Babel
Littératures plurielles

31 | 2015
The Masculine South

“Sexless And White” : Transgressing Gender Boundaries in Carson McCullers’s *The Ballad of The Sad Café* (1951)

Inès CASAS

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/babel/4070
DOI: 10.4000/babel.4070
ISSN: 2263-4746

Publisher
Université du Sud Toulon-Var

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 January 2015
Number of pages: 63-73
ISSN: 1277-7897

Electronic reference
Inès CASAS, « “Sexless And White” : Transgressing Gender Boundaries in Carson McCullers’s *The Ballad of The Sad Café* (1951) », *Babel* [Online], 31 | 2015, Online since 30 April 2016, connection on 26 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/babel/4070 ; DOI : 10.4000/babel.4070

“Sexless And White” : Transgressing Gender Boundaries in Carson McCullers’s *The Ballad of The Sad Café* (1951)

Inès CASAS

1 Throughout her life, Carson McCullers remained a southern woman whose imagination was frozen in collision with society’s expectations. She could not envision acceptance of womanhood, because she never found it herself. She displayed an ambivalent sexuality and frequently identified with the masculine. She herself explicitly stated this ambivalence by declaring to Newton Arvin, “I was born a man” (Kenschaft 221). It is this identification with the masculine which stimulated her imagination to explore the definitions of masculinity and femininity in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951). McCullers’s novella is a reflection on ambivalence about feminine identity, a problem which is indeed an expression of profound discomfort with the traditions of southern womanhood. The dominant discourse’s requirements of submissiveness and restraint for the southern lady traditionally discouraged the pursuit of professional, artistic or political goals. These restrictions imposed on women produced a fear that being female and daring to achieve was, as Louise Westling puts it, “to become a kind of freak,” and thus “the girl who insists on following her ambitions almost inevitably pays the price of shame and guilt as an adult … because she has abandoned the familiar boundaries of her gender” (*Sacred Groves* 113). This has been particularly true in the South, and McCullers highlights the horrifying dimensions of such a problem as she explores feminine independence in the portrait of Amelia Evans and how she—and her relationships with Lymon and Marvin Macy—reveals a challenge to masculinity. In this cautionary tale about the dangers that befall a woman who transgresses traditional gender roles, McCullers ridicules both the myth of the southern lady and traditional notions of manhood. She does so by creating a giant Amazon who embodies both woman and man and has a relationship with a similarly ambiguous figure and who illustrates McCullers’s belief that ambiguity provides the ideal way of experiencing the world.[1]

2 Critics such as Louise Westling, Louis D. Rubin, and Caroline Carvill focus on models of gender inversion and are of the opinion that the sexual dynamics in the novel represent an inversion of gender roles and traditional heterosexual patterns. The only escape to the oppressive position reserved for women in the novel’s southern setting seems to be the appropriation of male power and the identification with men, for masculinity promises freedom, power and status. Miss Amelia’s “masculinity” represents her dream of independence, the only alternative questioning the restrictions imposed on women by the southern community. However, behind this alternative is the notion of male vengeance which triumphs in the story’s conclusion, as the formerly invincible Amazon is left shrunken and imprisoned in what is the collapsing shadow of her old café. The plotline, then, develops Miss Amelia’s fall from masculine authority to female alienation, or as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it, “from a woman warrior to a helpless madwoman” (*No Man’s Land* 111). In this South that defines and classifies in terms of dualities and oppositions (male-female, strong-weak, powerful-powerless), there is no room for sexual ambivalence. These females who challenge conventions and question gender barriers, therefore, are eventually pressured into conforming to some kind of socially sanctioned womanliness, as is the case with Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), or punished for transgression, as in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

3 In her portrayal of Miss Amelia, McCullers insists on permanent suspension of clear gender identity and makes visible how such a state challenges patriarchal society. Miss Amelia does not fit into the role her society deems appropriate to her sex. She is portrayed as a “grotesque Amazon” (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 111), a “manly giantess” (Millichap 329); she has abnormal physical features for a woman, as she is an imposing figure with hairy thighs and “bones and muscles like a man” (*Ballad* 4)[2] and short-cropped hair brushed back from her forehead like Frankie Addams’s in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). Miss Amelia is, to the eyes of the southern community, a threat to images of the delicate, petite lady. Although her unambiguous name suggests femaleness—unlike Mick’s and Frankie’s—it seems to emphasize the discrepancy between a name which evokes expectations of a ‘proper’ woman and Amelia’s masculine body. Notwithstanding her strapping physique, which is complemented by means of dressing “in overalls and gum boots” (5) and boxing, Miss Amelia identifies in other aspects with masculinity. She is the central personality of the town and has great power in the community: she manages to become the richest person in town by displaying unscrupulous aggressiveness in commercial transactions, as she operates a profitable general store in the building inherited from her father, which gradually becomes the town’s only café. McCullers exaggerates Miss Amelia’s business interests and her desire for control to make visible the mechanisms in patriarchal society that seek to destroy the other. As Ellen Matlok-Ziemann has put it, “McCullers has, then, Miss Amelia impersonate and mock ‘man’ like a drag king” (141). By overemphasizing Miss Amelia’s imitation of man, McCullers actually expresses her critique of typically male (capitalist) practices.

4 Moreover, Miss Amelia shows great skill at masculine trades: she owns farms in the vicinity, is adept at manual skills such as carpentry, masonry, and butchering, and she produces the best whisky in the county. The most impressive of all her powers, however, is her ability to heal the sick with secret remedies from roots and herbs. The only exception to her healing powers is related to her rejection of everything female—the underlying fear that undermines her sense of self and her ability to control:

> 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. But in other matters people trusted her. (17)

5 These feelings of embarrassed confusion reveal her effort to reject and expel what threatens the self: femaleness. As she distinctly senses how femaleness invades herself, she seeks to assert that she is part of the male world by touching her masculine apparel, craning her neck against her shirt or rubbing her swamp boots together, as if to convince herself that femaleness does not exist. She fails and becomes a "dumb-tongued child."

6 Miss Amelia's rejection of conventional notions of womanhood is evident in her refusal to accept the diminished status of woman, as she resolves not to play the physical part of a woman in her marriage to Marvin Macy. Macy is good-looking and prototypically masculine, "a tall man, with brown curly hair, and slow-moving, deep-blue eyes ... [and] the lazy, half-mouthed smile of the braggart" (46). This portrayal of Macy as a hyper-masculine southern cowboy strutting around town suggests for Sarah Gleeson-White a "caricature of ideal American masculinity" (48-49). McCullers casts his masculine qualities in an evil, destructive light throughout the story, for he is also violent and viciously lustful. He is the devil male—the Satanic is suggested by his red shirt and the fact that he never sweats—who has ruined the tenderest young girls in the region. Perhaps for this reason it is even the more ironic that he falls for a manly woman.

7 When Miss Amelia marries him, the whole town is relieved, expecting marriage to soften her character and physique "and to change her at last into a calculable woman" (30). However, during her ten-day marriage, she fails again in her performance of the "proper" woman. The bridal gown that Miss Amelia wears at the wedding looks ridiculous on her, since it is "at least twelve inches too short for her" (37); as she dons this dress, she reveals with her body the artificiality of femininity and is utterly alienated by it. Thus, she keeps making an "odd gesture," and as she tries to reach "for the pocket of her overalls ... her face [becomes] impatient, bored, and exasperated" (37-38). Moreover, almost as if trying to escape the constraints of femininity, she hurries "out of the church, not taking the arm of her husband, but walking at least two paces ahead of him" (38), and on their way home she talks about work and treats him like a customer. After the bridegroom follows her upstairs to bed on their wedding night, she ignores him:

> Within half an hour Miss Amelia had stomped down the stairs in breeches and a khaki jacket... She slammed the kitchen door and gave it an ugly kick... She poked up the fire, sat down, and put her feet up on the kitchen stove. She read the Farmer's Almanac, drank coffee, and had a smoke with her father's pipe... That was the way in which she spent the whole of her wedding night. (31)

8 During the ensuing ten days of their abortive marriage, she sleeps downstairs and continues to ignore her husband unless he comes within striking range, when she socks him with her fist. Accepting her feminine part in the marriage would have meant renouncing the masculine sources of her strength; her enraged reaction to Macy's forlorn attempts at lovemaking clearly expresses the insult they represent to her pride. Miss Amelia's sense of self rejects the conventional patriarchal definition of womanhood, since she feels that her compliance with it would imply the loss of her autonomy. Therefore, a "normal" heterosexual relationship, transforming her into a "calculable woman" is out of the question. Miss Amelia drives Macy away through the humiliation of his masculine

pride, an act which leaves her victorious in her "Amazon virginity" (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 123).

9 In this patriarchal society, McCullers seems to suggest, an intimate (sexual) relationship between a woman and a man, in which both partners can sustain their autonomy, is only possible if man's power is diminished. For this reason, Miss Amelia's second partner, Cousin Lymon, is physically and mentally miniaturized, and the love relationship which unfolds between them makes gender distinctions even more opaque. Contrary to Macy, Cousin Lymon represents no threat to her power or sense of self: he is a sickly, deformed man whose warped, childlike form indicates his masculine impotence just as Amelia's grotesquely masculine appearance expresses her inability to function as a conventional woman. He "functions as child, pet, and rather feminine companion" (Westling, "Tomboys" 120); in fact, his feminine appearance meets the requirements of a lady-petite. With him, Miss Amelia feels safe in revealing affection, for he poses no threat of sexuality or domination. Hence, in their relationship, there is an inversion of conventional roles of male and female, which is hinted at by their "ill-matched and pitiful" conjunction in physical terms: "Miss Amelia was a powerful blunderbuss of a person, more than six feet tall—and Cousin Lymon a weakly little hunchback reaching only to her waist" (25). Miss Amelia is, therefore, physically dominant and provides a living for the household, while Lymon is "the pampered mate who struts about in finery, is finicky about food and accommodations, and gads about town socializing and gossiping" (Westling, *Sacred Groves* 123). In their intimate conversations before the parlor fire, Miss Amelia sits with her long legs stretched before the hearth contemplating philosophical problems and reminiscing, while Cousin Lymon sits wrapped in a blanket or green shawl on a low chair and chatters endlessly about petty details. At this stage, even if, as Constante González Groba notes, they are still "mutually complementary" (142), McCullers applies heavy irony to gender distinctions seemingly based on stereotypes.

10 Their relationship is marked by a lack of struggle in which each partner seeks to sustain their autonomy, as there is no place for submissiveness. Their union is initially regarded with bewilderment, confusion, and disapproval, indicating the inability of patriarchal society to accept the blurring of gender boundaries. But McCullers not only elucidates how a suspension of those boundaries threatens patriarchal society, she also explores an ideal sense of personal fulfilment. Not threatened by an "ordinary" he-man like Macy, Miss Amelia's facial features and manners soften, and her efforts to sustain her masculinity seem no longer necessary. Many critics have been puzzled by Miss Amelia's and Cousin Lymon's harmonious union and the question of a possible sexual relationship. Some have discussed Miss Amelia's tomboyishness as a rejection of femininity in general and criticized her failure to accept heterosexuality. I have decided to avoid constricting questions of sexual preference in this paper and keep this issue suspended—thus deliberately avoiding the numberless studies that have read McCullers's work in lesbian terms, such as Lori Kenschaft's "Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson McCullers 'As a Lesbian'" (1996). Nevertheless, I agree with Gary Richards in the belief that to label Miss Amelia a lesbian on the basis of her gender transitivity is erroneous (189): she is largely divested of an overt sexual identity, but she loves a person of the opposite sex.

11 Lymon, nonetheless, is drawn to the cruel masculine strength of Marvin Macy. As Sarah Gilbert and Susan Gubar put it, "the no-man Lymon, who as the fake thing recognizes the real thing, weds himself to the he-man Marvin" ("Fighting" 150). Clearly defined gender

identities are used as contrast to heighten the potential of ambiguity, and Marvin Macy’s return functions as such. In fact, the final outcome is brought about by the conspiracy created by these male characters against Miss Amelia, a male vengeance which deprives her of power and strength. Understanding that Macy’s return to town is a challenge and a threat to her power, Miss Amelia’s strained efforts to remain autonomous are brought back as she begins preparations for a (gender) fight, taunting Macy by wearing her red dress as a flagrant reminder of his failure to make her act the part of a woman during their marriage, and flaunting her inaccessibility and independence. In this sense, Amelia’s hyper-femininity by means of the red dress becomes a subversive and empowering performance of gender, which she uses at the most crucial points of the text—when power is at stake. While she wears the dress, she pokes her biceps constantly, practices lifting heavy objects, and works out with a punching bag in her yard. She appears to be at ease with her ambiguous behaviour, performing “both a ‘proper’ woman, thus exposing norms of patriarchy through mimicry, and a ‘proper man’ through a drag king act which mocks the construction of man” (Matlok-Ziemann 153). Although this performance of womanhood does not alienate her from herself as her role as a bride did, Miss Amelia becomes a masquerader when acting out femininity, which reveals the absurdity of strict gender categorization. As Gleeson-White states, “when a woman deliberately acts out the feminine, her supposedly natural and appropriate position, the fragility of gender becomes most apparent” (50). In other words, in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, McCullers depicts gender as pliable and inessential, in sum, as a masquerade.

12 In a final act of male vengeance, Macy and Lymon join forces to destroy the usurper in a fight. As Suzanne Paulson puts it, by portraying the annihilation of Miss Amelia at the hands of two male figures, “McCullers warns against the greatest danger of all: the danger of losing one’s individuality to the aggressive male collective... Like blacks in the southern community, Amelia is victimized by white males. She is *womanized* and *feminized*” (194 ; my emphasis). At the moment of Miss Amelia’s apparent triumph in this fight, likened to heterosexual intercourse, Cousin Lymon leaps across the room to aid his adored uber-masculine friend. Miss Amelia is destroyed, and remains secluded in her office that night —her physical isolation within the wrecked house reflects her internal development, as the café stands as a symbol of the “inner room” of Miss Amelia’s subjective illusions.

13 Miss Amelia’s physical change after the fight seems to corroborate that heterosexuality forces women to accept womanhood. Her voice changes and becomes as powerless as her hand that opens “feebly and [lies] palm upward and still” (67); she lets her hair “grow ragged” (69), which emphasizes her weakness; her body shrinks until she is “thin as old maids when they go crazy” (69); and her healing powers are diminished. She lives in utter self-imposed isolation, as a “caged bird” reminiscent of the southern lady, looking down on the town from one of the windows of the formerly popular café now boarded up and leaning “so far that it seems bound to collapse at any minute” (3). Through ambiguity, Miss Amelia experienced fulfilment. Once denied it, she refuses to be part of patriarchal society with its rigid gender distinctions. However, despite the bleak ending, the idea of suspension of gender boundaries is still vindicated at the end of the ballad, for hers is a face which is “sexless and white” (3): Miss Amelia is still suspended between “proper” femininity and masculinity—she is neither woman nor man, simply “sexless.”

14 In this sense, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* provides the depiction of a masculine Amazon whose transgression of conventional gender boundaries brings catastrophic male retribution, which brutally silences her. McCullers focuses on the terrifying revenge that

the law of the phallus inflicts on those women who defy its imperatives. Specifically, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have put it, she dramatizes the punishment meted out to a woman “who has arrogantly supposed that she could live in a no man’s land—first without a real man, and then with a dwarfish no-man” (“Fighting” 148). In the novella, McCullers sought to blur gender boundaries; however, the outcome illustrates the impossibility of such a vision in the American South, where no ambivalence is accepted in gender distinctions. By creating an ambivalent heroine, whose identity is structured by violations of gender norms and rejections of sexuality and whose personal realization is attained through her relationship with a similarly ambiguous figure, McCullers acutely challenges and exposes the constricting norms of patriarchal society. She denounces the insanity of conforming to an ethical system that denigrates women while admiring materialistic and aggressive behaviour in men, denying classification in terms of duality or binary oppositions and vindicating ambiguity as the ideal.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carvill, Caroline. “You Might as Well Listen to the Chain Gang: *The Ballad of the Sad Café.*” *Reflections in a Critical Eye : Essays on Carson McCullers*. Ed. Jan Whitt. Lanham : University Press of America, 2008. 33-45.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century. I.* New Haven : Yale UP, 1988.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. “Fighting for Life.” *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*. Eds. Beverly Lyon Clark and Melvin J. Friedman. New York : G. K. Hall, 1996. 147-54.

Gleeson-White, Sarah. “A ‘Calculable Woman’ and a ‘Jittery Ninny’: Performing Femininity in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.” *Reflections in a Critical Eye : Essays on Carson McCullers*. Ed. Jan Whitt. Lanham : University Press of America, 2008. 47-59.

González Groba, Constante. *El Mundo Novelesco de Carson McCullers*. Santiago de Compostela: Servicio de Publicacións USC, 1994.

Kenschaft, Lori J. “Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson McCullers ‘As a Lesbian’.” *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*. Eds. Beverly Lyon Clark and Melvin J. Friedman. New York : G. K. Hall, 1996. 220-33.

Matlok-Ziemann, Ellen. *Tomboys, Belles, and Other Ladies: The Female Body-Subject in Selected Works by Katherine Anne Porter and Carson McCullers*. Uppsala : Uppsala Universitet, 2005.

McCullers, Carson. *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. 1951. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

Millichap, Joseph R. “Carson McCullers’ Literary Ballad.” *The Georgia Review* 27.3 (Fall 1973) : 329-39.

Paulson, Suzanne Morrow. “Carson McCullers’s *The Ballad of the Sad Café*: A Song Half Sung, Misogyny, and ‘Ganging Up’.” *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*. Eds. Beverly Lyon Clark and Melvin J. Friedman. New York : G. K. Hall, 1996 : 187-205.

Richards, Gary. *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961.* Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

Westling, Louise. *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor*. Athens, Georgia : University of Georgia Press, 1985.

Westling, Louise. “Tomboys and Revolting Femininity.” *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*. Eds. Beverly Lyon Clark and Melvin J. Friedman. New York : G. K. Hall, 1996. 155-65.

NOTES

1. I have decided not to discuss sexuality in this article to avoid constricting questions of sexual preference when defining the categories of masculinity and femininity.
2. I will hereafter refer to this edition of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* by page number only.

ABSTRACTS

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the dominant discourse’s requirements of submissiveness and restraint for the southern lady still discouraged the pursuit of professional, artistic or political goals. These restrictions imposed on women produced a fear that being female and daring to achieve was to venture into dangerous territory—to transgress. Carson McCullers’s own situation was an extreme example of the plight of the southern female; she deliberately dressed in men’s clothes, flaunting her androgyny while she was writing *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951). Her protagonist’s transgression of conventional gender boundaries and her failure to perform normative femininity eventually brings about catastrophic male retribution, which brutally silences her and isolates her from the community. McCullers focuses on the terrifying revenge that the dominant law of the phallus inflicts on those women who defy its imperatives, and dramatizes the punishment meted out to a woman who has “arrogantly” supposed that she could live in a no man’s land. The outcome of the novella illustrates the unaccountability of such opaque identities in her contemporary American South.

Pendant les premières décennies du XXe siècle, les exigences du discours dominant de la soumission et de la retenue auxquelles était soumise la femme du Vieux Sud la dissuadaient de poursuivre tout objectif professionnel, artistique ou politique. Les contraintes qu’on lui imposait lui faisaient craindre que le fait d’être femme et d’oser agir pour réussir signifierait s’aventurer sur un terrain dangereux et ainsi transgresser. La situation de Carson McCullers est un exemple extrême de la situation de détresse à laquelle était confrontée la femme du Vieux Sud ; elle portait délibérément des vêtements d’homme, exhibant ainsi, au cours de l’été 1941, son androgynie, alors qu’elle écrivait *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951). Le fait que l’héroïne transgresse les limites conventionnelles du genre et qu’elle échoue à jouer le jeu de la norme féminine la mènent finalement à un châtiment masculin désastreux, qui la réduit brutalement au silence et l’isole de sa communauté. McCullers met l’accent sur la revanche terrifiante que la loi phallique dominante inflige aux femmes qui défient ses impératifs, et met en scène la punition prodiguée à la femme qui avait supposé, de façon arrogante, qu’elle pourrait vivre dans un no man’s land.

L’issue de cette nouvelle illustre le fait que des identités si opaques ne peuvent être expliquées et que, par conséquent, une telle vision ne peut exister dans le Vieux Sud contemporain.

INDEX

Quoted persons: McCullers (Carson)
Keywords: southern literature, patriarchy, masculinity, southern lady, transgression
Mots-clés: société patriarcale, masculinité, femme du vieux sud, transgression

AUTHOR

INÈS CASAS

Universidad Santiago Compostela