

Come, As You Are: Grotesque Characters

in McCullers, O'Conner, and Capote

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The use of grotesque characters is just one of many hallmarks of the Southern Gothic literature genre. This essay will focus on the use of grotesque characters and the purpose they serve in three specific works: *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* by Carson McCullers, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" by Flannery O'Conner, and *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Truman Capote. Whether it be through the more obvious physical deformities seen in *Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and "The Life You Save You Save May Be Your Own", or the mental distortions of Joel Knox and the transvestite Randolph in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the main characters of these works are bound to face society head on with their grotesqueness. Through their plight, we address the social issues and taboos of the time such as homosexuality, Southern women taking on masculine roles, and false prophets. "It is this collection of outsiders whose "difference" spectacularly appears on the body - that invites the classification of much southern literature as grotesque" (Gleeson-White 110).

In McCullers' short story *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, the protagonist of the story is Amelia Evans. Her form of grotesque is physical, which we are showed on the second page of the story, "She was a tall, dark woman with the bones and muscle of a man" (McCullers 198). McCullers furthers the manliness of this character by placing her in a

traditionally male position, the proprietor of a general store as well as a bootlegger. Also, McCullers shows how very unlady-like Amelia is in the scene after her wedding. A "normal" woman would know that she will consummate the marriage with sex on her wedding night, however Amelia seems unaware or completely uninterested in sex. First, as they ate supper it was she and not he that went for seconds, another male characteristic displayed by this female character. Then, after only thirty minutes, she comes downstairs more dressed than when she had gone to bed. Another hallmark of the Southern Gothic is at play when McCullers says, "A groom is in a sorry fix when he is unable to bring his beloved bride to bed with him, and when the whole town knows it" (McCullers 220).

So the question, when looking at Amelia Evans, is why make her so manly? I agree with Sarah Gleeson-White's assessment, "Amelia mischievously rejects heterosexual relations and the normal mode of living that supposedly accompanies these" (Gleeson-White 51). We see how important this is when Amelia's husband, if he can be called such, Marvin Macy returns and her mannerisms change. She begins to wear dresses more often, something she only reserved for the holiest of days, Sundays, in order to appear more feminine for Macy, and perhaps due in some part to the maternal undertakings she has taken up for Cousin Lymon. It is important McCullers to contrast our original view of Amelia with this attempt at a feminine version so that we can see who Amelia truly is in her heart. I believe one purpose McCullers, and the rest of the Southern Gothic experts, wrote these unconventional types of characters is to show the importance of knowing ones true identity and staying true to it. Femininity is

not in Amelia's DNA and she seems to have trouble with the most basic of task when she is in womanly cloths or in womanly situations; great examples of this idea are when a piece of her strong, hairy leg sticks out of the dress and the entirety of the wedding paragraphs. McCullers intentionally plays with this idea for the purpose of showing the sadness of a woman being forced into societal norms, for McCullers has, "made personal alienation the explicit single concern of all her fiction" (Broughton 34).

Also in this story is another grotesque character, the hunchback Cousin Lymon. He is one of the more obvious and clichéd grotesque characters due to his deformity and lack of family. He literally shows up out of nowhere on the steps of Amelia and immediately elicits pity from her by claiming to be kin and crying on her porch looking a defeated and lonesome sole. It is the introduction of this grotesque form that turns our manly woman Amelia into a caring, maternal figure. The entire setting of the story, from the description of the desolate town and dilapidated store exude the exact characteristics of gothic with Cousin Lymon rightfully orchestrating the circus from center stage of the cafe. With Cousin Lymon, and perhaps his function in the story, comes a separation from a loneliness that seemed to saturate the town and its inhabitants to a communal society where people come together. In fact, after the success the cafe has and the attraction that is Cousin Lyman becomes popular, Amelia becomes socially acceptable. McCullers reveals this transformation here, "Her manners, however, and her way of life were greatly changed. She still lobed a fierce lawsuit, but she was not so quick to cheat her fellow man and to exact her cruel payments" (McCullers 214). It is ironic, or perhaps fitting considering the fickle nature of children,

that Cousin Lymon leads to the story's climax. Cousin Lymon becomes obsessed with Amelia's estranged husband Marvin Macy, the child rebelling against their parent, which pushes Amelia and Marvin to the breaking point of a long overdue physical confrontation. As stated before, Amelia does not know how to deal with womanly emotions and situations, and the loss of her emblematic child is too much for her to handle. I feel this line, taken from a passage describing the cafe, as the purpose of Cousin Lymon in the story:

But no value has been put on human life; it is given to us free and taken without being paid for. What is its worth? If you look around, at times the value may seem to be a little or nothing at all. Often after you have sweated and tried and things are not better for you, there comes a feeling deep down in the soul that you are not worth much. (McCullers 239-240)

Next, we look at the triplet of grotesque characters in Flanner O'Conner's short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own". Similar to the McCullers novella, these characters are physically grotesque. First we have the mother Lucynell Carter. "The mother is a hard-bitten, leathery, and toothless country widow whose toughness has enabled her to survive but has taken its toll" (Westling 147). A woman who blindly allows herself to be hoodwinked by our false prophet figure, Tom Shiftet, and attempts to attach her mentally challenged daughter to him through marriage. The daughter, bearing the same name as her mother, is a moronic character who serves as a stark counter-example of the primp facade and sweetness so often thought of when characterizing Southern women. I agree with Westling's assertion that Lucynell Jr. is in

contrast to most O'conner daughters in that she, "is absolutely docile, serving as a strange and distorted symbol of spiritual innocence" (Westling 147). And finally, the third grotesque character in this story, the main character and antagonist, is Mr. Tom T. Shiftlet. Shiftlet is grotesque in his form in that one of his arms is halved at the elbow. His walking is described as, "listing to the side as if the breeze were pushing him" (O'Conner 172).

We falsely call Shiftlet a Christ like figure for two reasons; first because of the crucifix scene in which O'conner is displaying him as a such, "He swung both his whole and his short arm up slowly so that they indicated an expanse of sky and his figure formed a crooked cross" (O'Conner 173), and secondly when he marries Lucynell which represents him "saving" her from a damned life of a widow. However, Shiftlet does not represent Christ at all. The words O'Conner uses here, "crooked cross" should be taken literally, for Tom represents the false prophet that is so common in O'Conner works. He is a hypocritical robber who only marries Lucynell Jr. for the family's car. Westling views him as " a low-class parody of the Southern Gentleman" (Westling 153). He gallantly walks into the Carters' yard and does the gentlemanly gesture of tipping his hat to Lucynell Jr. first, as if nothing is wrong with her, and taking off his hat to address the lady of the house. Further fulfilling his purpose as the false prophet, he butters up the Miss Lucynell by telling her he is not interested in taking money for his services and tells her he hates the way people do things without a care of how they do it and reveres virtuous women.

Perhaps O'Conner was warning of the lying nature of evil hearted men, or perhaps the guilt Shiftlet feels at the end is emblematic of God coming down on the side of the betrayed, but either way we are wiser to the length men will pervert the truth and manipulate their actions in order to get what they want. In this case, Shiftlet undertakes an unpaid handyman position and marries a mentally challenged girl all for the car that came with her. Perhaps the true lesson is no matter how far you drive away, one cannot escape the guilt they carry with them. Shiftlet is confronted with his atrocity when the boy behind the counter at the diner he leaves Lucynell Jr. says, "She looks like an angel of Gawd" (O'Conner 181). Shiftlet becomes more depressed than he had ever been after this realization that he tries to atone for his sins by picking up an uninterested hitchhiker. In a very O'Conner way, Shiftlet uncontrollably starts to blabber about how good his mother is, in all actuality he is describing Miss Lucynell, and the hitch-hiker explodes on him with a barrage of unflattering words about both their moms. Rain begins to fall on the stolen car he occupies, as it rightly should, when Shiftlet prays that God wash the slime from the earth. Unlike other O'Conner mother-daughter stories, this is the only one in which God defends the betrayed women. "Usually the women need to be chastised for their pride, and the gentlemanly invader serves as a strangely diabolical agent for the robust O'Conner brand of divine grace" (Westling 155).

The final work I will be reviewing is Truman Capote's first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Joel Knox, a fatherless boy sent away in his formative teenage years and the main character, is not grotesque physically, yet he still does not fit into societal norms. Marguerite Young describes this novel as, "concerned with the extra-marginal,

the symbols interloping among otherwise unintelligible experiences, the dreams, memories, perceptions, the fleeting peculiarities of human nature as revelatory of the psychic underworld which all persons inhabit in daylight. Character, problem, situation are secondary to these" (Young 516). Capote does not focus on the Southern woman finding herself in the reconstruction, or the evils one man perpetrates on another. Like all good writers, he writes what he knows best, from personal experiences, and for Capote that is growing up not knowing his father and sexually confused. Capote said he had the most insecure childhood of anyone he knew and felt isolated from all people.

His gender-clashing appearance and mannerisms coupled with his mental instabilities is what classifies Joel as grotesque. Capote describes him as:

He had his notions of what a "real" boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate, and fair-skinned; each of his features was shapeless with sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes, which were brown and very large. (Capote 4)

Once at Skully's Landing, with all its grotesque inhabitants, Joel finds himself in a dreamlike state. Even the mirrors inside the house distort the reflections of appearances, metaphorically screaming that we must know what is on the inside in order to truly see the person. "It was like comedy mirrors in carnival houses; he swayed shapelessly in its distorted depths" (Capote 42). Going along with traditional Southern Gothic hallmarks, Joel is occasionally paired with a tomboyish girl named Idabel. Like *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, we see clear gender role reversals between these two; most obviously, when they are confronted by a snake while crossing a river. Joel had recently received a sword as a gift, one phallic symbol, and is leading Idabel through the

woods. When faced with the poisonous snake directly in their path, Joel freezes with fright as he imagines the snake's eyes turning into his father's eyes. Idabel takes the sword from him, symbolically emasculating him, and kills the snake, another phallic symbol. Another scene where gender role reversal is key is when the two take an impromptu swim. Joel shyly looks around as Idabel, already naked, instructs him to strip and get in the water. "What you got in your britches is no news to me, and no concern of mine; hell, I've been fooling around with boys since the first grade. I never think like I'm a girl; you've got to remember that or we can't never be friends" (Capote 111).

Living at Skully's Landing with the slightly deformed Miss Amy and the paralyzed Mr. Sansom is the homosexually explicit Randolph. The definition of creeper, I believe Randolph's purpose in the novel is to serve as a sort of greeter of the homosexual realm for Joel. Throughout the novel, Randolph befriends Joel and begins to open his mind to the thought the person he is going around is not his true self and may become nothing. "And Joel realized the truth; he saw how hopeless Randolph was: more paralyzed than Mr. Sansom, more child-like than Miss Wisteria, what else could he do, once outside and alone, but describe a circle, the zero of his nothingness" (Capote 191). For it is Randolph who Joel sees in the window dressed up as an old lady in full make-up and wig. Capote uses foreshadowing here, "It was at this point that he saw the queer lady. She was holding aside the curtains of the left corner window, and smiling and nodding at him, as if in greeting or approval" (Capote 55) for the same cross-dressed Randolph who appears in the same window beckoning to Joel. "He knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where, as though he'd forgotten

something, he looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he left behind" (Capote 194).

The physical bodies in this novel only represent a part of the figures in play. This story, as stated before, is mostly about the internal struggles, chiefly about living in a world where you identify as the other gender. The isolation of Skully's Landing and the setting of the surrounding area lend itself to the isolation, which forces Joel to forge his own identity. With no other male figure around, and with a seemingly feminine mindset, it is no wonder Joel comes to the realization he does at the end and gladly chooses his future.

In all three of these stories, we see the male causing the action. Whether it is the hunchback Cousin Lymon, the half-armed Tom Shiftlet or the cross dressing homosexual Randolph, these grotesque characters serve a purpose of enlightening the other characters to feelings they did not know or had forgotten; the first two are performing this duty to women, while the last is appealing to a boy. In conclusion, these characters are quintessential grotesque Southern Gothic representations and serve their purpose with the same mastery that flowed from the fingertips of their authors.

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