

**THE SOUTHERN GROTESQUE CHARACTER  
IN TWO NOVELS OF CARSON McCOLLERS**

**BY**

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NOVELS OF CARSON McCULLERS

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A Research Paper  
Presented to  
The Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in Education

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by  
Patricia Benningfield

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Patricia Benningfield entitled "The Southern Grotesque Character in Two Novels of Carson McCullers." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Edward E. Irwin

Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:

Wayne E. Stump  
Dean of the Graduate School



## THE SOUTHERN GROTESQUE CHARACTER IN TWO NOVELS OF CARSON McCULLERS

Not all characters who exist in the fictional world of Carson McCullers' novels are the typical citizens whom you meet in the course of a day's activities. Many of the characters in her novels have disfigured bodies or warped minds. In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe Cousin Lymon is a hunchback, and Amelia Evans has crossed eyes. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter John Singer is a deaf mute, and Antonapoulos is a dim-wit. This study will examine a grotesque character in two of McCullers' novels to determine whether or not his failure to communicate with people can be linked to his fate. The focus of the study will be on Amelia Evans in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, and John Singer in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.

The term grotesque is derived from the Gothic novels which flourished in the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The elements of the Gothic novel--weird castles, ghosts, dungeons, and mysterious chases and disappearances--offered romantic escape for readers. Parts of

the Gothic novel have survived in the works of Hawthorne, Poe, and Dickens. The term grotesque gradually became a broad inclusive term to cover all that was "incongruous, outlandish, and unique in modern fiction, European as well as American."<sup>1</sup>

The settings of Carson McCullers' novels are not mysterious castles, nor are the other characteristics of the Gothic novel present in her works. Since Carson McCullers was a Southern writer, most of her works have a Southern setting. Like Faulkner, she depicts in her novels the importance of blood ties, social conflict, a decayed or decaying aristocratic class, the growth of a lower class of usurpers, and finally the continuing impact of the Civil War. All of these elements constitute what has come to be labeled "Southern Gothic." In a study on Carson McCullers, Dale Edmonds contends that these matters impart to Southern life a sense of "fragmentation, of diffusion, a dreamlike, unreal quality which makes violence and grotesquerie seem both natural and commonplace."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Spiegel, "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," The Georgia Review, XXVI (Winter, 1972), p. 426.

<sup>2</sup>Dale Edmonds, Carson McCullers (Texas: Steck-Vaughn, 1969), p. 8.

In his article, "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," Alan Spiegel discusses a type of character who occurs so repeatedly in the contemporary Southern novel that the reader has come to accept his appearance. The character who is grotesque is either a physical or mentally deformed figure who, if physically deformed, may be a cripple, a dwarf, a deaf mute, or a blind man. If mentally deformed, he may be either a mad-man or an idiot.<sup>3</sup> This classification of the Southern grotesque character typifies Benjy, the idiot in The Sound and the Fury by Faulkner, and two of McCullers' characters, Singer the deaf mute in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Cousin Lymon in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The differences between the Gothic protagonist and the grotesque figure are listed by Spiegel:

Although the Gothic protagonist and the grotesque figure in Southern fiction both represent essentially anti-social gestures, the gothic gesture takes place outside of society in a nightmare setting, while the grotesque gesture takes place within society in the daylight setting of ordinary communal activity. Moreover, the gothic hero is an aggressive, Promethean figure, a rebel, whose reaction to the Establishment is one of total rejection. The grotesque is a passive figure, a victim, a scapegoat, whose reaction to the Establishment is never one

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<sup>3</sup>Spiegel, p. 428.

of rejection, but one either of anguish or ineffectual criticism. It is the Gothic hero who rejects; it is the grotesque who is rejected. The former inspires our terror and admiration; the latter our pity and compassion.<sup>4</sup>

The setting of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe is a dreary cotton mill town in an isolated area, apart from the rest of the world. This setting has Gothic overtones in that it is isolated and apart from the world. It is, however, an ordinary environment since this can be one of the many small country crossroads in the South. On the main street is an old house which is boarded up and leaning so far to the right that it is about to collapse. On the second floor in the late afternoon a face ". . . 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 . . ." (Ballad, p. 4) looks down on the town. This stark description foreshadows the ending of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The tone of the description then changes to indicate that this was not always a barren town but once had a cafe which was the central location for social activities. The owner of the cafe was Miss Amelia Evans, but the person responsible for its success was a hunchback called Cousin Lymon. The person responsible for

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<sup>4</sup>Spiegel, p. 433.

Notation: Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe (Boston: Bantam Paperbacks, 1958), p. 4. All quotes from (Ballad) will be from this edition.



its downfall was a former husband of Miss Amelia. These are the characters, and basically this is the story.

Miss Amelia, ". . . a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man . . ." (Ballad, p. 4) has inherited the cafe building from her father. In the building she operates a store, but this is not her only enterprise. In the swamps she operates a still; and at nights dressed in her overalls and gum boots, she silently guards the fires. She does anything to make money and succeeds in all her enterprises to become the richest woman for miles around. For some strange reason at the age of nineteen she marries Marvin Macy, a handsome lad with an evil reputation who supposedly carries about with him the dried and salted ear of a man he has beat in a fight. Macy loves Amelia, and he becomes softened in his attempts to win her love only to be beaten out of her bed on his wedding night. He also loses all his possessions to her. Perhaps this is the experience which leads him to a life of crime and eventually prison. Circumstances, however, are soon reversed with the arrival of a hunchback, Cousin Lymon, who is scarcely more than four feet tall. Claiming that he is kin to Amelia, Cousin Lymon is taken in by her. She opens up her heart to Cousin



Lymon, and her store to the townspeople who soon consider it the cafe. The climax occurs when Macy returns and has his revenge by winning the affection of Cousin Lymon away from Amelia. In the final showdown which is a fist fight between Amelia and Macy, Cousin Lymon interferes just as Amelia is about to win and thus gives the victory to Macy.

Amelia Evans is a grotesque figure. She is grotesque in physical appearance because of her crossed eyes and her muscular build. Another dimension of the Southern grotesque character is given by Spiegel: "The Southern grotesque is only a single, deformed character in a literary universe that is still oriented towards the actual and the normative."<sup>5</sup> Amelia Evans' environment is the South. The people around her are striving to make a living from the soil. She in turn makes her living from them.

Amelia's grotesqueness in appearance sets her apart from the townspeople. Appearance alone, however, does not make her a grotesque figure. Family background definitely contributes to her lack of acceptance by the townspeople. Amelia has been reared by her father to be more a man than a woman. Since her father had also been a solitary person, it is natural that this inclination combined with her strange

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<sup>5</sup>Spiegel, p. 437.

physical appearance would lead to her solitude as well. Amelia's mother is dead, and she matures without the guidance of another female. As an adult, Amelia is strangely embarrassed by her womanhood. She treats almost all the physical ails of the townspeople, but ". . . 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 . . ." (Ballad, p. 17.) Although a woman by physical definition, Amelia is so unaware of her physical form that often in the store she forgets the presence of men and pulls up her dress so high " . . . that a piece of her strong, hairy thigh could be seen by anyone who cared to look at it . . ." (Ballad, p. 60.) She grows up to assume the duties of her father. The people grow to fear and respect Amelia who assumes an authoritative position in the town. She, however, feels no compassion for their plight as they struggle simply to exist: ". . . the only use Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them . . ." (Ballad, p. 5.)

In her book, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction, Louise Gossett discusses the effect of environment and heritage on warped personalities. She contends that Carson McCullers " . . . does not seek to explain warped personalities and twisted loves on the basis of environment or heritage . . ." <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Louise Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1965), p. 176.

Amelia Evans, however, is not gross simply because she has crossed eyes. The motherless home environment definitely plays a part in her strangeness. It is the Amelia Evans in the overalls and gum boots operating a still who becomes a comically gross figure. The townspeople look at her with pity because " . . . they remembered that Miss Amelia had been born dark and somewhat queer of face . . ." (Ballad, p. 14.) Amelia needs no pity from those whom she owns. Amelia's physical appearance combines with her father's influence and motherless background to make her an abnormal sexual being who is grotesque.

Amelia fails completely to relate to a physically whole human being on a one-to-one basis. In her business she is domineering and overbearing so the townspeople alternate between fearing and pitying her. Her relationships with other human beings do not fail because the other people find her completely repulsive. It is more a rejection by her of them. She rejects the townspeople by becoming the "boss." The failure of her marriage to Marvin Macy is her failure to accept him as a husband. He is more than ready to accept her as a wife.

Amelia's marriage to Macy is doomed from the beginning

because Macy expects, and naturally so, a physical relationship. Having degraded and shamed many females in the region, Macy chooses Amelia as the object of his affection and loves her secretly two years before declaring his affection. The transformation in his character is unbelievable. He changes from an evil being who chops off the tails of squirrels for the fun of it to a well mannered young man who attends church and rises to give his seat to a lady. At the end of the two years he asks Amelia to marry him and she accepts.

The question of why Amelia accepts the proposal is unresolved throughout the story. Perhaps, as the townspeople surmise, she wants to get some wedding presents; or she is tired of the nagging of her great aunt in the town of Cheehaw. Her acceptance is totally devoid of affection for Macy, even on the man-to-man level. Like a man masquerading as a woman, she strides down the aisle in her dead mother's bridal gown twelve inches too short for her. She continually reaches for the pocket of her overalls during the ceremony, and at the close she walks out of the church two paces ahead of her husband.

The townspeople expect the marriage to change Amelia into a human being so they can perhaps have the upper hand



for a change: " . . . they counted on the marriage to tone down Miss Amelia's temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her at last into a calculable woman . . ." (Ballad, p. 31.) To Amelia, Macy is just another property. She has a store, a still, and now a husband whom she regards as an inanimate object also. Macy, however, expects more; and when Miss Amelia retires at eleven o'clock, he follows to consummate his marriage. His actions are probably a complete surprise to Amelia who has never considered her body functioning in the female sense, and she is outraged as she storms down the stairs. Macy attempts to win her with presents but even his signing over his worldly goods fails to move her. The relationship moves from a passive one to a violent one when Macy comes in drunk one evening and places his hand on her shoulder to tell her something. She hits him and breaks one of his front teeth. After she turns him off the premises and goes to Cheehaw to see if she can get him locked up for trespassing, he leaves town.

The one-to-one relationship Amelia Evans does form is with another grotesque person. In his book, New American Gothic, Irvin Malin states that Amelia sees her "freakishness in the hunchback. By loving him she can love herself more."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 26.

Carson McCullers gives this explanation for her selection of grotesque characters for her works:

. . . love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about--people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love--their spiritual isolation.<sup>8</sup>

This statement is contradictory in Amelia's situation. Amelia has already demonstrated her incapacity to receive the love of Marvin Macy. She does, however, love Cousin Lymon, but the relationship is not mutual. Thus Amelia is not without the capacity to love. If the statement is considered in relationship to Malin's theory, it is clearer. Amelia is capable of loving the hunchback because she sees herself in him. The love then becomes selfish love because she is bestowing it upon herself.

It is the unpredictable human element lurking in every being which moves Amelia. In her doctoring of children Amelia does not like to see them hurt, struggling, or terrified. To her on first appearance, the dwarf huddled on the steps is a hurt, sniffling child for " . . . no one in the town, not even Miss Amelia, had any idea how old the hunchback was. Some maintained that when he came to

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<sup>8</sup>Carson McCullers, The Mortgaged Heart (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1963), p. 274.

town he was about twelve years old, still a child--others were certain that he was well past forty . . . " (Ballad, p. 64.) If Amelia sees the hunchback as a child, then she also sees no threat of a physical involvement such as she encountered with Marvin Macy.

Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon leads to a more human relationship between her and the townspeople. Before the hunchback's arrival, it was necessary for the men to receive their liquor at the kitchen door, but now she brings the liquor into the store and invites the men inside to drink, thus the beginning of the cafe. For four years the relationship continues with Amelia spoiling the hunchback with any possession he desires as indicated in the following passage:

He had her confidence in the most delicate and vital matters. He alone knew where she kept the chart that showed where certain barrels of whiskey were buried on a piece of property near by. He alone had access to her bank-book and the key to the cabinet of curios. He took money from the cash register, whole handfuls of it, and appreciated the loud jingle it made inside his pockets. He owned almost everything on the premises, for when he was cross Miss Amelia would prowl about and find him a present. (Ballad, p. 37.)

McCullers establishes the basis for the relationship between Amelia and Cousin Lymon: " . . . the beloved can be of any description. The most outlandish people can be

the stimulus for love . . . The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain . . ." (Ballad, p. 27.)

As a lover, Amelia becomes softened, graceful, communicative, and eager to extend the rewards of companionship to others; he, the beloved, becomes perky, proud, aristocratic, and eventually cruel. The hunchback has the ". . . instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world . . ." (Ballad, p. 20.) Even though he establishes a rapport with the people of the town, Cousin Lymon creates a tension filled atmosphere because with this ". . . busybody about there was never any telling what might descend on you, or what might suddenly be brought to happen. . ." (Ballad, p. 40.) In her relationship to Cousin Lymon, Amelia exhibits her capacity to change. She learns to love but in the process becomes exposed to the "inevitable stings of loneliness, betrayal, and suffering."<sup>9</sup>

In his discussion of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, Lawrence Graver compares the relationship of Macy, Amelia, and Cousin Lymon to a richly patterned, sinister dance in

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<sup>9</sup>Lawrence Graver, Carson McCullers (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 32.



which each at different times plays the roles of lover and beloved. He uses a William Butler Yeats term to describe this relationship:

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe is about the crazy salad of every man--ugly and beautiful, heiress and outlaw, dwarf and amazon--they all choose love objects in ways that demonstrate that passion is the most permanent and amazing of all human mysteries.<sup>10</sup>

The circle comes full cycle with the return of Marvin Macy when it becomes the hunchback's turn to take the role of the lover.

Miss Amelia is forewarned by Marvin Macy's brother Henry that Marvin is out of prison on parole, and she declares that the devil will never set his foot on her property. Unfortunately, Marvin Macy returns on a day Amelia is away on business, and Cousin Lymon is the first to see him. From the beginning there is a strange chemistry between the two because as they initially stare at each other it is not the "... look of two strangers meeting for the first time. . ." (Ballad, p. 47.) When Amelia returns, she sees Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon at the same time, but it is Cousin Lymon whom she stares at in stricken amazement. The hunchback has the peculiarity of wiggling his ears when he wishes to ingratiate himself with someone,

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<sup>10</sup>Graver, p. 30.

and now he is wiggling his ears at Marvin Macy. Not only does he wiggle his ears, but he ". . . fluttered his eyelids, so that they were like pale, trapped moths in his sockets. He scraped his feet around on the ground, waved his hands about, and finally began doing a little trotlike dance . . ." (Ballad, p. 50.) Macy wonders if the hunchback is throwing a fit and proceeds to cuff him on the head. Everyone watching expects Amelia to fight Macy because " . . . in all those years no one had so much as touched a hair of Cousin Lymon's head, although many had had the itch to do so . . ." (Ballad, p. 50.) Amelia, however, goes into a trance, something the townspeople attribute to her handling of swamp roots and trying out all the medicines on herself first.

Having been unable to establish human relationships the first thirty years of her life, Amelia's relationship to Cousin Lymon has been neither wholly feminine nor wholly maternal. Perhaps in her first view of him, she did see her own loneliness. The tragedy for her is that this is the only close attachment to another human being she has wanted, and the return of Marvin Macy finds her defenseless as Cousin Lymon heaps insult upon insult on her. The hunchback brings Macy to eat at her table nearly every day and provides Macy with free drinks at the cafe. The final insult is Cousin

Lymon's announcement that Macy is going to move in with them. She does not put Macy off the premises because she is afraid she will be left alone and ". . . once you have lived with another, it is a great torture to have to live alone. It is better to take in your mortal enemy than face the terror of living alone . . ." (Ballad, p. 60.)

Seeing the inevitable doom of her relationship with Cousin Lymon, Amelia prepares to fight Marvin Macy. Already a fine fighter, she prepares herself by practicing on a homemade punching bag. Cousin Lymon struts around imitating her. He ". . . crossed his eyes and aped her gestures in a way that made her appear to be a freak . . ." (Ballad, p. 62.)

Each night at the cafe Amelia and Macy square off but nothing happens. On Ground Hog Day the fight occurs. The tragedy for Amelia is not only the loss of the fight, but also her complete betrayal by Cousin Lymon. Just as she is about to defeat Macy, Cousin Lymon jumps off a counter twelve feet away and lands on her back. This gives the fight to Macy, and Macy and Cousin Lymon leave town.

Amelia is now alone but finds it impossible to return to the domineering giant she had once been. Having been shamed in front of the town, she is crushed by the knowledge that she has been completely betrayed by Cousin Lymon. For

three years she sits on her front steps and awaits his return; in the fourth year she has the premises boarded up and there she remains in the closed rooms. Amelia's tragic fate results from her inability to relate to anyone but Cousin Lymon. Edmonds states that the song of the chain gang at the end of the story indicates that love is possible if the love is mutual and reciprocal.<sup>11</sup> This is the obvious failure of Amelia because just as she failed to respond to Marvin Macy so Cousin Lymon failed to return her love. Love for Amelia has only intensified her loneliness until she has become a face in a window " . . . 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 . . ." (Ballad, p. 4.)

Several conclusions can be drawn about Carson McCullers' selection of the grotesque characters for The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. Even the most grotesque beings can be attracted to one another in a love relationship. The grotesque character usually fails to achieve a lasting relationship because he has been psychologically marred by his grotesqueness. His self esteem is low; therefore, a one-to-one relationship is with someone like himself who in turn is incapable of love. Love can be meaningful only when it is mutually shared.

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<sup>11</sup>Edmonds, p. 24.



Amelia's final isolation can be linked to her grotesqueness, but it is not just appearance which has made her a grotesque figure. McCullers handicaps her further by placing her in a home environment which is abnormal. She develops to think of herself as more a man than a woman. Thus she is psychologically marred as well as physically deformed. Any love relationship will be abnormal since she is bi-sexual. The situation becomes more impossible when McCullers links grotesque to grotesque. It is ludicrous to think of six foot Amelia and four foot Cousin Lymon as lovers. Amelia sees her own grotesqueness in Cousin Lymon. The destruction of the relationship is a destruction of herself.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, 1940, the first of Carson McCullers' books and the longest, does not have the same grotesqueness of characters as The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. By Spiegel's definition, Singer is a Southern grotesque character in that he is a deaf mute, thus a physically deformed person. Two other characters in the novel, Jake Blount and Antonapoulos, are by the same definition deformed. Jake Blount is a madman, and Antonapoulos is a half-wit or a psychotic. None of these characters are so deformed, however, as to give the gross appearance

of Amelia Evans with her mannish figure and crossed eyes or Cousin Lymon, the hunchback.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter centers around Singer, a deaf mute, who has had to abruptly end a close relationship with Antonapoulos, another deaf mute. The lives of four other characters are revealed as they individually relate to Singer. Mick Kelly, an appealing teenager, is the tomboy daughter of a boardinghouse keeper and a crippled father who fails in his attempts to support his family with his watch repair business. To escape the boredom of reality, Mick creates an inside room to which she can retire to think about music. Often, she goes to the New York Cafe operated by Biff Brannon who likes freaks and misfits. Biff's oddity gets him involved with Jake Blount, a drunken workman who has read Marx and has formulated a vague philosophy which he attempts to pass on to anyone who will listen, especially Dr. Copeland. Copeland, a Negro doctor, cures the physical ails of his people and tries to convey to them pride in their race and continually encourages them to improve themselves. All of these people are drawn to John Singer because each sees in his calm exterior himself as he would like to be. Each believes that Singer alone understands his problems.

John Singer is realistically drawn to show the development of his complete isolation from society. Left an orphan

at an early age, Singer has been deaf since an infant. He was placed in an orphanage, and there he learned to talk with his hands and to read. He also learned to read people's lips and then finally to speak. The school considered him very intelligent, but he never became used to speaking with his tongue because ". . . it was not natural to him and his tongue felt like a whale in his mouth. From the blank expression on people's faces to whom he talked in this way he felt that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech. . ."

(Heart, p. 8.) At the age of twenty-two, he left the school and moved to the South where he met Antonapoulos immediately.

The relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos is one-sided. In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe McCullers states that the value and quality of love is determined by the lover, and the lover craves any possible relationship with the beloved even if this experience can cause him only pain. Singer is the lover, and Antonapoulos is the onlooker, perhaps because he is dimwitted and incapable of true emotional feelings. From the brief description of his life before meeting Antonapoulos, it is assumed that Singer has had no close relationship with anyone. Singer commits himself totally to his new friend, and for ten years the two

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Notation: Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (Boston: Bantam Paperbacks, 1953), p. 8. All quotes from (Heart) will be from this edition.

are together. They live together, take long walks, and share household duties with Antonapoulos in charge of cooking. Although Singer tells Antonapoulos everything that happens to him in his job as an engraver, Antonapoulos never responds. Thus the relationship is totally one-sided, but Singer is content.

Conflict develops between the two when Antonapoulos becomes ill, and Singer places him on a diet recommended by the doctor. Antonapoulos is more animal than human and cannot understand this loss of his sustenance. He becomes sulky and irritable and a constant embarrassment to Singer who continues only to respond with love. Antonapoulos begins to steal from stores, but Singer always manages to pay for the stolen items. Indecency follows when Antonapoulos urinates in public. Singer is continually marching his friend to court and paying his own money for bond. At times Antonapoulos decides he doesn't like the expressions on people's faces and deliberately bumps into them. Singer has always thought Antonapoulos wise and subtle, but now he becomes troubled: ". . . he would shake his friend by the shoulders until he was very tired and explain things over and over with his hands. But nothing did any good . . ."

(Heart, p. 6.)



The situation is taken out of Singer's hands by Charles Parker, Antonapoulos' cousin, who arranges for Antonapoulos to be committed to an insane asylum because he is afraid that he will be held responsible for damage done by him. Singer is suddenly left completely alone. Even though Antonapoulos never responded to attempts to communicate, Singer had always felt that he understood; and this had provided a release for the thoughts stored in his mind.

Singer and Antonapoulos are such opposites that it is difficult to comprehend Singer's tenacious attachment to Antonapoulos. Singer is always immaculate and very soberly dressed while Antonapoulos may be wearing ". . . a yellow or green polo shirt stuffed sloppily into his trousers in front and hanging loose behind. . ." (Heart, p. 2.) Nothing is more important to Antonapoulos than food. Antonapoulos would often steal food from his cousin while Singer stood by thoroughly embarrassed:

Usually before leaving Antonapoulos waddled gently to the glassed case in the front of the store where some meats and cheeses were kept. He glided open the back of the case and his fat hand groped lovingly for some particular dainty inside which he had wanted. Sometimes his cousin who owned the place did not see him. But if he noticed he stared at his cousin with a warning in his tight, pale face. Sadly Antonapoulos would shuffle the morsel from one corner of the case to the other.

During these times Singer stood very straight with his hands in his pockets and looked in another direction. He did not like to watch this little scene between the two Greeks. For, excepting drinking and a certain solitary secret pleasure, Antonapoulos loved to eat more than anything else in the world. (Heart, p. 2.)

Spiegel states that "when the grotesque calls attention to his grotesquery, he becomes either picturesque, or repellent, or self pitying, or all three; he becomes, indeed grotesque."<sup>12</sup> Antonapoulos, more than any other grotesque character created by Carson McCullers, fits this description. Although Singer is intelligent, he is blinded by his need to communicate with Antonapoulos, a feeble-minded, impassive figure who doesn't understand. Antonapoulos depends on Singer for his physical needs, and thus Singer feels wanted. In the outline of "The Mute," McCullers describes Singer as follows:

Because of his deaf-mutism, he is isolated from the ordinary human emotions of other people to a psychopathic degree. He is very observant and intuitive. On the surface he is a model of kindness and cooperation--but nothing which goes on around him disturbs his inner self. All of his deeper emotions are involved in the only friend to whom he can express himself, Antonapoulos.<sup>13</sup>

After Antonapoulos is committed, Singer is overcome with loneliness. Unable to sleep soundly at night, he dreams of Antonapoulos. When this does not work, he

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<sup>12</sup>Spiegel, p.429.

<sup>13</sup>McCullers, p. 126.

begins spending his evenings walking around the town for hours:

His agitation gave way gradually to exhaustion and there was a look about him of deep calm. In his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone. (Heart, p. 9.)

Singer might have been able to form other friendships had Antonapoulos not been his only close associate for so long. During the ten year friendship, the two would meet other mutes but something always happened. One, a mute named Carl, had even been invited to dinner. All went well until midnight when Antonapoulos became offensive and began to make grotesque gestures of obscenity at Carl. Carl became afraid and quickly left, and then Antonapoulos told Singer that while they were not looking Carl had drunk the gin. The ironic twist was that Antonapoulos had drunk the gin himself and could not remember doing it. Singer gradually forgets all of the ugly deeds and remembers the Antonapoulos whom he alone could know:

This was the friend to whom he told all that was in his heart. This was the Antonapoulos who no one knew was wise but him. As the year passed, his friend seemed to grow larger in his



mind, and his face looked out in a very grave and subtle way from the darkness at night. The memories of his friend changed in his mind so that he remembered nothing that was wrong or foolish--only the wise and good. (Heart, p. 173.)

Unwittingly, Singer becomes involved in the lives of four other lonely people, but it is a superficial involvement for him because he is absorbed in his own loss of Antonapoulos. Singer chooses Biff Brannon's cafe in which to eat all his meals. Biff likes all freaks. Since Singer is a deaf mute, Biff considers him a freak. It is indirectly through Biff that Singer meets Jake Blount, a stranger in town who has chosen Biff's as a place to drink every night and also to lodge. Blount is driven by a violent fury to reform labor, and he speaks a mysterious philosophy based on Marx and Veblen. Totally drunk and not realizing Singer is deaf, Blount talks to Singer in the cafe because he thinks Singer understands his ideas. Singer listens patiently for an hour and then leaves. Blount follows Singer and suddenly becomes violent to himself, or so Willie, Biff's clean-up boy, describes it to Biff:

Well--I didn't see how it commenced. I were standing in the back door when I heard this here commotion. Sound like a big fight in the alley. So I r-r-run to see. And this here white man had just gone hog wild. He were butting his head against the side of this brick well and hitting with his fists. He were cussing and fighting like I never seen a white man fight before. (Heart, p. 21.)



Singer, having seen the commotion, returns to the cafe and offers to allow Blount to spend the night with him. Singer rooms at the Kellys', and Mick, a teenager in the family, loves to go to Singer's room to talk over her problems. Dr. Copeland, the Negro doctor, has a deaf patient; and at his daughter Portia's suggestion, he writes to Singer to ask him if there is a deaf institution that will take the deaf boy. The four, Biff, Blount, Mick, and Copeland, become regular visitors to Singer's room.

The four come to Singer's room thinking that he understands them, and they interpret his silence as assent. Singer, however, is always occupied with thoughts of Antonapoulos and often visits him at the asylum. On his first visit Singer takes Antonapoulos many presents but no food; therefore, Antonapoulos wants none of the gifts. Singer takes Antonapoulos to a restaurant, and Antonapoulos orders half the dishes on the menu and then refuses to leave. Singer coaxes him with a bottle of wine and then throws the unopened bottle out of the cab, leaving Antonapoulos enraged. Singer never tells the four of his visits. When they ask where he has been, Singer pretends he does not understand. When it is impossible to visit Antonapoulos, Singer writes him long letters even though Antonapoulos cannot read:

He had always known that his friend was unable to make out the meaning of words on paper, but as the months passed by he began to imagine that perhaps he had been mistaken, that perhaps Antonapoulos only kept his knowledge of letters a secret from everyone. (Heart, p. 180.)

Singer, however, never mails the letters.

Singer never accepts the loss of Antonapoulos and states in one letter that the loss is a loneliness he cannot bear. On the final visit to the asylum when Singer hears that his friend is dead, he is doomed. After hearing the news, Singer returns to the hotel and inserts a nickel in a slot machine but jams the machine:

Over the incident he made a great-to-do. He cornered the desk clerk and furiously demonstrated what had happened. His face was deathly pale and he was so beside himself that tears rolled down the ridges of his nose. (Heart, p. 278.)

Singer's tragedy is like that of Amelia Evans in Ballad of the Sad Cafe. Both characters have been able to relate only to one other individual. As long as Antonapoulos was alive in the asylum, there was always hope for Singer. Writing letters which he never mailed and looking forward to visits with Antonapoulos sustained him so that he could outwardly appear to be sympathetic to the four lonely people who visited his room and thought that he understood them. The finality of Antonapoulos' death is a fact which Singer cannot accept, and for him violence to himself becomes the

answer. He returns to his room at the Kellys', drinks a glass of iced coffee, smokes a cigarette, washes the ash trays, and puts a bullet in his chest. This is done in the same calm manner he had customarily given his daily routine.

Several of McCullers' characters are lonely and isolated, but none are more lonely than the grotesque characters. Both Singer and Amelia Evans risk communicating with only one person, and both are left utterly crushed when this relationship fails. Violence and disaster are the end result for both. Unable to accept the loss of Cousin Lymon, Amelia totally withdraws from people, though still a breathing human being. Singer destroys himself because he cannot live without Antonapoulos. These two grotesque characters have communicated with another human being, but the failure of the relationship in each instance has led to violence and despair.

By fate both Amelia and Singer are born with a physical defect. In both situations an abnormal home environment, in Singer's case the lack of a home environment, makes them more withdrawn. Both characters turn inward until they are without ordinary human emotions. This complicates their communication with other people. Both Amelia and Singer

form a relationship with a person who is even more grotesque than they. McCullers implies that even the most grotesque beings can love, but ironically she also indicates that they are destined by their fate to love only another grotesque person.



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