GROTESQUE IN CARSON MCCULLERS’S THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER, AND THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ

PREETI SINGH1 & MAHESH KUMAR ARORA2

1Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Management and Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering and Technology, Longowal, Punjab, India
2Associate Professor, Department of Management and Humanities, Sant Longowal Institute of Engineering and Technology, Longowal, Punjab, India

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the portrayal of physically distorted bodies in the fiction of Carson McCullers. In particular, characters from The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and The Ballad of the Sad Café represent a variety of physical anomalies. McCullers’ grotesque characters depict the loneliness of man and his incapacity to love each other. She portrays a dark and somber world devoid of sympathy, care, love and closeness in these novels that have not even a single normal character. This paper will also stretch the scope of the grotesque to refer to characters whose body, thinking and behavior depart from culturally sanctioned standards of normality. The Heart is a Lonely Hunter introduces themes that stay with McCullers throughout her lifetime and appear in all of her works, such as isolation and her notion of the grotesque, which she used to define characters who find themselves excluded from society because of their abnormality, physical or mental. Whereas The Ballad of The Sad Café, intensely autobiographical, is centered around the psychic void of the giantess Amelia, her relationship with the two men and traces the cause of her solitude. The characters of these two novels are grotesque, queer, strange people who are at odds with the ways in which they have been categorized by the world around them.

KEYWORDS: The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, The Ballad of the Sad Café

INTRODUCTION

Southern gothic tradition started in the southern U.S. states dating mostly from the 20th century with William Faulkner who wrote some of the most classical southern gothic works. Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams, apply kinds of gothic effects in some of their works, often as they address alienation and disorder in modern southern settings. The most interesting, and most radical inheritors of the grotesque are women writers of the later modernist era, Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor, who developed this sensibility into very different strands. Southern grotesque works usually depict southern lifestyle, often focusing on small-minded country people who believe they understand the world without having experienced it. Because most of the southern authors come from the southern states, write on southern subjects and have been therefore popularized as American Southern Gothic Writers. Their deformed, freakish, psychotic or imbecile female characters are inversions of the pure white southern woman, icon of the well-ordered universe of southern tradition. “Although fiction by most southern women uses the grotesque as a political surface to explore unequal distributions of political power, as an opportunity to image and envision the return of the oppressed,”1. Among the aspects of southern life typically depicted in the tradition are the racist heritages of its white population, the sense of loss and of deficiency of history because of the defeat in the Civil War and the Southern pride or arrogance, class conflicts, empty or deserted manor houses in former plantations. Southern grotesque novels focus on violence, such as beating, rapes, murders,
lyncing (one family member killing another) and mix terror and horror in order to shock or disturb. They combine comic or obscene exaggeration with sometimes gratuitous violence. Incest and incestuous feelings are a part in the plot of grotesque novels. For Flannery O’Connor the grotesque was the perfect medium for objectifying fears, obsessions, uncertainties and compulsions and she was even successful in depicting the same. Here a basic point to emphasize is that, “grotesque characterization does not necessarily make the character in a story remote and improbable, since the sacrifice in psychological realism is more counterbalanced by the impact of the grotesque.”

Grotesque is one of the key components of Southern Gothic writing, which shows deeply damaged characters, decayed, uncomfortable and painful settings, or sinister events, often linking them to racism, poverty, or violence. Though grotesque characters or situations can sometimes be hard to take, carefully applied they allow us to exaggerate their material without betraying it.

Carson McCullers was highly impressed by great English gothic writers of the eighteenth century and she followed them too. “They maintained that fear distorted the perception of the psyche and anything ordinarily observed by a rational mind as trivial could become overpowering under stress. Believing this, they chose medieval settings associating them with miracles, visions, necromancy and dreams. In this they saw the normal through a distorting love and confused the probable and the improbable to convey their particular impressions of the world.” Carson McCullers is frequently classed as a writer of the Southern Gothic School, a school supposedly concerned with the grotesque and abnormal, with an outlandish love for the morbid. She often adopts the technique of associating lonely characters with some sort of physical or psychic abnormalities which isolate them, intensifying their sense of alienation. McCullers’s stories are set in the South but the theme is worldwide. She is not only one of the outstanding Southern writers but an important and unique one in American literature. McCullers’s self-imposed exile works well enough as a medium for her grotesque depictions. There is an overabundance of lonely, outcast, confused and deformed characters in her fiction world like Singer, Amelia, Lymon and Marvin Macy- are all deformed in one way or the other. Her expertise in portraying grotesque characters is evident from her very first novel The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (1940), a story of two deaf-mutes, Spiros Antonapoulos and John Singer. It also depicts the isolation of Singer and the effort of the other characters to break through to some kind of communication with him. The grotesques in this novel have come to feel that they dwell in the saddest place on earth. In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe the three grotesque characters appear so remote from life. The novella is woven around a female giantess Miss Amelia—feisty, muscular, and an exceptionally good nurse, prosperous and skilled in both the masculine and feminine crafts—maintains a powerful authority over her town because she is both sexually ambiguous and completely independent. Amelia’s grotesque relationship and unsuccessful search for love with two kinds of men Marvin Macy and the queer Lymon ruin her life and the café. These two novels are comparatively more grotesque than the rest of her works.

**Grotesque in the Heart is a Lonely Hunter**

Through her novel, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter Carson McCullers takes her very first tenacious step into the kingdom of the grotesque. The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and subsequent novels resulted in her being called a writer of grotesque stories. The fictional world of McCullers’s is populated by numerous grotesque characters who are lonely, outcast and weak. In the first novel, she explores the lives of isolated grotesques in the American south. The focus of the story consists of a deaf-mute and a lunatic who is also a dummy. All the rest characters move around these two grotesques central figures. Singer and Antonapoulos live in the shelter of loneliness and walk silently together, hand in hand. “The two mutes had no other friends,” and they were “alone so much that nothing ever disturbed them.” Antonapoulos’ grotesquerie is evident in his physical appearance; he is an “obese and dreamy Greek” with round, oily face, “half-closed eyelids and lips that curved in a gentle, stupid smile” when he kneeled, his “huge buttocks would sag down over his plump
little feet” and the dirty string tied around his neck make his appearance more ugly and repulsive. His grotesquerie is limited not only to his physical appearance, but it is reflected in his behavior too. He loves eating to anything else in the world. After the meals, “the big Greek would lie back on his sofa and slowly lick over each one of his teeth with his tongue.” He develops the habit of stealing lumps of sugar, pepper shakers or silverware from restaurants, and urinating in public against the wall of the First National Bank Building. He attacks people whose faces do not delight him. Antonapoulos is a mere mass of flesh with deadened sensibilities. The other mute was tall and thin; he worked as a silver engraver in a jewellery store. John Singer, “always put his hand on his friend’s arm and looked for a second into his face before leaving him”.

Because McCullers was the prisoner of the grotesque, that’s why she chooses to people her fictional world with the misfits, the ugly and the abnormal. When Singer and Antonapoulos are together, Singer would eagerly ‘talk’ gesticulating with his hands about all that is moving in his mind and Antonapoulos would recline on bed, placid and indolent. He seldom moves his hands to speak and when he does, it is “to say that he wanted to eat or to sleep or to drink.” At the bus station, singer watches his friend from the window, and his hands begin hectically to talk to his friend for the last time, but Antonapoulos is so busy checking over the items in his lunch box that he pays no attention to his friend. After parting from Antonapoulous, Singer overlooks his hands, which, for him serve the purpose of the tongue. He who has talked eloquently with his hands thrust in his pockets, his hands become a torment to him. They move restlessly even in his sleep.

The news of Antonapoulos’ death comes to Singer like a bolt from the blue, something he cannot put up with. His mental grotesquerie comes to light in his suicide at the news of his friend’s death. These two deaf-mutes are not the only grotesque characters in the novel. Biff Brannon, the proprietor of the New York Cafe, is sexually ambivalent and watches the events in his café. Brannon likes freaks and entertains them at the café. According to his wife, Biff, himself is a freak. He firmly believes in the bisexuality of human beings and becomes increasingly feminine after his wife’s death. There is an unmistakable streak of the grotesque in Jake Blount, the radical agitator and alcoholic Marxist reformer who work for the amelioration of the poor whites and want justice, but he does ranting, yelling, raving and drinking.

He was, “short, with heavy shoulders like beams. He had a small ragged moustache, and beneath this his lower lip looked as though it had been stung by a wasp.” There were many things that seemed contrary in him, “his head was very large and well-shaped, but his neck was soft and slender as a boy’s. The moustache looked false, as if it had been stuck on for a costume party and would fall off if he talked too fast.” His hands were huge in shape, stained, calloused and dressed up with a cheap white-linen suit. His grotesque nature alienates him further from the society. For McCullers, grotesque is the most suitable medium because through this, she draws an alienated and tragic world of characters who demonstrate physical as well as psychological grotesqueness. Carson McCullers continues her art of grotesque in her other novels too.

---


Grotesque in the Ballad of the Sad Café

Amelia Evans in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is one of the most important grotesque characters McCullers created, and it is generally agreed that Amelia’s grotesque tragic tale is an indirect presentation of the novelist’s own personal life. In this autobiographical novel, she analyses the strange Amazonian female’s relationship with the two men and traces the cause of her loneliness. “Physical incapacity is a sharp feature of the personalities of Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon”\(^1\). Amelia appears man-like in her physique as well as attire. She is a mannish woman a giant.

She is a woman with a face “like the terrible dim faces known in dreams sexless and white, with two grey crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief”\(^14\). At a towering height of over six feet she “was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed”\(^15\). “Her hands, though very large and bony, had a light touch about them. She possessed great imagination and used hundreds of different cures”\(^16\).

Marvin Macy, the victim of the ill assorted marriage, is a man of a murky past. He was tall with brown curly hair, and slow-moving, deep-blue eyes. He was “one of seven unwanted children whose parents could hardly be called parents at all; these parents were wild younguns who liked to fish and roam around the swamp”\(^17\).

The children grew up as thin as little white-haired ghosts, who didn’t speak even to one another. Marvin Macy, however, “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”\(^18\). At the age of twenty two, “That solitary, gangling, queer-eyed girl was the one he longed for. Nor did he want her because of her money, but solely out of love”\(^19\).

Macy’s life exemplifies the redeeming power of love and the destructive force of rejection. Amelia continues her solitary grotesque reign until she is thirty. Then one-night Cousin Lymon, the tubercular, hunchbacked dwarf struts into the store, claiming kinship with Amelia.


\(^5\) Ibid, p.9

\(^6\) Ibid, p.7

\(^7\) Ibid, p.10

\(^8\) Ibid, p.8

\(^9\) Ibid, p.7

\(^10\) Ibid., p.8

\(^11\) Ibid., p.18

\(^12\) Ibid., p.18
McCullers’s introduction of the hunchback- is an example of McCullers’ definitive use of southern gothic elements of macabre, grotesquity and even irony in that Amelia- formerly married to the handsome Marvin Macy- eventually falls in love with the ghoulish, dwarf- like cousin. This uncommon little man claims to be related to Amelia: “The man was a hunchback. He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, rusty 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 both soft and sassy- at the moment his pale skin was yellowed by dust and there were lavender shadows beneath his eyes. He carried a lopsided old suitcase which was tied with a rope.” His hands are like dirty sparrow claws. No one had any idea about the age of hunchback, not even Miss Amelia. Some people maintained that “when he came to town he was about twelve years old, still a child- others were certain that he was well past forty. His eyes were blue and steady as a child’s, but there were lavender crepy shadows beneath these blue eyes that hinted of age it was impossible to guess his age by his hunched queer body.

Cousin Lymon is outlandish from every point of view; he is a hunchback, tubercular and homosexual. Amelia invites him to share food and drinks; he offered no one around him a taste. “It was not even proper snuff which he was taking but a mixture of sugar and cocoa. This he took, though, as snuff, pocketing a little wad of it beneath his lower lip and licking down neatly into this with a flick of his tongue which made a frequent grimace come over his face.” The short, hunchbacked Lymon with his anomalous appearance was the center of attraction for all the people coming to the café. “He did not wear trousers such as ordinary men are meant to wear but a pair of tight-fitting little knee-length breeches. On his skinny legs he wore black stockings, and his shoes were of a special kind, being queerly shaped, laced up over the ankles, and newly cleaned and polished with wax. Around his neck, so that his large, pale ears were almost completely covered, he wore a shawl of lime-green wool, the fringes of which almost touched the floor.” This love triangle leads to a fist fight between Amelia and Marvin that only ends when Lymon joins in and the two men defeat Amelia. The café which provides entertainment to the townsfolk eventually becomes the field of combat between Amelia and Macy. They then tear up her café before leaving town together. After the tragic defeat and desertion in the grotesque fight match, Amelia is left alone, and she turns bitter and rough. Miss Amelia goes through a physical metamorphosis; or, as the story suggests, she is unmasked: “the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy.” At the end, she is left a woman, gender-locked in a decaying house. A painting by Lymon, remains unfinished, the loss of her lover and the destruction of the café cause Amelia to withdraw from the world.

---

15 Ibid, p.8
16 Ibid, p.22
17 Ibid, p.35
18 Ibid, p.36
19 Ibid., p.35
20 Ibid., p.11
21 Ibid., p.76
22 Ibid, p.25
CONCLUSIONS

The craft of Carson McCullers’s visible in the character portrayal of chronically depressive, gloomy, alienated, angry and solitary individuals is that she paints them grotesque without melting the border between the ridiculous and the melodramatic. Anthony Di Renzo in his “American Gargoyles: Flannery O’Connor and the Medieval Grotesque” observes: “The grotesque presents opposites without trying to reconcile them. Under its aegis, the sublime and the ridiculous stand side by side.”25. Evidencing this, McCullers creates most accurate comments, not only on the grotesque and the unreal but also on normal lives and existence. The grotesque characters of Carson McCullers play a vital role of recognition for other main characters, for which the idea of familiarity seems punishing. Her fictional grotesque creations appear as hard dummies performing in front of a cloudy yet constant backdrop and are rich with darkness of life without the light of emotions, love and care. She was often attacked by critics for her gloomy concern with the perverted and grotesque characters. Like Sherwood Anderson and Flannery O’Connor, McCullers also explores the lives of isolated grotesques of the American South. She makes purposeful use of these physical and psychological freaks to symbolize the suffering and sharp or extreme pain of alienation, while representing the incapability to give and take love because they are separated by their own oddities and singularities.

REFERENCES


23 Ibid, p.24
24 Ibid, p.83