FAILURE OF LOVE IN CARSON MCCULLERS' *THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ*

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In her art as in her personal life Carson McCullers experienced great tidal movements involving changes of scene, of friends, and of emotional direction. Yet she never really deviated from her main theses: that love drives men, but in vain, and that, in loving, the individual seeks to integrate himself into a larger whole. Where *Reflections in a Golden Eye,* as an effort to elucidate these ideas, represents regression (Tseng 39-59), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* marks a new, if limited efflorescence. This third novel explores the dark ground separating the lover and the beloved, and divides the illusion and the cold reality, as does none of her other books. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* also emobodies McCullers' pessimistic view of love because she sees lover and beloved coming "from different countries" (*Ballad* 18).

A stark tale concerning semi-mythical characters set in semi-mythical countryside, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is considered by some critics to be McCullers' finest work. Irving Howe went further, characterizing it as "one of the finest novels ever written by an American" (5). The encomium seems exaggerated from at least two perspectives: (1) *The Ballad of the Sad Café* lacks the depth and poignancy of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and, in consequence, does not touch in the reader the responsive chords of compassionate ecstasy; and (2) the later work is cast physically on a far smaller scale and thus ranks as a somewhat slighter effort that cannot merit consideration with *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as regards character development and delineation.

In some respects, nonetheless, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* must be regarded as the most successful of McCullers' fictional works (Hassan, *Radical Innocence* 223). Most basically, it brings to full flower her philosophy of love, and does so within the confines of a relatively simple, compact story told in appropriately unadorned prose. Allusion has already been made to the famous and oft-quoted passage in which the author states that the lover and the beloved originate in different countries. The result may not quite stand as the masterpiece once expected of McCullers if she would only abandon "her excessive interest in the grotesque" (Evans, *The Ballad of Carson McCullers* 126); yet *The Ballad of the Sad Café* unquestionably probes new dimensions of the love-hate dialectic. In the process her characters exhibit what must be regarded as a limitless capacity for spiritual pain.

The work itself is not so much a novel as a novelette or a novella: a single, short, sustained tale without the structural complexities of, for example, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.* First published in the *Harper's Bazaar* in August, 1943, it was republished the following year in *The Best American Short Stories of 1944,* and in 1951 was included in—and gave its name to the title of—an omnibus edition of McCullers' works published at that time.

The Ballad of the Sad Café was written in a six summer weeks, 1941, at the Yaddo Writer's Colony (McDowell 23-24). It had matured in the author's mind while

she was working on the earlier chapters of *The Member of the Wedding* and had drawn its inspiration from some neighborhood personalities whom she had met in the Sand Street area of Brooklyn: "In one bar, there is a little hunchback who struts in proudly every evening, and is petted by everyone, given free drinks, and treated as a sort of mascot by the proprietor" (*Mortgaged* 219).

Allegorical in form, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* deals with a love triangle between three unusual people—Miss Amelia, a mannish, driving, strong-minded personality; her husband Marvin Macy, a loveless criminal; and Cousin Lymon, a hunchbacked dwarf. The focal point of the story is the not-always-sad café; but the larger setting is a countryside that is plainly Georgian, and which, even so, is part of a Georgia that never quite was. It is a landscape strangely transformed, impregnated with the writer's special view of the world, as if every object had been affected by the particular psychological climate that passes over it, a spiritual weather that caricatures what really exists. The model for this town and countryside, of course, was Carson McCullers' Columbus and surrounding areas; but the imaginative construct is a desiccated, foreboding extract of that Southern mill town. As the text tells us: "The town itself is dreary" and "not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live, a few peach trees, a church with two colored windows, and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long" (*Ballad* 1). The town has taken on the tenor of the miserable and dreary lives of its inhabitants who flesh out the estrangement which is ascribed to the town: "the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world" (1).

The Ballad of the Sad Café does nothing to diminish McCullers' reputation as the creator of works that are "gothic" or "grotesque." Her characters in this third novel fall into no standard human category, and her story of love that begets hate is reminiscent of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*: ". . . an exercise in the gothic tale, Southern style . . . , crammed with pathology" (*Time*, 4 June 1951, 106).

Labels are often misleading and classification of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* as merely gothic or Southern Gothic invites fundamental misunderstanding at worst, inadequate comprehension at best. McCullers' horrors are not the psychological monstrosities of Poe. Quite the contrary—and far worse: in the McCullers' world, "little Southern towns" are "haunted by far more masterful horrors than were ever conjured up in the dreary castles of Horace Walpole," so that ". . . there are played out the most sombre tragedies of the human spirit" (Clancy 243). Here is a major difference between the purely gothic and the Southern Gothic as exemplified in McCullers' writings. Her characters "speak of complexities and frustrations which are so native to man that they can only be recognized . . . in the shock which comes from seeing them dressed in the robes of the grotesque" (Clancy 243). And while grotesque, they are recognizable as intensely human figures because they function "in a frame of commonplace facts and details" that the author "enumerates precisely" (Redman 30).

It has been held that the "eccentrically inclined" view of mortal existence that Carson McCullers espouses has little or no revelance to real life. Indeed, McCullers has from time to time been accused of creating her own "private dream place" (*New Yorker*, 9 June 1951, 115) in which *outré* characters engage in incredible gyrations,

none of which relate to known human experiences. But the author is not trying to portrary simple reality, whether social or psychological or physical. She is attempting to breach and lay bare inner chambers of the shell that is the human heart. Dream world this must be, to an extent, because McCullers is transmuting a private and deeply felt *Weltanschauung* into webs of words whose burden is as subtle as their core of meaning is frightening. Dream place it must also be, of course, because this world of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is a fictive one, a strange mélange of grotesque characters, abnormal motivations, unusual situations—and very human sorrows and frustrations.

The charge by the anonymous *New Yorker* critic that McCullers, in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and other works, seeks to impose substitutes for real literature on unsuspecting audiences cannot be substantiated. In the first place, the literary charlatan, as McCullers well understood, is probably more easily detectable than the charlatan in any other métier. Second, a good novel is the successful creation of a world that inspires credence, or touches the mind or emotions or both. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* succeeds on both counts.

McCullers' third novel, like so much fiction, requires some minor, initial suspension of disbelief. The reader is called upon to accept the basic premise of the tiny, ingrown Southern hamlet and its mentally and physically deformed characters. Given suspension to that point, and reading forward, one can enter this silent strange world of the emotions and watch as the characters revolve toward their own spiritual destruction. The book then becomes a compressed, curious tale in which the characters and their twisted psyches supply the elements of surprise and interest, in the process providing a very recognizable plot. Three ill-starred loves, that of Macy for Miss Amelia, of Miss Amelia for her hunchback, and finally of the hunchback for Macy, unfold in succession, moving toward the conclusion that had been announced at the beginning. McCullers' choice of grotesques for characters enables her to prove her thesis, enunciated in so many words for the first time, that "the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself" (*Ballad* 19).

The Ballad of the Sad Café is replete with this pessimism. Because the book is compact and intense, it seems to generate a strange, incandescent atmosphere of its own. Toward the end, the story is told with swift and bitter savagery; tragedy is approaching, and the townspeople sense it: "People are never so free with themselves and so recklessly glad as when there is some possibility of commotion or calamity ahead" (29). Seeing these small, ill-intentioned people in action, one recalls that McCullers was approaching the end of the work when she learned of the tragic death in Switzerland of her close friend, Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach, to whom she had dedicated *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. It is almost as if she were despairing of life itself—and yet one senses that she does not, for if she did, why would she trouble to create, to write at all? On a deeper level, her philosophy would seem to have similarities with that of the English poet A. E. Housman, during the bitter and poignant days of his youth when he wrote most of his poetry:

> Therefore, since the world has still
> Much good, but much less good than ill,
> And while the sun and moon endure

Luck's a chance but trouble's sure,
I'd face it as a wise man would
And train for ill and not for good.
(*A Shropshire Lad* 131)

Such stoic attitude has been adopted by Portia in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.* But seldom does it become the living principle of Miss Amelia. Miss Amelia, the strongly-built, miserly owner of the "Sad Café" and the richest woman in town, is the central character in the story. Her story exemplifies McCullers' recurring theme of love offered and betrayed. Miss Amelia is not comfortable with people but is a shrewd business woman and is much at home in the world of things:

> People, unless they are nilly-willy or very sick, cannot be taken into the hands and changed overnight to something more worthwhile and profitable. So that the only use that Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them. And in this she succeeded. (2)

On her wedding night, Miss Amelia spent no more than half an hour with the bridegroom before she "stomped down the stairs in breeches and a khaki jacket," with "her face . . . darkened so that it looked quite black" (22). As Louise Westling suggests, Miss Amelia is a grown-up tomboy who "refuses to accept the diminished status of woman" (469). She then passed the night in the office, poring over *The Farmer's Almanac*, and afterwards, when daylight returned, she began to construct a rabbit hutch that she intended to sell somewhere. Spurning her husband, she loves only Cousin Lymon.

The latter, te hunchbacked dwarf, is the most convincing of the three main characters. He brings the dreary town to life with his malice, his liveliness, his lies, and his boasting. No longer is it a place where there is nothing to do, but a community centered on Miss Amelia's café, where he lives. He accepts Amelia's love but in the end abandons her and all the benefits that he derives from her to go away with Marvin Macy, who possesses the strength and virility that he himself would like to have.

Marvin Macy, Amelia's husband, is an unsympathetic character who, finding no place for himself in life, and having been heartlessly dispossessed of his property by Amelia, descends into a state of criminality. McCullers provides the key to his personality in the following passage:

> . . . the hearts of small children are delicate organs. A cruel beginning in this world can twist them into curious shapes. The heart of a hurt child can shrink so that forever afterward it is hard and pitted as the seed of a peach. . . . Marvin Macy . . . grew to be bold and fearless and cruel. His heart turned tough as the horns of Satan, and until the time when he loved Miss Amelia he brought to his brother and the good woman who raised him nothing but shame and trouble. (21)

With Marvin Macy, Carson McCullers again reveals her artistry in the creation of character, filling in the main outline with deft touches of detail. She lets the reader

know, for example, about the wickedness of the young Macy by specifying that he chopped off squirrels' tails and engaged in other cruel and unusual acts; she also notes that he "was well off, made good wages, and had a good watch which opened in the back to a picture of a waterfall" (19-20). She adds that he made many conquests among the tender young girls of the vicinity, to their eventual disadvantage.

The story itself represents in cameo form what may be the most perfect expression of McCullers' belief that all love is doomed. But here the love is doomed even as it blossoms: the door to the sad café hardly opens, banishing loneliness, when it slams shut again, leaving desolation of the spirit. The narrative opens at Miss Amelia's store on an April night when the hunchback first comes to town, carrying an old suitcase and claiming kinship to Amelia. Lost and alone, a stranger, he bursts into tears, thus awakening Amelia's sympathy--and her love. She adopts him, but as the townsfolk do not see him again for a day or two, a rumor circulates that she has murdered him. When a delegation of eight visits the store to investigate, the hostile, unreasoning environment becomes personified. To the astonishment of the group, Cousin Lymon appears, smartly dressed. A relaxed atmosphere then prevails. Amelia decants her whiskey, and the store is on its way to becoming a cafe. In the weeks that follow the transformation becomes complete, with a softened Amelia running the business and with Lymon—whom Amelia spoils unmercifully—bringing life, chatter, disputes, and a piquant spice of malice to the café's life, upon which the life of the town comes to center.

Amelia, one learns, had been married to Macy for some years earlier, but the strange and apparently unconsummated marriage had lasted for only ten days, ending when Amelia threw Macy off her property. Amelia had taken the latter step only after he had deeded her all his property and personal possessions—including the watch with the waterfall picture—in a futile attempt to placate her and to win her love. As Margaret McDowell observes, "at the point of her marriage she is almost monstrous" (69). Macy had then drifted away and become a notorious criminal, finding his way to the penitentiary after "the law captured him, drunk, on the floor of a tourist cabin, his guitar by his side, and fifty-seven dollars in his right shoe" (24).

For Miss Amelia and the hunchback, the halcyon time cannot last. As was foreordained, the beloved—the hunchback—finds his own love-imperative and, in its pursuit, destroys both the café and Miss Amelia. The store has been a café for six years when Macy is released from the penitentiary and returns to the town, more dangerous than ever. Lymon fawns upon him; but Macy "brushed the hunchback aside as if he were a swamp mosquito" (42). Still Lymon pursues, undaunted, seeing in Macy *his* avatar of love. Tension grows between Amelia and Macy and culminates in a legendary fight that is watched by the entire village on Groundhog Day. The fight, as Albert Griffith suggests, is staged with all the panoply of "a gladiatorial contest or knightly joust" (55). At the climax of the struggle, which is also the climax of the story, as Amelia is throttling Macy, Lymon leaps on Amelia's back, giving the victory to Macy. Apparently, it is not the fight, but the grotesque act of betrayal perpetrated by Lymon that ultimately defeats Amelia and plunges her into the abyss of loneliness and self-estrangement. The physical defeat by Marvin is only a consequence of the

shock of betrayal by Lymon. The moment that Lymon, hawk-like, springs twelve feet from a counter, lands on Amelia's back and furiously claws at her neck, Amelia is destroyed from within. That night before leaving town together to be heard no more, Macy and Lymon wreck the café and everything belonging to Amelia that they can find. Amelia, broken by the treachery of Lymon, loses her vigor and becomes a recluse. She awaits for Lymon's return for three years, after which she has the premises boarded up and retires within. With the cafe closed, the town reverts to its original dreariness: "The soul rots with boredom. You might as well go down to the Forks Falls highway and listen to the chain gang" (53).

The form of the story indeed suggests that of a ballad, although, as McCullers was later to say, "I only thought the name was pretty" (cited in Smith 7). Ballads are popular in the Southern states, where they are often receptacles for folk memories, and McCullers' musical ear evidently led her, almost unconsciously, one suspects, to appreciate the possibilities that the ballad form offered. Among the advantages of the ballad are its simplicity, its poetic and symbolic possibilities as well as its elevation of human experience to the level of myth and legend. McCullers has used these advantages effectively, subtly announcing the fact to the reader, then in the story's closing lines issuing the invitation to " 'go listen to the chain gang,' [the invitation] serving as a reminder that the piece is at one and the same time a literary ballad and a folk dirge enclosing a cosmic statement" (Folk 203).

The story opens and closes with phrases that seem to set a quasi-musical tone. The opening statement contains the sad and mournful strain that seems to run like a background refrain throughout the piece:

> The town itself is dreary; . . . If you walk along the main street on an August afternoon there is nothing whatsoever to do. The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely . . . ; sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams—sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief. (1)

If this introduction sets the tone for the story, the closing statement, entitled "THE TWELVE MORTAL MEN," is like a musical coda, suddenly continuing once more after the story itself has ended and bringing a further and final message. In this instance the final message is one that lifts the gloomy story of man's plight on earth as a prisoner doomed to suffer from unrequited love to the level of the universal:

> The gang works all the day long, . . . All day there is the sound of the picks striking into the clay earth, hard sunlight, the smell of sweat. And every day there is music. One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and

> the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in the silence.
>
> And what kind of gang is this that can make such music? Just twelve mortal men, seven of them black and five of them white boys from this county. Just twelve mortal men who are together. (53-54)

From the concrete particular, the coda swells for a moment to the universal before sinking back to the particular again, to die away at last.

The psychological structure of the story, as already remarked, is that of a love triangle, or circle, which has no end. Happiness is attained for a time when a balance is established between Amelia and Lymon, but that which was launched earlier runs to its inevitable conclusion. Macy returns; the balance is upset and the triangular pattern is introduced; love runs to waste and the death of the spirit ensues, both for Amelia and for the town itself, which settles into its original death-like torpor under the hot Southern sun. The legend has reached its conclusion; there is no more.

The themes of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, as noted, echo those of Carson McCullers' other works–unfulfilled love, which makes each person a prisoner within himself, and alienation, or loneliness. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, however, McCullers succeeds in stating these themes and working them out with more force and simplicity than in any other of her works. The café, a device that surfaces again and again in McCullers' writings, is functional as the author proceeds with the story:

> The symbolism of the café, that "clean, well-lighted place" for the lonely and the sleepless . . . brings into perspective and balance the chief elements of her narrative pattern: a plot of double conflict, external and internal, between the individual and a hostile environment; a dramatic structure unfolding the tension of crisis, when the individual realizes that he is separate and lost; a theme of moral isolation presented in terms of social disunity and the wasted human effort to escape the loneliness which life itself imposes. (Kohler 4)

Each of the three main characters in turn is lover, and each in turn sees his or her love spurned and is condemned to isolation. The central tragedy, however, is not the eventual flight into oblivion of Macy and Lymon, but "the destruction of the heart of Miss Amelia" (Pritchett 137).

Some critics have seen as a weakness McCullers' tendency to inject herself into the story in the role of a moralizer or editorialist, pointing a moral or warning the reader of what is to come (Kohler 8). It is precisely the use of this device, however, that permits her to make the statement about the nature of love, which is not only central to the theme of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, but also central to the themes of all her novels:

> There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. . . . Now, the beloved can be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the

> stimulus for love . . . . Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself. (18-19)

Rarely has such an elemental view of the nature of love been expressed in fiction, and never, it would seem, has it found expression in American literature with such simple explicitness. The statement has distilled meaning; it is, clearly, a summation of a deeply felt personal cosmogony of love. It may even have "a religious significance when the victim is conceived both as scapegoat and redeemer. . . .[McCullers'] doctrine of love comes close to defining evil in Christian terms," a view that gains credence if one accepts the one-way nature of love as the cause of evil: "Therefore man must love, like God, without hope of requital. He must further redeem the beloved, redeem evil, by offering himself as a willing victim" (Hassan, "The Victim" 144-45).

Not all is exclusively bleak or metaphysical in *The Ballad of the Sad Café,* even though its keynote is stark. There is, unquestionably, an underlying pessimism, an anguish turning to despair. But warm humor surfaces as well, naturally and unself-consciously, as in other major works by McCullers: " 'Drink,' she said, 'it will liven your gizzard' " (*Ballad* 6).

One reason for the controversy that Carson McCullers' work has aroused, apart from charges of grotesqueness and the like, has to do with her use of allegory. The charge is valid only in the sense that the allegory produces unevenness. The reader cannot always be certain whether the characters are moving on the allegorical level or the realistic. But McCullers is not a pure allegorist, for whom the realistic hardly exists, nor yet a modern realist, for whom the allegorical is anathema. Rather, McCullers often placed her characters directly between the two worlds of realism and allegory, always reemphasizing the parable of man's exile in a universe devoid of mutual love. She understood perhaps that some readers would read her on the realistic level while others would read on the allegorical. Still others would comprehend both frames of reference. Such factors suggest one reason why she has been called a "writer's writer" (Evans, "The Case of Carson McCullers" 42). The charge, if charge it is, constitutes high praise as well since it implies mastery of craft.

As allegory or parable, a novel requires symbols, and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is, indeed, rich in both symbols and signs. Miss Amelia makes a whiskey that has particularly beneficial properties, transcending those of similar liquids; it is a magic potion, and at the peak of her powers she runs off large quantities of it in her private still. Another important symbol is Miss Amelia's café. "Product of her love, the café is the symbol of the ability of human affection to create intimacy and delight where lonely barrenness existed before" (Graver 31). She also cherishes an acorn that she picked up from the ground on the day her father died and that she keeps for a reason that she does not know. It is perhaps the mysterious symbol of life itself which none can know. Even the seasons are symbolically in tune with the events of the tale:

> Marvin Macy brought with him bad fortune, right from the first, as could be expected. The next day the weather turned suddenly, and it became hot. Even in the early morning there was a sticky sultriness in the atmosphere, the wind carried the rotten smell of the swamp. . . . After a few days there was everywhere the smell of slowly spoiling meat,

and an atmosphere of dreary waste. (38)

Shortly before the climactic fight, there is a symbolic fall of snow, an event that has not occurred before in the living memory of the townspeople. On the day of the fight itself, a hawk with a bloody breast flies over the town, circling Miss Amelia's property twice. Near the end, Lymon has begun to paint the café porch but leaves it half finished when he goes away with Macy. Even this circumstance may have a deeper meaning: "But the world, like the painting of the café, is only partially finished," with the consequence that "there can be only incomplete unity and understanding, even when all are assembled in the café" (Dodd 211).

Despite the fact that the novel verges upon a caricature of itself at times, the extensive use of symbolism adds to the story's power, lifting it to a level of abstraction, of density, of condensed meaning which does suggest at times that the book contains traces of cosmic truth caught, as it were, on the wing and contained within a small compass. Like the song of the chain gang, such traces of truth seem to have been distilled from earth and sky, then brought down to mortal level.

The reasons why *The Ballad of the Sad Café* proves indigestible for many readers lie—like so much in McCullers' writings—just beneath the surface. These reasons do not hinge so much on the book's ineffable quality of sadness as on the new dimension the author has given to her basic doctrine of love, of loneliness and alienation. One encounters here the author's sense of the incompleteness of love. One also recognizes that when the café is boarded up, love has died, and Miss Amelia has boarded up her heart as well, in a sense committing emotional suicide. But *The Ballad of the Sad Café* implies even more: "the beloved fears and hates the lover" (*Ballad* 19). Oliver Evans elucidates the point aptly:

> Cousin Lymon despises Miss Amelia. . . ; it is not . . . in *spite* of her love for him that he despises her . . . but *because* of it. There is dreadful justice in the fact that in the past she has herself treated Marvin Macy in the same way and for the same reason. ("Spiritual Isolation" 307)

Such is the abnormal, grotesque dimension of the book, the one from which some turn in revulsion.

For if the beloved hates the lover, where is hope even in striving after flawed human love? This is the natural question. The death of hope would mark a new high point of spiritual desolation even in a philosophy that excludes the possibility of requited love.

One need not belabor the point. *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was written at a time when Mccullers was beset by a diversity of personal problems. The fact may explain, as noted earlier, the new element of negativism with which the novel is infused. But negativism is negativism only for those anchored to the normal, the positive, the uplifting. Just as truly, an evolutionary change in a writer's basic credo, as expressed in that artist's writings, represents growth. That, and not the reactions of readers, should be taken as the most valid measure of the relative artistic importance of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. With this book, Carson McCullers has further honed

her beliefs: she looks more deeply into her life, her experiences, and herself to interpret in fiction what she can find there. The reader is invited to join McCullers to probe his own life, his own experiences in search of a more authentic existence.

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