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Femininity and masculinity in Carson McCullers selected novels - isolation, alienation, existential quest for identity and human relations

Gender, sexuality and the relations between men and women frequently constituted major sources of interest and inspiration for miscellaneous artists, men of letters, philosophers, critics and theologians. Since the antiquity till the contemporary era artists, scholars and philosophers have endeavoured to present their vision of love, spiritual and physical unity and fulfillment when searching for male and female ideals. In their quest for perfect human relations, marriage and family units which reflected excellent combinations of body and soul, mutual trust, understanding and respect for one's identity and individuality, they nevertheless realized that such an idyllic image or view of love was illusory and unattainable due to the imperfect, fallible nature of a human being, their weaknesses, egotism, selfishness, propensity to sin and break moral codes. It was Adam's and Eve's egotism, solipsism, excessive ambition and sexual insatiability which brought about breaking the covenant with God. Furthermore, their firstborn son, Cain killed his brother Abel out of jealousy, hunger for power, domination and desire to be recognized and favoured by God. Since that time human beings are regarded as the offspring of Adam and Eve and their son Cain, and in this regard they are marked by the original sin. Due to that scholars, artists and philosophers have shown strained, at times tempestuous relations between men and women stemming from Adam and Eve's original sin and Cain's vicious, murderous nature. At the same time, however, they searched for some ideal, exemplary models of men and women which they presented in perfect harmony and unity or they strived to depict bitter fate and alienation of men and women as victims of the original sin of their ancestors.

In Anglo-American literature, most notably in 19th and 20th century American fiction various authors in their portrayal of men, women and male-female relations have made frequent references to the Bible, especially to the idea and symbol of the forbidden fruit, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise and a concomitant damnation and fall of mankind. It was especially visible in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Sherwood Anderson, to name but a few. Apart from that, numerous writers focused on the problem of human alienation, isolation, the suffering and agony of men and women, their physical and spiritual separation, referring indirectly to the Bible but first and foremost to the contemporary misfortunes, adversities and conflicts men and women had to face. There is no doubt that it was the

American Civil War which left its harrowing mark on the psyche of every American citizen, in particular on the dwellers of the southern states and which had a huge impact on every aspect of their lives, mentality and social relations. The conflict between North and South seemed to be the culmination of violence, mutual hatred, distrust, racial, ethnical and sexual tension and consequently the process of human isolation and separation. Nobody delineated that period of history and culture with such graphic details and psychological insight as the writers of the South, most notably the representatives of the Southern Renaissance, such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Truman Capote or Tennessee Williams. These authors made a thorough, profound analysis of the Civil War and its aftermath, especially the examination of troubled racial and sexual relations in the post-civil war period in the USA.

Apart from the scrutiny of racial and ethnical conflicts, being frequently crucial issues raised by these writers it is worth drawing the readers' attention to gender relations painstakingly analyzed by the above-mentioned female southern writers, most prominently by Carson McCullers. In her novels and short stories McCullers excels at portraying complex, labyrinthine and highly ambiguous relations between men and women, emphasizing the eccentric, bizarre or even grotesque features of the characters, especially of the female protagonists. The world and vision of mankind depicted by this author seems morbid, weird, abnormal and catastrophic, yet one cannot fail to hear/notice the characters' desperate, frantic call for love, affection, tenderness, compassion and harmony, mostly but not exclusively pronounced by female characters. Carson McCullers' protagonists live in their own isolated, alienated world, they are constantly torn between their dreams and ideals and the norms, rules and expectations imposed on them by their relatives and the communities they live in. Hence, despite that they live together with their large families and next to their neighbours, they are in fact solitary and desolate.

In one of her interviews, the American writer remarked that: "I wouldn't want to live if I couldn't write," and added that writing was a "search for God." (McCullers, 1987, p. VIII). This statement reflects, explains and helps to understand the world she depicts, choice of characters, their motives, acts and behaviour – beneath social and cultural degeneration, physical and mental deformity, bizarreness, bedlam, racial and sexual violence one may hear the voice of humanism, the existential cry for companionship and amity as well as the need for the recognition of one's individuality and distinctness. Nevertheless, the "search for God", quest for Christ-like qualities in another human being is extremely difficult and, when scrutinizing such stories as *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, *The Member of the Wedding* and the novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, one may observe that male and female characters fail to create intimate, harmonious relations.

In the first of the above-mentioned novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the author introduces the reader into an isolated, dismal and grotesque world of the three main protagonists, each of them suffering from the unrequited love and the rejection of their

feelings. The existential angst of the main female character, Amelia and the two male protagonists, her husband, Marvin Macy and her dwarf-like cousin, their isolation and separation are emphasized and strengthened by a gruesome, depressing description of the town in which they live, the place marked by misery, lifelessness and constituting spiritual banishment for the characters:

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.

(McCullers, 1987, p. 197)

The above illustration of the town which opens the story initiates the readers' journey into a bleak, labyrinthine internal world of the three protagonists, each of them being imprisoned in their own micro-worlds albeit living together under the same roof. Their alienation and desolation heightened by their mental torture and agony render them tragic as well as bizarre and grotesque to such an extent that their sexuality becomes questioned. Such a viewpoint seems to be supported by McCullers' three weird portraits of the protagonists. As for the Amelia character, her description may evoke a reversed sense of her gender, negate her femininity and isolate her from our idea of what constitutes a woman (Bancou, 2012):

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...Often she spent whole nights back in her shed in the swamp, dressed in overalls and gum boots, silently guarding the low fire of the still.

(McCullers, 1987, p. 198)

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.

(McCullers, 1987, p. 206)

The above description of the protagonist may, at first glance, question her femininity and accentuate the very man-like qualities. Needless to say, the writer dexterously plays with readers' notions and expectations of the image and role of a woman in the American society in the middle of the 20th century. McCullers purposefully presents her female character as freak, bizarre and even masculine in order to underline her distinctiveness and uniqueness, yet also simultaneously to draw the attention to her isolation and alienation from the society and community who fail to accept her individuality and eccentricity.

This unusual, unconventional and to some extent controversial depiction of gender and sexuality, in this case, femininity, leads us to another, even more morbid and grotesque description of the next character, the hunchback, Amelia's dwarf-like cousin, who despite constituting the negation of maleness and typical male qualities, becomes the object of her great affection and passion:

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.

(McCullers, 1987, p. 200)

The introduction of the hunchback into the story intensifies the sense and atmosphere of desolation and dreariness. As for the very character, this Amelia ghoulish cousin, being physically unfit, handicapped human being, epitomizes the lack of male virility and vitality, which makes him become asexual and unattractive in the eyes of women. Contrary to average readers' expectations, the heroine becomes infatuated with the hunchback despite or rather due to his disability, impotence and grotesque appearance, and, what is more, their behaviour and further relations reflect the exchange of their gender roles – she acts more like a husband and he as a wife. Nonetheless, Amelia's cousin shortly becomes attracted to her handsome husband Marvin Macy whose love towards his "unfeminine" wife was unreciprocated and rejected. By presenting such uncommon/unconventional protagonists and their weird demeanour, the writer endeavours to make the readers realize the complexity and ambiguity of gender, troubled, tempestuous relations between men and women that cannot be measured and controlled/regulated according to the patriarchal order of the conservative American South. *Ballad of the Sad Café* is undoubtedly Carson McCullers most innovative work in which the author shows most grotesquely and ironically the internal maze and alienation of women and men whose controversial individualities and nonconformity render them social pariahs. Furthermore, the protagonists' isolation from one another, their internal agony, unreciprocated feelings and the impossibility to create happy, harmonious relations, betoken mirror separation, lack of communication, understanding and spiritual distance between men and women in the contemporary world.

Carson McCullers' ambivalence in presentation sexuality and gender relations is also visible/apparent in her other great novels, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*. Here, the writer analyses more deeply her female protagonists, more specifically teenage girls who rebel against the strict patriarchal norms of the towns of the American South, yet she makes some references to the background female

characters, predominantly the Blacks. In this regard the critics such as Constante Gonzales Groba examine the problem of femininity in McCullers' works in connection with racial issues. Groba investigates gender and racial relations in the categories of power and powerlessness, hegemony and subjugation, proving that Carson McCullers, similarly to another writer of the American South, Lillian Smith, by presenting unconventional, rebellious portraits of her heroines and by depicting ambivalent gender relations, opposes the insistence of her culture on racial purity as vehemently as its demands for rigid sexual definition and its suppression of any deviant form of sexuality. The critic adds that the protagonists in McCullers' and Smith's fiction are "victims of a dichotomic culture that resists the acknowledgement that black and white have always been as inextricably linked as male and female" (Groba, 2007, p. 119).

However, on closer examination one may see that McCullers' scrutiny and ambivalent treatment of sexuality and male-female relations go beyond racial issues. In the author's outline accompanying the original manuscript of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers stated that: "The broad principal theme of this book is indicated in the dozen pages. This is the theme of man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible...Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature" (McCullers, 2001, 61-62). Melissa Metz, in her paper "Freaks, the Grotesque, and Other Sideshow Attractions in the Fiction of Carson McCullers" remarks that it is this theme that one of the protagonists, Mick Kelly, struggles with as a female adolescent "coming into her own" – the conditions that society expects from her in terms of femininity and identity as a whole is "not in accord with her deepest nature" (Metz, 2008). The critic adds that, similarly in *The Member of the Wedding*, within the character of Frankie Adams, McCullers portrays/delineates a closed, conservative Southern world where an adolescent speaks her anxiety and desolation over the course of several months: "It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old... She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hang around in doorways, and she was afraid (McCullers, 1987, 257). Hence, Carson McCullers novels are made up of dejected dreamers, predominantly females, who ponder on the world, and search for ways out of the rooms that enclose their loneliness, these walls being a metaphor for and symbol of confinement within a set of conventions that negates individuality (Metz, 2008).

As was previously pointed out, the writer's fascination and preoccupation with solitariness and alienation encompasses the lives of freaks. In the two afore-said novels it manifests in the forms of female teenage girls attempting to ascertain their roles according to gender and identity. Both Mick and Frankie finally evoke adolescence as a frantic spasm of energy, yet their experiences additionally express the deeper meaning of identity. Furthermore, these adolescent girls are especially susceptible to an exploration of the grotesque since their bodies are in a state between childhood and

adulthood (Metz, 2008). Moreover, in the case of Mick and Frankie, frequently referred to as tomboys, their bodies are also between masculine and feminine gender identification.

All things considered, Carson McCullers' whose fiction abounds with highly complex, untypical, bizarre, frequently grotesque characters treats sexuality and gender relations with high ambivalence and ambiguity, emphasizing the tortuous, labyrinthine nature of human interactions, particularly gender interdependence. Behind the grotesque and freakish countenances lies an obsessive, desperate longing for human harmony, love, closeness, cooperation and togetherness. It is the human voice that appears in the majority of McCullers' works and which prevails despite the trauma her male and female characters experience:

The silence in the room was deep as the night itself. Biff stood transfixed, lost in his meditations. Then suddenly he felt a quickening in him. His heart turned and he leaned his back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fruit passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who –one word- love. His soul expanded.

(McCullers, 1940, 306)

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