

Trabajo Fin de Grado

‘A Little Glance of Grief and Lonely Recognition’:
Space and Gender Identity in Carson McCullers’
The Ballad of the Sad Café

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ABSTRACT

Set in an enclosed southern mill town that punishes any women who attempts to depart from the role imposed by tradition, Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) offers a critique upon heteronormative discourses of gender, sexuality, and the body in the portrait of Miss Amelia Evans. This dissertation aims at analysing the ways in which the spaces in the novella become a representation of her transgression of gender boundaries and the destruction of her power at the hands of the male characters. The position of dominance she acquires from her sexual ambiguity and the appropriation of typically-male spaces is progressively brought down by her grotesque 'feminization', mirrored by the café. The last section of this document contemplates the decaying house in which Miss Amelia is confined after her ultimate defeat as a gothic space, symbol of the female body that imprisons her.

RESUMEN

Ambientada en un represivo pueblo del sur de Estados Unidos donde toda aquella mujer que trata de eludir el papel que tradicionalmente se le ha impuesto es castigada, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) de Carson McCullers ofrece una crítica a los discursos heteronormativos de género, sexualidad y el cuerpo en el retrato de Miss Amelia Evans. Este trabajo pretende analizar las formas en las que los espacios de la novela se convierten en una representación de su transgresión de barreras de género y de la destrucción de su poder a manos de los personajes masculinos. La posición dominante que adquiere gracias a su ambigüedad sexual y a la apropiación de espacios típicamente reservados para el hombre es progresivamente derrocada por su feminización grotesca, reflejada por el café. La última sección de este documento contempla la casa en ruinas en la que Miss Amelia se confina tras su derrota final como espacio gótico, símbolo del cuerpo femenino que la aprisiona.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When the Civil War survivors returned and resumed the exclusively male occupations that had been provisionally covered by women's active participation during the war and Reconstruction, the patriarchal regime gradually solidified as most of these women retreated to the household (Westling 20). Subsequent to their defeat, southerners started to feel nostalgic about the Old South and clung to their past traditions. The Antebellum image of the Southern lady reemerged as the ideal of nineteenth-century femininity: 'Ideally a patrician, privileged white woman, [...] she possessed great skill in the domestic sphere, [...] She was essential to the patriarchy, assuring well-brought-up children, a well-run home, and complete comfort for her husband' (Flora and MacKethan 413).

The end of the war brought about the end of slavery. Nevertheless, white men would not cease their attempts to recover the hierarchy of race and gender. From the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, the Jim Crow laws regulated racial segregation and enforced white supremacy in the South. Groba identifies an intrinsic relation between racism and sexism in Southern history, arguing that the black male was targeted as a 'new enemy' in such a way that white men acquired the role of guardians or protectors of the vulnerable, pure white woman (121). Yet these women were, in fact, in the same position of inferiority and powerlessness as blacks.

This ideal of submissive femininity and virile masculinity remained prominent after the stock market crash in the 1930s in order to lift America out of the Depression. It was not until the 1940s and 50s that such an ideal began to wither with the changing status of women: with the outbreak of World War II, many teenage girls and mothers joined the workforce and this granted them certain economic independence. However, a

‘postwar gender backlash’ occurred with the reversal of wartime employment (Yaeger 294).

The traditional link between women and the domestic space has proved to be an appealing and recurrent subject in the Southern Gothic narratives of Carson McCullers, where the house becomes a symbol of their entrapment, subversion and subordination to male dominance within the patriarchal structure. Thus, space becomes the embodiment of gender power relations by the norms of the ‘separate spheres’ (Ying-ru 204) and the domestic-public dichotomy. The trope of the house as a gloomy space of imprisonment is present from the inauguration of Gothic fiction with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In this late eighteenth-century novel, the castle appears as a locus that oppresses the young princess Isabella both physically and psychically, symbolising her submission to the authority and will of the male villain. Furthermore, as reported by Soon Ng, the Gothic tradition has recognised the power of the domestic space to ‘unnerve, fragment and even destroy its inhabitant’ (1).

Influenced by the English Gothic tradition, the American Gothic emerged as a genre in the early nineteenth century and focused largely on the social and cultural anxieties derived from slavery. Roughly one century later, authors like Tennessee Williams, Flannery O’Connor or Carson McCullers came together to give a Southern twist to the classical Gothic style. They eventually became the main exponents of the Southern Gothic subgenre, which explores the disintegration of the plantation South after the war and how the idyllic vision of the Old South lies on the repression of ‘the region’s historical realities: slavery, racism and patriarchy’ (Bjerre 1). It often presents a particular interest with uncanny, abnormal, freakish and grotesque characters, settings or events to offer ‘a gloomy version of modernity, according to which the soul

of man is both aimless and loveless' (Gleeson-White 108); together with the assertion of sexual dissidence and the denunciation of deep-rooted notions of white femininity.

Lula Carson Smith started writing stories at the age of fifteen when her father, a jewellery store owner, bought her a typewriter. Two years later she arrived in New York, where she began to develop her literary career. Her debut novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) received instant acclaim and stimulated her rise to public life. Regarded as her most autobiographical work, it is set in a small southern mill town resembling Columbus, Georgia, where she was born in 1917. For most of her life, McCullers struggled with health problems that frequently interrupted her studies and drove her back to the South to recover. In 1937 she married Reeves McCullers, a soldier she met during one of her visits to Georgia with whom she had a long and complicated relationship. She died after a stroke at the age of fifty, leaving behind an exceptional literary legacy.

McCullers was notably prolific during the 1940s, a time when America reinforced the separate-spheres ideology and gender deviance was being gradually wiped out from society. The Hays Code promoted the sanctity of marriage and the home; and sexologists like Sigmund Freud denied the existence of any human sexual nature other than male or female. Anybody who departed from this binary system was considered to be mentally ill; and McCullers recognised this sexual ambivalence and homosexuality in herself. In the summer when she was working on *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, she confessed to Newton Arvin: 'I was born a man' (Carr 159). Her nonconformity to the southern culture's demands for sexual definition was already obvious in her childhood, for she detested doing 'sissy things with sissy little girls' (22). From her adolescence, she dressed in masculine apparel and all her life she refused to be relegated to one gender or another.

The Ballad of the Sad Café (1951) explores the troublesome notion of female identity in the portrait of Miss Amelia Evans, an Amazonian woman who falls in love with the hunchbacked dwarf Cousin Lymon and in the end is left alone, miserable and feminized by male vengeance shortly after the return of her former husband, the ex-convict Marvin Macy. By means of the staging of ‘freakish’ characters that resist normalizing discourses—in particular, the manly giantess Miss Amelia and the effeminate Lymon—McCullers ridicules the southern patriarchs’ strict gender and sexual definitions, along with the ‘idealization of ‘weakness’ in the southern lady’ (Westling 17; qtd. in Gleeson-White 72). According to Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity as expounded in her 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, ‘proper’ femininity and masculinity consist in the repetition of acts in coherence with the socially-constructed gender norms. Building on this approach, McCullers portrays gender as fluid, flexible and inessential through Miss Amelia’s performances of hyper-femininity after Lymon’s arrival and Macy’s caricaturesque hyper-masculinity.

This dissertation will explore the ways in which the spatial distribution in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* becomes a reflection of Miss Amelia’s personality, her downfall and her punishment for the transgression of gender boundaries. My analysis will be structured in terms of the different spaces in which the plot is developed, following Miss Amelia’s decay from a position of prominence and strength attained by the appropriation of masculine traits to the loss of her autonomy. The final section will deal with space as a symbol of Miss Amelia’s impossibility of escaping her female body, resulting in her self-isolation and alienation. In fact, the outcome of *The Ballad* reveals that the self-sufficient woman who resists the strict gender conventions of a phallogocentric society that refuses to contemplate sexual ambiguity is punished for

transgression. Her feminization after the fight not only becomes a conspicuous symbol of the triumph and restoration of masculinity—which entails the reaffirmation of male dominance; but it also appears to confirm that ‘heterosexuality forces women to accept womanhood’ (Westling 5). At the end, the only option left for the castrated heroine is to admit defeat and retreat to domestic confinement; finally yielding to what patriarchy has conventionally established for her.

2. THE REPRESENTATION OF SPACE IN CONNECTION WITH THE PROTAGONIST’S EVOLUTION

The third-person omniscient narrator opens and closes the tale in the same vein with a bleak description of the deserted town in the characteristic Southern gothic style. In this way the novella takes a ballad-like form which confers a certain sense of unity and circularity, emphasising the dreariness and desolation of a place in which ‘there is absolutely nothing to do’ (McCullers 8, 84). In the first paragraph, the narrator makes use of adjectives and expressions like ‘lonesome’, ‘sad’, ‘miserable main street’ and ‘far off and estranged’ (7). It is worth noting that, apart from bringing out features and attributes of the town itself, these terms aim at transmitting to the reader the subjective impression that the narrative voice is getting from the place as if he/she was present as an observer. Similarly, when the narrator remarks that ‘here in this very town there was once a café’ (8), he/she is suggesting that he is within the scene he is describing. The site is portrayed as gloomy, isolated, wearisome and located somewhere remote with no way of escape. Hence the town has consistently been read as a metaphor for spiritual isolation, which is the central theme in McCullers’ work (Broughton 34).

As regards the configuration of space, there is a preference for concise descriptions based on enumerations, putting aside detailed and ornate accounts. Beginning with the town, the narrator lists the few things it holds, drawing attention to

its bareness: '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' (McCullers 7). It seems clear here that there is no need to address directly the specific characteristics of the place, for the mere mention of its constituent elements suffices to construct the image of such space in the reader's mind. Besides, proper names are also involved in the process of building spaces. Of particular interest is the contrast established with the so-called 'Society City' (7). The fact that the nearest train station receives a name deliberately connected with the ideas of society, multitude and movement translates into a further insistence on the desolation of the town. It might also be noted that the name of the town itself is not given. This omission takes on a dual function: on the one hand, it allows the town to be identified with any other town, implying that the story presented here might occur anywhere else; on the other hand, it appears to suggest that the name is so meaningless that it is not worth revealing, as it is the dull existence of the townspeople.

Having provided an overall description of the town, the attention then shifts to the largest building in the main street, an old ruined house located in the very center of the town. This house, we are told, is boarded up completely and leans far to the right side. It has 'about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling' (7), which is the result of a painting work left unfinished long ago. Even though the building looks 'completely deserted', it is not uninhabited. In fact, the narrator recounts, in late summer afternoons a face will come out of the only unboarded window and linger for an hour looking down on the town; a face 'like the terrible dim faces known in dreams — sexless and white' (7). The building, Broughton argues, serves as 'symbol for whatever life remains in it and in the town. For life here is hopelessly inward, separated and estranged' (35). All of this sounds, in her own words, 'curiously gothic'. As pointed out in the Introduction, the

house has long been regarded as one of the major tropes in Gothic fiction. Its origins can be traced back to the old Gothic image of the haunted castle, which has been recurrent since the publication of *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The Gothic castle was a symbol of the control and power of its master, as well as the patriarchal oppression of the female heroine. Also, its isolation and obscurity helped to represent the main anxieties of the eighteenth century. It was not until the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) that the motif of the decaying house became a pervasive image in Southern Gothic fiction, replacing the medieval castle of early literary Gothicism (Moss 177).

As far as McCullers is concerned, it is significant that the storyline in her writings is generally restricted to one or a few interiors. The house, along with other enclosed spaces in *The Ballad* like the rooms, the office or even the town itself, works as a metaphor for captivity, contributing to the creation of an all-pervasive claustrophobic atmosphere. As claimed by Westling, enclosed places in McCullers' fiction work as 'an index of feminine identity' and 'mirror anxieties about the confinement which has been woman's traditional lot in our society' (178, 180). It has been already remarked that the home occupies a particularly important place in female fiction, since it has been considered to be a female sphere connected to the cult of domesticity. Nevertheless, the real accomplishment of the Gothic novel has been the transition of the house into a participating agent, instead of being merely a setting. The building holds an evil that ceaselessly haunts its inhabitant, often ending with the destruction of both; and its dreadful external appearance is frequently paralleled to the psyche of the protagonist.

In the same way as the house, Miss Amelia is a central and dominant figure in the town. The narrator explains that the ruined house was once a café, and prior to that

the building was a store that Miss Amelia inherited from her father. The description of the store and the old still situated in the swamp is intertwined with that of Miss Amelia's features, thus establishing a very close link between her and the spaces she possesses. It would even seem that there is an unbreakable bond between the protagonist and the settings she inhabits, occupies and controls:

‘and it was a store that carried mostly feed, guano, and staples such as meal and snuff. Miss Amelia was rich. In addition to the store she operated a still three miles back in the swamp, and ran out the best liquor in the country. She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead’ (McCullers 8)

By creating this grotesque, giant Amazon who embodies both woman and man, Westling contends, ‘McCullers ridicules both the myth of the southern lady and traditional notions of manhood’ (1). The motif of the Amazon derives from Greek mythology. These warlike women were noted for their courage and their habit of bearing arms, riding on horseback, hunting and plundering. As one might expect, since men were not needed to wage war, their only function was propagation (Blok 1). Rendered as the twentieth-century version of this mythological figure, Miss Amelia Evans is described as a manly giantess whose physical and psychic features by no means correspond to conventional notions of femininity. First, reference is made to her muscular body and her excessive height, which distinctly underline her ‘defiance to the ideal image of the Southern woman’ (Gleeson-White 48). Besides, she has short-cropped hair and slightly crossed eyes, and cross-dresses using ‘overalls and gum boots’ (McCullers 8, 9). Miss Amelia conforms to traditional patterns of masculinity not only physically speaking, but also in terms of her behaviour and the sort of activities she carries out. Many times she appears leaning back in a chair in a defiant attitude or

proudly feeling the hard muscles of her arm as a way of demonstrating her strength. She breaks with gender stereotypes in many respects and this makes her stand out among the other women: 'She did not warm her backside modestly, lifting her skirt only an inch or so, as do most women when in public' (McCullers 71).

She has a great power in the community and her business acumen, marked by a rather belligerent attitude in commercial operations, leads her to become the wealthiest person in the locality. It is for this voracious need to dominate, rather than her clothing, that she is considered to be 'like a man'. Casas proposes that McCullers overemphasises such business interest and desire for control to criticise 'typically male (capitalist) practices' and to expose the destructive mechanisms in patriarchal society (2). Miss Amelia is unable to genuinely communicate with her neighbours and the only use she has for others is 'to make money out of them'. She is a solitary and selfish individual, for the most part cold and calculating, and she cares nothing for the love of men. (McCullers 9)

Miss Amelia shows great skill on tasks traditionally considered to belong to the male, including carpentry, masonry and butchering. Spaces like the sawmill, the liquor still in the swamp or the plantations illustrate her exceptional masculine strength. The protagonist is also notable for her ability to brew the best whiskey in the county, which she sells in her profitable general store. This place evinces her power and the coldness in the relationship with the customers: 'There was no feeling of joy in the transaction. After getting his liquor the customer walked off into the night' (McCullers 27). There are three rooms above the store and at the far right there is another door which leads to her office, 'a room well-known, in a dreadful way' where Miss Amelia 'transacted all business' (22). The store and her office symbolize her authority and the financial independence that she has attained by rejecting traditional gender and social patterns.

But over and above that, these spaces succeed in deconstructing the gendered spatial politics by blurring the lines between the public and domestic spheres within Miss Amelia's building (Ying-ru 205). Over the centuries, the patriarchal ideology and its gender norms have dictated the implementation of this spatial dichotomy which, in turn, has been crucial for the upholding and consolidation of patriarchy itself. Thus space becomes a catalyst for the development of power dynamics between men and women and the formation of gender identity.

In "The Blight of Southern Womanhood", Westling explores the idealization of the Southern Lady that America witnessed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Especially in the South, characterized by its distinctive racial system and their belief in white supremacy, the white female was considered to be the embodiment of the ideals of her culture and she had to represent 'a racial purity which was required by her men for the maintenance of their caste' (9). Therefore, women were expected to submit to the man's authority and they assumed a passive role within the patriarchal society of the plantation South. Though written in the middle of the twentieth century when most of these ideas were starting to vanish, *The Ballad* incorporates traces of this patriarchal order and clearly reflects this secondary position of women as 'objects of worship' (Westling 16), doomed to devote themselves to the home care and the upbringing of their children. It is for this reason that the authority, self-sufficiency and independence that Miss Amelia enjoys, completely inconsistent with what has been traditionally stipulated for women, is not well regarded by the rest of the townspeople. Throughout the novella, all other women in the community remain in the domestic realm and dedicate themselves entirely to the performance of household chores: 'It rained and women forgot to bring in the washing from the lines' (McCullers 19). However, Miss

Amelia surpasses the private environment and conquers a much larger scope of spaces, which grants her a power that has been reserved for men for centuries.

Contrastingly, one thing that connects her to the figure of a sorceress is her impressive ability to heal the sick with magical potions and her deep interest in conducting empirical research into the properties of herbs and roots. Millichap observes that supernatural elements are present in her doctoring, which adds to the tale a magical atmosphere nourished by hints of Southern folk superstition (15). In a way, her superstitious beliefs denote a feminine intuitive mind. More reputable than the local doctor, Miss Amelia receives sick people in her office and successfully puts her own remedies to use, expressing a special tenderness when they are children. Yet there is one exception to her healing powers:

If a patient came with a female complaint she could do nothing. Indeed at the mere mention of the words her face would slowly darken with shame, and she would stand there craning her neck against the collar of her shirt, or rubbing her swamp boots together, for all the world like a great shamed, dumb-tongued child. (McCullers 23)

Amelia adopts a childlike attitude of embarrassment and confusion when she is consulted about issues related to the female sex, incapable of offering any cure. For Casas, this reaction reveals her efforts to reject everything that threatens the self, that is, femaleness. She starts craning her neck and rubbing her swamp boots together seeking to assert her belonging to the male world, albeit failing and finally becoming a ‘dumb-tongued child’ (3). For her part, Groba suggests that rather than an aversion to ‘anything which reminds her of her repressed female sexuality’, this seems to manifest her ignorance of female sexuality and her total inability to identify with a femaleness from

which she has been ‘physically and psychically excluded’ (144). Amelia is a motherless only child raised by a loving father, himself described as a ‘solitary man’ (McCullers 20). Without a female exemplar to identify with, there was no way in which Amelia could accomplish a ‘normal’ sexual development. Actually, the only close human relationship she has ever experienced until the arrival of Cousin Lymon is that with her father, who for some reason called her ‘Little’ and from whom she inherited her business skills.

After the presentation of the setting set in the present of the novella’s diegesis, the narrator brings us back to the time when Miss Amelia’s store is transformed into a café, which is essentially ‘the story of Miss Amelia’s humanization through love’ (Millichap 15). It all starts with the appearance of a mysterious stranger in the middle of the night claiming kin with Miss Amelia. The five men sitting on the porch outside the store are repulsed by the hunchback, who is described using bird symbolism: ‘His hands were like dirty sparrow claws’ (McCullers 12). To everyone’s surprise, she gives him a generous reception. Drawn by rumours that Miss Amelia has murdered him, a group of townsmen come to her premises and when they see Cousin Lymon coming down from the top of the staircase they cluster around him with curiosity and astonishment. His joy and confidence soon fill the room with ‘an air of intimacy’ and ‘a vague festivity’ (26), and Amelia starts selling her liquor inside the building, providing glasses and platters of crackers with warm hospitality. This marks the beginning of the café. It is at this moment when Miss Amelia and the townspeople ‘almost succeed in breaking out their separateness’ (Broughton 35), and an atmosphere of ‘company and genial warmth’ (McCullers 28) is created. ‘For the atmosphere of a proper café’, McCullers writes, ‘implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behaviour’ (29). Hence, the café brings about for the first time a certain

value to the town and a strong sense of community among the townspeople, who were ‘unused to gathering together for the sake of pleasure’ (29). It becomes the place where they can overcome the loneliness of their monotonous lives and ‘see themselves as individuals of some worth’ (McDowell 40). However, the narrator comments upon another factor that contributes to the creation of the café: ‘This, together with the fact that it was Saturday night, could account for the air of freedom and illicit gladness in the store’ (McCullers 27). The adjective ‘illicit’ seems to suggest that this gladness that the café emanates is, in fact, undeserved or forbidden for an anonymous town; and thence it is going to be temporary too. Furthermore, the paradox included in the title also foreshadows the fate to which the café, the town and its inhabitants are doomed, for a *Sad Café* is not a café. At the end, the café is destroyed by the same force which gave rise to it: love.

The changes effected by the coming of Lymon may best be observed in Miss Amelia herself, whose manners and way of life are greatly changed. The café comes to symbolize her transformation through love; and therefore, the creation, growth and destruction of Miss Amelia’s café mirrors the progression of her love for the hunchback. Such love causes a partial feminization on her: her facial features soften, she becomes more sociable and less prone to cheat her fellow men, and on Sundays she substitutes her overalls for a dark red dress. Lymon is ‘scarcely more than four feet tall’ with ‘crooked little legs’, a ‘great warped chest’ and a ‘hump that sat on his shoulders’ (McCullers 11). It is his deformed, warped and above all childlike appearance that renders him attractive to Miss Amelia, since for her it points to his masculine impotence and the fact that Lymon represents no threat of domination or sexual possession. Similarly, her grotesquely masculine appearance precludes her from functioning as a conventional woman and any attempt at sexual intercourse would represent an insult to

her masculine pride. Additionally, with Lymon, Amelia can safely release affection because she does not see him as a 'real man' and 'she can baby and pet him without any threat of sexuality' (Westling 123). Their relationship is then asexual, reminding of that of a mother and her child; and her new femininity springs up in the form of a nurturing attitude and a maternal care towards him.

If approached from a psychoanalytical perspective, Miss Amelia's maternal yearnings and the café have one thing in common: the longing for a wholeness only found in the pre-Oedipal stage. In his article, Fowler offers another way of reading the meaning of the café within a Lacanian framework. According to Lacan, in the beginning, before the formation of identity, we are not alone because in the mother's womb the child perceives itself as part of the mother's body. But for the formation of identity there must be exclusion. The mother must be excluded and the child must submit to the loss of the mother's body, being this moment crucial for the formation of the human subject. The self, then, is born after a moment of division in a fragmented estate, and a buried guilty desire for a lost holistic unity is 'driven underground' (261). The events of the novella appear to 'stage the disguised return and the subsequent repression of the desire to overcome loss'. Fowler explains that the brief existence of the café, during which the townspeople converge, represents a momentary relaxation of this repression. The café becomes the 'warm bright center point of the town' (McCullers 65) and a symbol of unity, as opposed to the fragmentation characteristic of the post-Oedipal subject. With its red curtains for the windows, the café is associated with warmth and the colour of blood; and thereby equated with the mother's womb. It also represents Miss Amelia's identification with femininity, because by offering low prices and a variety of drinks, it resembles the female body that 'nurtures children regardless of their sex' (Ying-ru 206). Along the same line of thought, Gleeson-White connects Miss

Amelia's strong maternal desire with her androgyny, which is the combination of masculine and feminine qualities (98). The fantasy of pregnancy evoked by androgyny is equated with a repressed desire to return to the sexual neutrality and plenitude of the pre-Oedipal phase; that is, 'the imaginary wholeness and self-sufficiency [...] before sexual difference' (Weil 3, qtd. in Gleeson-White 99). Writing in much the same vein, Fowler (2002) relies on Nancy Chodorow's theories in order to examine the maternal role that Miss Amelia adopts towards Lymon. According to her, all adults seek to return to the 'emotional and physical union [experienced with the mother before the entry into language and culture]' and women attempt to reproduce it by becoming mothers themselves (199).

The narrator then focuses our attention on the upper part of the premises, which remains unaffected by the alterations brought about by Lymon, 'as it was in the time of her [Miss Amelia's] father' (42). First, we are told that the front room, which happened to be Miss Amelia's father's bedroom, is also where Lymon is accommodated during the six years he stays in the town. Curiously, it is also the room that Marvin Macy had occupied in the few days he was married to Miss Amelia, an unfortunate event that will be addressed hereinafter. Once again the space is constructed by means of the enumeration of its elements, namely, in this case, the objects that furnish the room: 'a large chifferobe, a bureau covered with a stiff white linen cloth crocheted at the edges, and a marble-topped table. The bed was immense, [...]' (McCullers 43). Most of these objects are qualified by descriptive adjectives that convey the impression that the room is neat, warm and comfortable, alluding to Miss Amelia's attachment to her father.

On the other side of the parlor is Miss Amelia's bedroom, which contrasts with the former for its austere appearance and the simplicity of its furnishing. Such contrast is underlined by the fact that, unlike the aforementioned 'immense' bed made of 'carved,

dark rosewood', Miss Amelia's is 'narrow and made of pine' (43). The objects it holds are related to the protagonist's daily business and they portray her as a simple and methodical person.

Finally, the narrator gives details about the large middle room by mentioning the rosewood sofa in front of the fireplace, the marble-topped tables, two Singer sewing machines and a big vase of pampas grass. Nevertheless, the most important piece of furniture in the parlor is 'a big, glassed-doored cabinet in which was kept a number of treasures and curios,' among which are 'a large acorn from a water oak' and 'a little velvet box holding two small grayish stones.' (43, 44). Those grayish stones are indeed the kidney stones that Amelia had got removed with surgery some years before. The fact that she opens the large cabinet for Lymon is meaningful considering that the inside of a cabinet is a space that especially represents privacy and intimacy. Then she makes him a present of her kidney stones, to which she adds a special value, set as ornaments in a watch chain. For her, they are the reminder of a traumatic experience comparable to that of birth or, as maintained by Broughton, of a 'mutilation' that left her 'totally helpless and dependent' (39). Furthermore, she also hands him the precious acorn she picked up the day her father died. As Miss Amelia demonstrates her love for the hunchback by opening herself up to him and sharing with him her most cherished 'treasures', she also makes herself inevitably defenceless and gradually loses the space of her own.

In this way, Miss Amelia shows herself increasingly vulnerable and feminized in the presence of Lymon and her authority in the community is diminished, for her strength lies in her sexual ambiguity. Yet, the event that marks the beginning of the end of the social order established around the protagonist is the return from prison of her former husband, Marvin Macy. Described as a 'hard man', this handsome, young and troubled ex-convict proves to be an important source of tension in the town. Macy

embodies the hyper-masculine image of the southern cowboy strutting around town, which in Gleeson-White's view suggests a 'caricature of ideal American masculinity' (81-82). His masculine qualities are cast in an evil light; he is the wicked male who has degraded the tenderest young girls in the region and who, ironically enough, falls for a manly woman. When he marries Amelia, the whole town expects him 'to tone down Miss Amelia's temper [...] and to change her at last into a calculable woman' (McCullers 38). Groba (1994) notes that the community has a restrictive conception of gender roles and their marriage is welcomed as 'an opportunity for her to become feminized by subjection to male power' (145). Her dead mother's bridal gown is 'at least twelve inches too short for her' (McCullers 37) and she gets impatient anytime she tries to find the pocket of her overalls, indicating her discomfort with a conventional feminine body that functions as sexual object for the satisfaction of the male gaze. Incapable of accepting the passive role of a 'proper' woman, Miss Amelia violently rejects Macy's intercourse attempts on their wedding night, ridiculing his masculine pride.

Marvin Macy comes back to town full of rage, in search of revenge and determined to restore the social equilibrium existing before Miss Amelia's dominance. He is perceived as a threatening individual invading not only Amelia's space but also her life: 'Macy stopped before Miss Amelia's premises [...] Then, not hesitating to trespass, he walked through the side yard' (58). The verb 'trespass' implies that the house has acquired the role of refuge or place of protection. This is reflected, for instance, in the moment when Lymon refuses to accompany Miss Amelia to Cheehaw to do some business: 'Before leaving she found a stick and drew a heavy line all around the barbecue pit, about two feet back from the edge, and told him not to trespass beyond that boundary' (56). Furthermore, since his arrival Macy occupies the best, largest and most

centric table in the café every night. This is significant because he appropriates the position that belongs to the male according to the patriarchal culture. Still, the worst comes when Lymon, 'tantalized' by Macy's exoticism and ostentatious virility, gives up the room that belonged to Miss Amelia's father to him. As a result, Miss Amelia has no choice but to grant her own bed to Lymon and retreat to the sofa in the parlor. The fact that Macy occupies the protagonist's father's room must not be overlooked, for he is positioned as the head of household and succeeds in restoring his masculinity. This incident is described by the narrator as a conspicuous sign of Miss Amelia's disempowerment, proving how her authority starts to crumble as Macy deprives her of her possessions.

Understanding Macy's intrusion into the town and her premises as a defiance, Miss Amelia prepares for a fight. She taunts him by wearing a red dress as a 'flagrant reminder of his failure to make her act the part of a woman during their marriage' (Westling 51), flaunting her 'inaccessibility and independence' (Casas 5). This dress, previously mentioned in the text when she desperately attempts to attract Cousin Lymon, becomes the channel through which she enacts her hyper-femininity as a 'subversive and empowering performance of gender' (5). The fight takes place in the café, which ceases to be a symbol of love to become a place of battle and hatred. After half an hour exchanging 'hundreds of blows' (McCullers 79), Amelia and Macy get locked in a wrestling hold. In a chapter titled "Fighting for Life", Gilbert and Gubar interpret the fight as the sexual act that was not performed on their wedding night. Evoked in sexual terms, the struggle then seems to function as a metaphor for that consummation: 'For a while the fighters grappled muscle to muscle, their hipbones braced against each other. Backward and forward, from side to side, they swayed in this way.' (McCullers 79). Accordingly, the fight serves Macy for the restoration and

assertion of his manliness, which was called into question when it became known that Amelia had refused to consummate their marriage.

The climax of the battle comes with Lymon's sudden intervention just when Amelia is about to win. Like a hawk pouncing on its prey he leaps on Amelia's back digging his claws into her shoulders, which eventually enables Macy to defeat her. Following the fight, the hunchback 'suddenly disappears' and he and Macy leave the town before daylight, not without first doing 'everything ruinous they could think of' (82). Through yet another enumeration, the narrator describes the damage they cause in the spaces representing the autonomy that Amelia has achieved. They steal Amelia's 'treasures' from the cabinet, pillage the café and completely wreck the still out in the swamp. Again, a particular stress is laid upon the inextricable link between Miss Amelia and the spaces she occupies: by depriving her of all sources of authority and strength, the two men ruin her financial and emotional stability too, leaving her alone and miserable.

Miss Amelia waits for Lymon for three years after his departure and finally shuts herself away in her decaying house for the rest of her days. Subsequent to Macy's metaphorical rape —materialized by the fight—, the manly Amazon is left castrated and feminized through a tragic physical transformation: 'Her face lengthened, and the grat muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy' (83). She lets her hair 'grow ragged' and her voice becomes 'broken, soft and sad', emphasizing her weakness and loss of discourse. In spite of the bleakness, the protagonist's appearance at the end of the novella appears to indicate McCullers' advocacy for the idea of suspension of gender boundaries. Miss Amelia's face is 'sexless and white' (7); as if she were in a dreamlike state, disoriented by gender patterns. She has been turned into an anonymous, faceless and 'sexless' figure,

signifying that she is neither a 'proper' woman nor a 'proper' man, but halfway between the two. The singularity of her grey eyes being crossed, in my judgement, may be interpreted as one symbolizing masculinity and the other femininity. They seek each other out 'to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition' (83), representing Amelia's everlasting negotiation process of gender identification. On the one hand, she cherishes masculinity for the autonomy she obtains from it. On the other, however, the Southern society she lives in repudiates her waywardness and will pressure her to accept her femaleness.

Hence, the protagonist's locking-up in the denouement of *The Ballad* reveals that such a vision of sexual ambivalence is inconceivable in the American South. The house has always been a place of refuge and shelter, thereby becoming the embodiment of womanhood and motherhood. It is for this reason that when Amelia decides to confine herself, the house is turned into a threatening space that epitomises what she most fears and rejects: the female body and the socio-cultural role that she is expected to assume in conformity to patriarchal culture. In her essay, Kahane asserts that in modern Female Gothic the heroine is typically a motherless young woman who ends up 'imprisoned not in a house but in the female body' (343). Amelia's house, then, is symbolic of the suffocation and oppression exerted by her own body. Such imprisonment reflects her condition of 'victim of restricted gender roles' (Groba 146) and depicts her as the grotesque Amazon whose transgression brings about male retribution, eventually forcing her to confront her unavoidable fate and give in to her female condition.

3. CONCLUSION

As made manifest in this dissertation, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* presents a critique upon the position of subservience historically mandated for women and examines such plight in the context of the South, especially marked by its exigencies of rigid sexual

definitions coupled with a deep-rooted idealization of fragility in the Southern lady. Along these lines, McCullers vindicates gender equality through the figure of Miss Amelia Evans and her defiant attitude towards conventional notions of femininity.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist appears constantly eluding a femininity she perceives as restrictive and burdensome. Many of her physical attributes and features of behaviour, including the type of activities she carries out, conform to traditional patterns of masculinity. Yet, as analysed in the previous pages, Miss Amelia's transgression of gender boundaries is also expressed by means of the spaces she occupies. One of the most remarkable aspects of the novella is, indeed, the way in which the descriptions used to construct the space contribute essential meanings to the storyline, underlining the heroine's conflicts and establishing a very close relationship between her and the different locations pictured by the narrator.

Spaces like the store, her office, the sawmill and the liquor still demonstrate her autonomy and masculine strength, as well as the position of dominance and authority she has achieved in the community. But, above all, these places are indicative of Amelia's sexual ambiguity. Despite being a woman, Miss Amelia takes possession of the social and spatial spheres typically reserved to the male. It is her condition of androgynous figure that grants her power, freedom and self-sufficiency. However, this appropriation of male power is a short-lived dream progressively torn down due to her feminization in the presence of Cousin Lymon and ultimately crushed by Macy's vengeance. The space that functions as reflection of this moment of transition between Amelia's masculine independence and her total defeat is the café. Prior to Lymon's arrival, the café takes on the role of a fortress where Miss Amelia keeps her 'treasures'. Then, under the influence of the hunchback, it opens up to become the warm center of the town. However, after the destruction of Amelia's power by the two males, the café is

transformed into a prison that symbolizes her entrapment within her female body. The ending of the novella raises the necessity of revising the degrading position of women in a world governed by the 'law of the phallus' which, still in our days, punishes any attempt at transcending the limitations of female identity.

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