

The presentation of
the american south in
carson mccullers' the
ballad of the sad...



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When it comes to defining the literature of the American South, geography, history, politics, race, gender, social order and religion are what come to one's mind immediately (Hobson, Ladd 1). However, this description changed over time, and in the middle of the twentieth century scholars added " a tragic sense, a sense of place, and a sense of the past in the present" to this definition (Hobson, Ladd 1). All of these three characteristics, as well as a strong sense of loneliness and trials of strength, are present in Carson McCullers' novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (Gray, 266, 270). According to Richard Gray, the author's " peculiar quality of isolation", with which her works are usually described, is a result of her place among other writers of the South (Gray, 265). She was not part of the great " renaissance", but it would not be true to say that she belonged to the new wave of Southern writers who came after the Second World War either, considering most of her main works were published before the end of the war (Gray, 265-266). *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was first published in 1943, when the author was only twenty-six, in *Harper's Bazaar*, and in the following, I discuss the above mentioned themes' presence and the Southern grotesque in McCullers' short story (Dazey, 117).

The story is set in an isolated, rural town in the American South and tells the story of Miss Amelia Evans, who is approached by a hunchback, Cousin Lymon. She invites him to her home, and this is the beginning of the café, which is the center place of the short story. The central characters, Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon and Marvin Macy are embodiments of the Southern grotesque. Alan Spiegel states that " the grotesque, as it appears in Southern fiction, refers neither to the particular quality of a story . . . nor to

its mood . . . nor to its mode of expression. . . . The grotesque refers rather to a type of character, defined by either physical or mental deformity” (Gleeson-White 110). However, McCullers’ short story explores the different versions of grotesque: male homosexuality, androgyny and a love triangle, which eventually leads to the destruction of both Miss Amelia and the café (Gleeson-White 7). The physical deformities of these characters are introduced right in the beginning, or at least, in the case of Marvin Macy, early in the story. Joseph R. Millichap, in the Carson McCullers’ Literary Ballad, calls them very aptly “ a manly giantess, a selfish dwarf, and a demonic bandit” (Millichap 12). Miss Amelia’s appearance is rather unsettling. She has a face that is similar to “ the terrible dim faces known in dreams” with two gray crossed eyes (McCullers 3). She looks rather masculine, considering her six feet two inches height, man-like muscles and short-cropped hair (McCullers 4). She seems to reject almost every feminine qualities. She wears overalls, only have one Sunday dress, and even that is short on her. This is probably the result of being raised by her father, and the lack of a mother figure, a female figure, ended up with Amelia almost copying her father. She also owns a set of rather masculine skills, which are the opposite of the traditional feminine roles i. e. raising children and keeping a household. She has a good hand for carpentering, she built a brick privy behind her store, she goes hunting and also makes and sells alcohol. She is a very dominant person who is feared by the townspeople, and her relationship with them is purely based on business: “[T]he only use that Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them” (McCullers 5). This entirely material interest in other people, the complete lack of any type

of relationship and “ gender configuration” contribute to the grotesque representation of her character (Gleeson-White 110).

The most definite bodily disfiguration is apparent on Cousin Lymon:

“[T]he man was a hunchback. He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, dusty coat that reached only to his knees. His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp, little mouth (McCullers 7).

As Virginia Spencer Carr mentions in *Understanding Carson McCullers*, the townspeople are not only extremely amazed by this tubercular but also by his extraordinary relationship with Miss Amelia and later with Macy (Spencer Carr 60, 61). Miss Amelia is moved by this stranger and feels love for him, but as Harold Bloom says, the reader is incapable to comprehend “ the grotesque tragedy of the doomed love between” them (Bloom 437). This love led to the creation and the demise of both the café and Miss Amelia. Her unexpected love towards him can be explained by the fact that this weak henchman could not be threat to her sexuality (Spencer Carr 61). I believe that the main reason, beside Marvin Macy’s inner deformity, why her marriage with him only lasted for ten days is because due to her grotesqueness she was incapable of a traditional marriage. Macy wished to have a normal romantic relationship with Miss Amelia, he loved her, so the fact that she ended it was truly painful for him, and it led to him turning back to his cruel old self.

As I mentioned above, grotesque refers to a type of character who is deformed either physically or mentally and the one character of the story who is only deformed mentally is Miss Amelia's husband, Marvin Macy. He is described as "the handsomest man in this region" who "[f]rom the outward and worldly point of view...was a fortunate fellow" (McCullers 27). However, the narrator warns the reader that he should not be envied since he was a rather evil man due to his very unfortunate and difficult childhood (McCullers 27-29). His character greatly changed when he fell in love with Miss Amelia, "[h]e reformed himself completely" (McCullers 29). Their marriage did not end well, Macy ended up in penitentiary, then later left the town. His revenge on Miss Amelia and his cruel treatment of Cousin Lymons only confirmed the great deformity of his soul and mind. When Lymons first set eyes on Marvin Macy, he became utterly infatuated with him and despite his unrequited love, he followed him everywhere, and was more than happy to help him destroy Miss Amelia. The narrator addresses the nature of love, which serves as a explanation for those who cannot comprehend the possibility of these three characters' love: "First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons-but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved...Now, the beloved can also be of any description" (McCullers 26). Being different, even the right opposite of what is expected or what is common in a society does not mean that they cannot have a romantic relationship, even if that is not a traditional one.

The deformity of their relationship triangle led to the final fight, which ended with the victory of Marvin Macy. This "combination of macabre and grotesque" is a reminder of the trials of strength found in many tales of

Southern literature (Gray 270). It led to the final tragic of Miss Amelia, and to her unavoidable future of loneliness. Even though before the arrival of Lymons, she had been alone, the fact that he left her completely destroyed her completely both physically and mentally:

Miss Amelia let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning gray. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they grow crazy. And those gray eyes—slowly day by day they were more crossed, and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition. She was not pleasant to listen to; her tongue had sharpened terribly. (McCullers 70)

She was waiting for Lymons to return but he never did. As Richard Gray says, Miss Amelia is a lonesome woman, however the previously quoted passage places her in a more sympathetic context; she is still odd and grotesque, but now we know the reasons behind her oddity and are able to understand her (Gray 270, 271).

The main themes of the American Southern literature usually include history and nostalgia, however, as Richard Gray points out, Carson McCullers did not use either of these themes in her work, “ she manages to make history function as an absent presence” (Gray 273). She made a conscious choice to conceal both history and religion. The townspeople may feel a certain kind of nostalgia but they cannot define the reason behind it (Gray 273). They might miss something they never had or opportunities that never existed for them, since they live in a deserted, “ dreary” Southern town, which is “ lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the

world” (McCullers 3). From the narrator’s speech it is evident that the townspeople still greatly miss the café as well, since it was something different and new in their boring lives.

Even if Carson McCullers was not considered a major writer, she was a rather extraordinary minor one (Gray 273). The Ballad of the Sad Café offers the reader a glimpse into the life of a rather peculiar little town. Her characters, and we have to admit that not just the main ones, are quite unusual, deformed and grotesque. However, as the story unfolds and we get to know the lives and circumstances of these people, with the exception of Cousin Lymons and Marvin Macy, it is hard not to feel sympathy towards them.

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