hardly large enough to justify any expanded treatment here.

8. Significantly, when Tom does strike, he does so as a man of few words. In spite of his key role in The Grapes of Wrath, he is a terse, laconic individual; Jake, on the other hand, though he talks a lot, never seems to accomplish much, even in the negative way of a Tom Joad.