

Isolation & Alienation in Carson McCullers

'The Ballad of Sad Café'

Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of Sad Café* is set in an isolated town in a small rural area. From the novel's vivid beginning we get a sense of the time and place through the narrator's panoramic portrait of "an extraordinary atmosphere...the heat, the slowness...the south,"¹ and McCullers sets the tone for the loneliness and isolation to come, creating a poetic and lyrical probing of isolation, loneliness, gender.

The novel begins with a rather dismal description, the mill town being nothing more than a (seemingly geographically isolated) "dreary" location beset with misery, drabness, and lifelessness, far removed, it seems, almost an image of banishment, from any kind of civilization:

The town itself is dreary; not much is there except the cotton-mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two coloured windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long... If you walk along the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do (3).

Southern Gothic literature is often supernatural and escapist, and focuses on cruelty and suffering of everyday life.

¹ McCullers, Carson. "Marielle Bancou On Carson McCullers." 08 Jan 2008. Online video clip. YouTube. Accessed on 16 Sept 2011. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAkH1uUoY-s>>

Cruelty, suffering, irony and macabre are hallmarks of the southern gothic tradition with much of it centering on the tragicomic viewpoints of the oppressed peasant classes, grotesquery and racial bigotry. McCullers once described this technique as "a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialist detail" (McCullers, *The Mortgaged Heart*, 286). The following primal scene - McCullers introduction of the hunchback - is an example of McCullers' definitive use of southern gothic elements of macabre, grotesquery (and even irony in that Amelia - formerly married to the handsome Marvin Macy - eventually falls in love with the ghoulish, dwarf-like cousin):

The man was a stranger...a hunchback. He was scarcely more than five 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. His face was yellowed by dust and there were lavender shadows beneath his eyes. He carried a lopsided old suitcase which was tied with a rope (7).

McCullers constructs characters like Amelia as devices of rumination on isolation and alienation. McCullers' description of Amelia evokes an almost reversed sense of her gender, negates

her femininity, isolating her from our idea of what constitutes a woman. The following passage is very alienating:

...Miss Amelia had been born dark and somewhat queer of face...early in youth she had grown to be six feet two inches tall which in itself is not natural for a woman, and that her ways and habits of life were too peculiar ever to reason about (14).

There is also the matter of racial isolation and alienation, a certain sense of invisibility and namelessness inherent in McCullers' treatment of black humanity (her condescending and presumptuous remark about the "the slow song of a Negro on his way to make love" or "the reason why Negroes are black"); how *Sad Café's* treatment of black identity ("Jeff, the old Negro who cooked for Miss Amelia") in small-town south, and how McCullers deals with the schism between black life in a small white southern town.² In his seminal essay, *Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization*³, philosopher and historian Cornel West discusses

The basic components of black invisibility and namelessness: black people as a problem-people rather than

² I am aware of McCullers' other treatments of black characters, which lend more attention to the development of its characters. For example, in *Renaissance in the South: A Critical History of the Literature, 1920-1960* (The University of North Carolina; Chapel Hill, 1963), John M. Bradbury wrote: "Miss McCullers not only defines and gives concrete life to her major theme but she displays an extraordinary grasp of diverse character problems. One of the first of a growing number of young Southern women, she deals directly and effectively with a Negro family" (110). However, my concern here lingers on the matter of how she constructs her black characters in *Sad Café*.

³ West Cornel, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization." *The Future of the Race*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Cornel West. Vintage, 1997.

people with problems; black people as abstractions and objects rather than individuals and persons; black and white worlds divided by a thick wall (or a "Veil") that requires role-playing and mask-wearing rather than genuine humane interaction; black rage, anger, and fury concealed in order to assuage white fear and anxiety; and black rootless and homeless on a perennial journey to discover who they are in a society content to see blacks remain the permanent underdog (84).

Ironically, McCullers never fully develops this society (at least not in a realistic way which would honestly discuss life as it occurred in a small southern town), or perhaps that is one of the elements (or gimmicks) of the southern gothic tradition: how it rearranges history to create some sense of irony and abstract realism. It seems ironic that *Sad Café* - a story situated in 1940s Jim Crow south - seems to have no race problems. We never get to *know* or *see* Jeff (unless he is cooking). We never see any idea of black humanity in this otherwise grim town except for McCullers' stereotype acknowledgement of a distant faint sound in the night, a sound of a Negro on his way to make love - an image that's reminds us of white stereotypes of black men as hyper-sexual⁴.

Along with Amelia's masculine character, other character's gender roles are reversed as well. McCullers' Miss Amelia character is more masculine than feminine, and identifies Miss

⁴ Even the essence of Harper Lee's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, is essentially a story of a black man raping a white woman.

Amelia in seemingly androgynous or at least sexually peculiar terms: she has no menstrual cycle, she consciously avoids other women, and her physical and spiritual strength is constant projected throughout the novel, which culminates in a fistfight between Amelia and her ex-husband, Marvin Macy. Masculinity and femininity are interchangeable, and Miss Amelia is mostly masculine while Cousin Lymon seems weak and effeminate, and has no amiable qualities of maleness, lacking the most basic masculine sensibilities.

In the end, McCullers leaves no solution to the problems of isolation, alienation, loneliness, just another sad, tragicomic perspective on what it means to have been in great amounts of physical and emotional despair...in a small southern town...during the 1940s...smack dab in the middle of nowhere.

