

A HAVEN IN THE AGE OF ANXIETY: THE CAFE AS SETTING AND SYMBOL IN THE FICTION OF CARSON MCCULLERS

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Carson McCullers' best novels came out in the first six years of the forties, a decade that, according to Warren French, can be compared to a fearful and undesirable guest who arrives early, stays longer than expected and leaves everything in a mess. French contends that the decade began in 1939 with World War II and didn't finish until June 25, 1950, when one part of Korea invaded the other. The fall of the first atom bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 was a disastrous landmark that divided the decade into two periods of «hot» and «cold» war. From the literary point of view, the decade would not begin in America until June, 1940 with the publication of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers, a very young writer from the South¹.

The fiction of the early forties is characterized by a minimal reference to contemporary society and by the exclusion of social and political issues, perhaps as a reaction to the excesses of the thirties, a decade in which the social context played an important role in a fiction that often explicitly accused and condemned the established order. Carson McCullers wrote in a period in which the critics favoured the depth and intensity of the inner life of the characters and the portrayal of private lives often spent in places as remote and peripheral as the prototypical small town in the South where practically all of McCullers' works take place. The characters of what some critics termed «new fiction» are often victims of circumstances, rather than heroes or villains in the traditional sense². They are often passive rather than active subjects, and the action is internal in most cases,

¹ Warren French, ed., *The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1969), pp. 1, 2.

² A good detailed description of the «new fiction» is given by Malcolm Cowley in chapter VII of *The Literary Situation* (New York: Viking, 1947).

and most of the time limited to the characters' feelings, either of despair, love, hate or anxiety.

But, for all its appearance of being far from the main currents of contemporary American life, the novel of the forties does reflect, even if only indirectly, certain aspects of the society of the period and a state of mind that many sectors of that society presumably shared with its writers. After all, the refusal to deal with social institutions in the literary work seems to be nothing but the reflection of a prevailing mood of disillusion with the social structures that proved incapable of avoiding war and the nuclear holocaust, and the expression of the rejection of a terribly confusing and aimless world. Only when a society has lost faith, not just in the communism of the thirties, but even in the possibility of achieving a more human and ideal world through progress and reason, can we understand that the writer, who does not believe any more in his mission as guide of society, may wish to shun the social context in order to explore the individual. And the latter, in turn, finds himself most of the time powerless to influence the course of history and to avoid catastrophes of which he himself might eventually be the victim.

As a result of the war, the period in which McCullers wrote was characterized by insecurity and anxiety, both in the individual and the collective sphere; it was a time of despair and lovelessness to which W.H. Auden's poem «The Age of Anxiety» gave a name³. In a book published in 1953, Van Wyck Brooks wonders «whether this post-war frame of mind» —which he finds characterized by the bewilderment, the frustration, and the tensión that accompany the feeling of queerness and strangeness and by a tendency to retrospection in every form to make up for an intolerable present in which the end of the world seems as imminent as it seemed in the tenth century— «is not rather the effect of a pre-war sickness, 'the sickness of being man' that one young poet speaks of and that was felt already in the pre-war epoch». Brooks adds that in that pre-war time «there were many who could say, with Alfred Hayes in his *Welcome to the Castle*, 'Do not ask me what my generation can have faith in or hope for'»⁴. But at least this attitude is not as nihilistic as that prevailing during World War II, which led the soldier Wilson in *The Naked and the Dead* to exclaim, «Goddam carrion, that's all we are, men, goddam carrion», something very close to the feeling expressed by the insistent refrain «many have perished; more will» of the poem that gave a name to the period.

In Carson McCullers' first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, written from 1937 to 1939, the menace of a war hovering over Europe is repeatedly felt, and in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) there are many references to several parts of the globe that are being devastated by the monstrous war beast. It is one of

³ «The Age of Anxiety», which the author calls «a baroque eclogue», was published as a whole in a volume of the same name in 1947 (New York: Random House). Some pieces of it had appeared previously in different publications. My quotations from «The Age of Anxiety» are from: W.H. Auden, *Collected Longer Poems* (London: Faber, 1968). Page numbers are in parentheses in the text.

⁴ Van Wyck Brooks, *The Writer in America* (New York: Avon, 1964), pp. 116, 117, 118.

those periods in which not only the individual, but the whole historical process seems to disintegrate, «when necessity is associated with horror and freedom with boredom» and when «it looks good to the bar business» («The Age of Anxiety», p. 255). According to Auden's narrator, «in wartime, when everybody is reduced to the anxious status of a shady character or a displaced person, when even the most prudent become worshippers of chance, and when, in comparison to the universal disorder of the world outside, his [the bar owner's] Bohemia seems as cosy and respectable as a suburban villa, he can count on making his fortune» (225-256).

The bar or café is a refuge not only in times of war but also in peacetime, in all times, as long as there are humans in need of it. According to McCullers' conception of man and the universe, the human being is essentially imperfect and incomplete, permanently anxious and unsatisfied, and finds himself internally divided between opposing tendencies. A primary necessity in man is, according to McCullers, to establish his individual identity, and consciousness of self is the first abstract problem the human being solves. But after the establishment of individual identity, «there comes the imperative need to lose this new-found sense of separateness and to belong to something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self»⁵. For McCullers, consciousness of self, which distinguishes man from lower animals, is intimately related to an essentially human trait that she indistinctly calls «spiritual» or «moral isolation», the separateness that isolates the individual from others and from the world and traps him in the prison cell of his self. In the introduction to her play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958), McCullers expressed her conviction that an author writes out of some interior force that impels him to transform his own experience, much of it unconscious, into creations of universal and symbolical relevance. The themes that a writer chooses are deeply personal, and McCullers, who says she has always felt alone, supposes that the spiritual isolation of man has always been her central theme⁶. McCullers believes that loneliness, which she considers a universal condition, is the great American malady and that this is due to the Americans' obsessive quest for identity⁷.

The settings of McCullers' fiction are always presented with concrete and precise details and almost always through the consciousness of the characters, from whose moods the qualities of the setting often depend. In this respect McCullers follows the line of most twentieth century fiction in its reaction against the detailed delineation of place and the deterministic conception of the environment of the naturalistic writers of the nineteenth century, which brought fiction to the verge of historical and scientific documentation. As is the case with all literary elements, setting has both a literal and a metaphorical or symbolical value and it functions on these two levels. But the literal aspect of place is always influenced

⁵ Carson McCullers, «Loneliness... An American Malady», in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. Margarita G. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), p. 265.

⁶ C. McCullers, «The Square Root of Wonderful» (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1958), p. viii.

⁷ See: «Loneliness... An American Malady» in *The Mortgaged Heart*, 265-67.

by the tendency of all literature to attain the condition of poetry and symbol and, as Leonard Lutwack says, «it is difficult to avoid the proposition that in the final analysis all places in literature are used for symbolical purposes even though in their descriptiveness they may be rooted in fact»⁸.

In McCullers' imaginary universe, characterized by isolation and inhabited by lonely hearts, it should not be a surprise to find the bar or café as a frequent setting, always successfully integrated with the theme and the characters, who reveal themselves through their reactions to such a setting⁹. The café is the meeting place of lonely hearts who know each other precisely because they share it as a refuge from their loneliness; it is the haven that offers protection against the inclemency of the weather—in the case of the South, more often against the heat than the cold or the rain—and against a tormented spirit. The café is often the place where, due to the effect of good liquor, and for a short time only, it is possible to reach what belongs to the realm of dream. The narrator of «The Age of Anxiety» calls attention to a phenomenon that frequently occurs «in a state of semi-intoxication», and which he describes as «the way in which our faith in the existence of other selves, normally rather wobbly, is greatly strengthened and receives, perhaps precisely because, for once, doubt is so completely overcome, the most startling justifications. For it can happen», he adds, «if circumstances are otherwise propitious, that members of a group in this condition establish a rapport in which communication of thoughts and feelings is so accurate and instantaneous, that they appear to function as a single organism» (296).

The New York café plays an important role in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Biff Brannon's café is both a meeting place for the characters, who often reveal themselves to the reader and interact with each other while eating or drinking there, and a symbol of the union and communication craved by the lonely hearts who people the novel. A beer or a whisky at the café, together with the rickety fair ironically called the Sunny Dixie Show, seem to provide the only diversion available to the anonymous small town in which life is rough and monotonous for the majority.

In the very first chapter, John Singer, unable to cope with the heavy burden of his loneliness, decides to become a regular patron of the café for all his meals. Sitting at a table in the centre of the establishment, Singer becomes the focus of attention for other characters, mainly Mick Kelly and Jake Blount, and also for Biff, who feels an intense curiosity toward the deaf-mute. In the second chapter,

⁸ Leonard Lutwack, *The Role of Place in Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1984), p. 31.

⁹ Leonard Lutwack notes how «setting in fiction is more intimately related to character than it ever can be in drama because it functions as the detailed and continuous environment in which character is formed and to which character reacts over a long period of time». He adds that the writer of fiction may not transform place like the poet—more concerned with the subjective flow set in motion by the place—, nor lose sight of its concreteness, «because place is too necessary in the rendering of action, which must have a specific locale to occur in, and of character, which cannot fully exist without an environment to which it owes its identity through consistent orientation... From its inception in the eighteenth century, the novel has been devoted to the history of character as it is formed by and reacts to a specific environment» (op. cit., p. 17).

Singer and all the satellite-like characters whom he so mysteriously attracts are present at the café. This is the only occasion that we see Doctor Copeland in a place from which he is excluded because of his colour; the black doctor goes there dragged by a drunk Blount, thinking that some sick person needs him.

A kind of parallel with the café can be seen in Copeland's house, as it is a place of reunions and parties. It is there that the family reunions promoted by Portia take place, reunions in which the reader comes to realize the black doctor's alienation from his kin, owing to his fanatical obsession with what he calls «the strong true purpose». Copeland gives an annual Christmas party for those of his race, who show a better understanding of fellowship and the feelings of the human heart than of the rigid dogmatism of their host, and who feel more comfortable with their irrational and superstitious faith than with Copeland's excessive rationality.

The New York café has a special fascination for Jake Blount. This prototype of the wandering rootless personality, who defines himself as «a stranger in a strange land»¹⁰, frequents the café in search of warmth and relief from his excruciating loneliness. The place provides him with the alcohol that mitigates his anxiety and gives him new energy, and with an often indifferent or hostile congregation of listeners to whom he preaches his muddled and contradictory marxist creed. In the café Blount manifests himself as a man full of striking contrasts, who sometimes talks «like a linthead and sometimes like a professor» (19).

Biff's establishment is also important for Mick Kelly and reveals her journey of initiation from dream and illusion to reality and frustration. Very significantly, Mick is seen for the first time on the threshold of the New York café, which seems to indicate her state of transition between childhood and the adult world represented by an establishment into which Mick ventures from time to time. This adolescent girl, who at the beginning comes into the café in the company of her little brother to buy candy or cigarettes and to nose about and observe Singer, has her final scene at the café. At the end of the novel the café is a temporary refuge for an exhausted Mick after she leaves her frustrating job at the dime store, which traps her in a conventional alienating world and keeps her away from the «inside room» of her dreams:

If she went home she would lie down on the bed and bawl. That was how tired she was. But if she went into the New York Café and ate some ice cream she might feel O. K. And smoke and be by herself a little while (305).

Mick is now more of an adult than a child, crosses her legs in a different way, and wears rings and bracelets, and consequently she no longer holds the strange fascination that Biff used to feel for her.

The New York Café is most intimately related with its proprietor. It allows Biff the opportunity to vent his obsession with observation and to ask himself questions about everybody and everything he sees. It is also the vehicle through

¹⁰ C. McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 24. All subsequent references are to this edition and page numbers are in parentheses in the text.

which Biff channels his compassion for all the lonely hearts and freaks, whom he even treats to free drinks and meals. The compassion of this man, detached from reality through his constant observation, counteracts to some extent his analytic coldness. Through observing the freaks and the lonely hearts, Biff gains a better knowledge of himself and at the same time relieves his own loneliness.

The café is also a place of vision and it is here that the novel concludes with a kind of epiphany for Biff, who has been the observer of the panorama of life throughout. It is a vision that combines opposite aspects of reality and provides the whole novel with a commendable ambiguity. The positive side predominates in the first half:

For in a swift radiance of illumination he [Biff] saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valour. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labour and of those who —one word— love (312).

But this is as short-lived as the ideal world represented by the Beethoven symphony that Mick tries over and over again to put together in her mind. It is the dream that man houses in his «inside room» but which must inevitably be confronted with the other side of reality:

His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin (312).

It seems that love, though elusive, does exist, but the destiny of man is to be always essentially alone, as the reflection of Biff's face in the counter glass appears to indicate. The future that promises to be black could be the eternally tragic and negative end of man, in the individual sphere, and the devastating world war that is being announced on the radio, in the collective sphere. Biff eventually is left oscillating between radiance and darkness, between the bitter irony of reality in the «outside room» and the faith and dreams of the «inside room», the two polarities between which McCullers' future novels are going to oscillate.

In the silent loneliness of the night Biff makes the final gesture in the novel when from his inner fortress he gathers the courage to live on and to confront reality, in spite of uncertainty; he raises the awning and awaits, with serene bravery, the sun of a new dawn, which will outline the contours of a new day in the horizon.

The actual action of the novel had begun in this café on a Saturday night and the fact that it concludes in the same place on another Saturday night emphasizes the idea of man's eternal and cyclical struggle to find and to know himself, to distinguish reality from illusion and to attain ideal love. The New York Café—the name carries echoes of a distant cosmopolitan world, an ideal world in ironic contrast with the reality of the small Southern town— continues open day and night, with its kind and compassionate owner always present. Its drinks con-

tinue to refresh dry throats in the same way as love irrigates the hearts dried up by loneliness; and its nourishing meals are as restorative for the fatigued bodies as fresh hope for the depressed spirits.

The prom party that Mick Kelly gives for her high school friends is like a substitute for the café, an attempt to find union and belongingness on the part of those excluded from Biff's establishment by their age. Another substitute for the café, where neither the black doctor nor the underage Mick are allowed, would be Singer's room, in which there is always beer and coffee and a deaf mute who is glad to be the silent recipient of the words of his admirers.

In McCullers' short novel *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, a café is endowed with a notable centrality in the meaning and the structure¹¹. The café in this literary ballad in prose is intimately related to the plot and its destiny follows a course parallel to the protagonist's love, of which it is expression and symbol. All the action is concentrated in this café, a central place where the destinies of the characters converge, a place which becomes the whole book in the mind of the reader.

When the manlike Amelia, who never gives away a drop of whisky, invites the newly arrived, weeping Lymon to a drink in her porch, it becomes clear that her heart has fallen a prisoner to love. On that same April night two large bottles are consumed there by those present, which constitutes the announcement of the birth of the café two days later. The conversion of what has so far been Amelia's impregnable fortress into a café is the most blatant symbol of the transformation that love effects in the personality of the lover. Amelia's country store, which used to be the best expression of her individualism and her ruthless ambition, is unexpectedly transformed into a snug café whose purpose is to serve the community.

Two days after Lymon's arrival, the party of men that go into Amelia's house to claim justice, suspecting that she has killed the hunch-back, find a proud and happy Lymon, already enjoying all the prerogatives of his new condition as Amelia's beloved. Due to Lymon's flair for establishing immediate contact with other individuals, to the fairly large, though unexpected gathering, and to the fact that it is Saturday evening, an atmosphere of freedom and gaiety —almost illicit for these people— is soon established. An unusually kind Amelia allows the illegal whisky that she sells to be drunk on her premises for the first time, and she even opens two boxes of crackers for everybody to take one, free. The night of Lymon's arrival they drank on the porch; now that Amelia is in love and much more open to the outside world they can drink inside her store. Those who have come to buy bottles of the precious liquor this Saturday evening share it here with their friends, in a sort of eucharistic ritual of love and fraternity. The beginning of the café has come as suddenly and unexpectedly as Amelia's infatuation with Lymon.

¹¹ *The Ballad of the Sad Café* was first published in the August, 1943 number of *Harper's Bazaar*. Although this magazine had never published so long a story, the editor decided to publish it complete in a single number «to maintain the cadence of the lyric form» (*Harper's Bazaar*, August 1943, p. 72). It was published in book form by Houghton Mifflin in 1951, in a volume that included other novels and tales by McCullers. All my references are to: Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

The whisky that Amelia distills, which constitutes the first bridge that joins her to Lymon, is so exceptional that the narrator shifts from the past of history to a timeless present, thus elevating the drink to mythic and symbolic levels:

It is known that if a message is written with lemon juice on a clean sheet of paper there will be no sign of it. But if the paper is held for a moment to the fire then the letters turn brown and the meaning becomes clear (15).

Amelia's whisky is like fire; it is a magic potion that brings to light those messages and feelings lying dormant in the depths of the human heart and soul. A cotton mill spinner who has drunk this whisky may achieve a unique moment of vision and be elevated to a reality much deeper than his unimaginative factory work; he can come across a marsh lily, hold it in his hand and feel «a sweetness keen as pain» (15). On contemplating «the cold, weird radiance of midnight January sky» (15), a weaver might have a frightful revelation of his smallness and insignificance. In the same way as the love it symbolizes, this whisky awakens intuition and emotions and opens the way to new truths; the realities it reveals are so deep and exceptional that they can only be glimpsed in elusive and fleeting moments. This is an ambivalent whisky; it reveals the sublime, but also the frightful; it is the source of both pain and bliss, the same as love, which relieves loneliness but at the same time makes the lover even more aware of how terrible it would be to be alone again. In this respect, we need only remember Mick Kelly and the indescribable spiritual pain she felt after listening to the Beethoven symphony, because such beauty, by way of contrast, made her smallness all the more intense.

Miss Amelia's uninhibiting whisky has a liberating effect on those who drink it and it may in this respect be compared to the love that is making Amelia more human and bringing to the surface aspects of her personality that so far have lain dormant. McCullers seems to suggest that love is like a magic potion that elevates the lover to a creative and poetic dimension, allowing him to see reality through new eyes and to respond with all his being to a new experience that, although it combines the beautiful with the painful, is always fruitful:

He [who has drunk the whisky] may suffer, or he may be spent with joy —but the experience has shown the truth; he has warmed his soul and seen the message hidden there (15).

It is through the café that the change that takes place in the most prominent person in the town has an immediate effect on the small community, of which the café becomes not only the physical —it is situated right in the middle of the town— but also the spiritual centre. In spite of being a phenomenon that germinates and develops inside the human heart, love has here, through the café, a beneficial and regenerating effect on the outside world. But we should not forget that the café would not have existed if it had not been for a community hungry for everything that this establishment provides and stands for:

For people in this town were then unused to gathering together for the sake of pleasure. They met to work in the mill. Or on Sunday there would be an all-

day camp meeting and though that is a pleasure the intention of the whole affair is to sharpen your view of Hell and put into you a keen fear of the Lord Almighty (29).

The café comes to be a new type of church in sharp contrast with the one represented by Reverend Willin, who is, significantly, the only one who does not frequent Amelia's establishment. The café is a church with a different spirit, where the whisky is the wine of the communion of man with his own inner being and with his fellowmen, a church that offers relief from anxiety and fear of death¹². It is the church of fraternity and gaiety, a place where hatchets are buried and people undergo a transformation similar to the one love has effected in Amelia:

Even the richest, greediest old rascal will behave himself, insulting no one in a proper café. And poor people look about them gratefully and pinch up the salt in a dainty and modest manner. For the atmosphere of a proper café implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behaviour (29).

These beings, who know nothing but hard work and poverty, find all of a sudden a fortress that protects them, though only temporarily, against loneliness and monotony. In this secure haven there is always light and warmth in contrast with the often cold and dark night outside. Thanks to the café, existence acquires a new dimension and it is possible to escape from «the cheapness of human life» (165), from a grinding reality in which everything is measured according to its monetary value. «At times the value [of human life] may seem to be little or nothing at all» (66), but in the café these humble patrons learn that one of the great things about human life lies precisely in the fact that «it is given to us free and taken without being paid for» (66), unlike the goods that are bought only with money. After love has opened Amelia's eyes to the realization that there is much more to life than just making money, the liquor her clients drink at the café allows them to see that every individual has some nobility to be proud of.

All these people was themselves to go to the café and, before going in, they scrape their feet, which suggests the purification previous to a ritual, as if they were getting rid of the soil of the earth to enter the house of the spirit¹³. They all know, as if by instinct, how to behave in the café, although they have never been in such a place before. It is something that, like Amelia's love and new being, has always been latent, as if waiting for the adequate conditions to flourish. With its new spirit of gaiety and communion, the café makes it possible for all the positive qualities that have sprung up in its owner to have a ripple effect on an increasing number of hearts in the surrounding community.

¹² At one point in the story the narrator gives to understand that Lymon's fear of death, which Amelia relieves with her love and conversation, might have played a crucial role in the spectacular growth of the café, which was «a thing that brought him [Lymon] company and pleasure and that helped him through the night» (32).

¹³ See Judith Garrett Carlson, «The Dual Vision: Paradoxes, Opposites and Doubles in the Novels of Carson McCullers», Diss. Case Western Reserve Univ. 1976, p. 148.

For six years, the café grows parallel to Amelia's love for Lymon and is like a huge heart that pumps purified blood and renewed life into a moribund community. But the vengeful return to town of Amelia's rejected husband is going to bring about the destruction of the love that joins Amelia and Lymon and, consequently, of the café that had been born with it. In a progressive but relentless way, Amelia's former husband, the representative of revenge and hate, uses his physical strength to take possession of the café that represents love and communication. Lymon, who used to strut proudly about the café created for his own benefit and over which he had always claimed sovereignty, is very soon in the habit of giving free drinks to his admired Macy, who sits at the best and biggest table in the very centre of the establishment.

The internal and external tensions produced by the irrationality and the instability inherent in human love reach a culminating point in the titanic fight between Amelia and Marvin Macy. Amelia fights moved by her love for Lymon and her hate for the man who once tried to take sexual possession of her and now wants to rob her of her beloved; Macy fights out of the hate into which his rejected love for Amelia has degenerated. The same community that six years ago was present at, and contributed to, the birth of the café, gathers again in the same place, this time to witness the final defeat of love, to which they contribute with their passive attitude. The fight takes place in the very centre of the café and the centre of communication and fellowship has come to be the centre of hate and violence.

Macy and Lymon complete Amelia's physical and spiritual defeat by destroying all her most precious possessions, which had made her so strong and influential. Both the piano that had contributed so much to the gay evenings at the café, and the still that had distilled a magic liquor capable of brightening up the spirit, succumb to the violence of these two representatives of evil. An immediate consequence of Amelia's spiritual defeat is the utter deterioration of the café, which ceases to give sustenance to the community and to receive reciprocation from it. The narrator voices the complaints of the community, in which the disappearance of its favourite haven has left hollow the void it had filled for six years:

Everything in the café had suddenly risen in price to be worth one dollar. And what sort of a café is that? (82).

In *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) the Blue Moon café plays an important structural and thematic role and is for the adolescent protagonist the testing ground and the setting of confrontation with the realities of an adult world towards which she has ambiguous feelings of attraction and revulsion¹⁴. As Leonard Lutwack says, «confrontation with places is an age-old means of revealing character, whether they are the allegorical places of romance, the geographical places of realism, or the places filtered through the consciousness of the twentieth-century hero in

¹⁴ Page references are to: C. McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

Ulysses»¹⁵. The painful experience that Frankie goes through at the Blue Moon, where she, paradoxically, goes in search of escape from an unbearable everyday reality, anticipates the frustration of all her dreams that takes place the following day.

Throughout the whole episode of the relationship between Frankie and the soldier she meets at the café there is intense dramatic irony, and the reader, all the time aware of Frankie's self-delusion about the true nature and intentions of the soldier, witnesses a prolonged confrontation of adolescent illusions with adult reality.

Frankie's entrance into the Blue Moon, a place completely unknown to her and forbidden to the innocence of childhood, reflects her desire to pass into the unexplored territory of adulthood. The fact that Frankie enters a different and unknown world is made sufficiently clear by the sustained contrast of the sombre and dark interior of the café with the glare outside. The place is hot, stuffy and suffocating for Frankie, both in the physical and the spiritual sense, and «the beery air reminded her of a room where a rat has died behind a wall» (85). The symbol of the rat reappears later in the novel when in the evening of the same day there are several references to a noisy rat trapped behind one of the kitchen walls, all of them in a context in which Frankie and Berenice are speculating about the confinement of man in the isolation of his self. The rat is heard for the first time when Frankie is fighting her inability to express her feelings about the impossibility of connexion between humans (p. 137). Soon afterwards the imprisoned rat serves as a physical reflection of the metaphysical condition of man as stated by Berenice:

'The point is that we all caught. And we try in one way or another to widen ourself free. For instance, me and Ludie. When I was with Ludie, I didn't feel so caught. But then Ludie died. We go around trying one thing or another, but we caught anyhow' (142).

In the ensuing silence after the three members of the kitchen have cried in unison over the painful human condition, the rat is quiet too, placated by the crying noise, as if it were also expressing the acceptance of its imprisonment (p. 145).

When Frankie goes again to the Blue Moon in the evening, a precise image taken from her environment —Frankie usually visits the fairs that from time to time bring a bit of escape to the monotonous Southern small town— conveys once more the contrast between the freedom of the outside and the oppression and limitation represented by the inside of the café:

The change from the street to the inside of the Blue Moon was like the change that comes on leaving the open fairway and entering a booth (157).

An extension of the same image comes a little later, to express the protagonist's impotence to refuse the invitation to go up to the soldier's room:

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 72.

It was like going into a fair booth, or fair ride, that once having entered you cannot leave until the exhibition or the ride is finished (159).

Fascinated by her brother's recent stay in Alaska with the army, and always jealous of the soldiers from the nearby camp who visit the town and who she thinks are going to go and see the world, the adolescent protagonist projects her romantic dreams on to the soldier she sees in the morning at the café, where «it seemed to F. Jasmine they exchanged the special look of friendly, free travellers who meet for a moment at some stop along the way» (72). The image that suggests a world of romantic travel is used again when they meet in the street later on the same day and the exchange of looks gives way to the exchange of words. Frankie again deludes herself, thinking that «the soldier was joining with her like a traveller who meets another traveller in a tourist town» (82). But it soon becomes evident that the soldier's look, idealized by Frankie to excess, is pursuing a kind of union very different from that imagined by Frankie, and that the imaginary romantic journey may prove to be one that leads to painful experience:

He was staring at her with a peculiar expression, not as one traveller gazes at another, but as a person who shares a secret shame (86).

The meeting of Frankie with the soldier in the street is significantly accompanied by the suffocating heat, which on this particular occasion seems to represent the prison of coarseness and sex that threatens to smother Frankie:

The noon air was thick and sticky as hot syrup, and then there was the stifling smell of dye-rooms from the cotton mill (83).

The fact that he represents a menace to the monkey of the monkey-man anticipates the role the soldier is going to play with respect to Frankie, whose weakness and insecurity are reflected in the frightened monkey, which has for her the fascination of the remote unknown places she associates with the monkey-man.

The soldier belongs to a world vastly different from that dreamed of by Frankie, who is perplexed by his insincerity and double talk. His merely physical and animal concept of love is diametrically opposed to the love Frankie associates with her brother's wedding, about which, ironically, she spoke that very morning for the first time in the Blue Moon. The soldier, who is, paradoxically, the only person who actually speaks to Frankie in a morning in which she repeatedly talks to strangers who never respond, does not show the least interest in the wedding, or in Jarvis or in Alaska and what it means to Frankie. He turns out to be from Arkansas, precisely the state with the least appeal to her, and he is not at all eager to connect with the world through participation in the war that is going on.

If the musical imagery that provided accompaniment to Frankie's triumphant march through the town in the morning reflected the harmony she felt with the world, in the evening it becomes the expression of danger and fear, of the lack of harmony with the soldier that Frankie intuitively perceives:

Like a nightmare pupil in a recital who has to play a duet to a piece she does not know, F. Jasmine did her best to catch the tune and follow (158).

The soldier's room at the Blue Moon, dirty and stuffy, inhabited by a tense silence, provides a parallel with Frankie's oppressive kitchen. The soldier's eyes, which in the morning seemed to transmit communication, now inspire terror in Frankie; the illusion of connection and belongingness is shattered; as soon as concrete and individual reality substitutes for the ideal and the abstract, the outcome is total frustration:

The soldier sat on the bed, and now she was seeing him altogether as a single person, not as a member of the loud free gangs who for a season roamed the streets of town and then went out into the world together. In the silent room he seemed to her unjoined and ugly (160).

The ensuing violent confrontation between Frankie and the soldier adduces proof of the impossibility of communication between two individuals who pursue it with preconceived ideas: the soldier's exclusive aim in sexual gratification, whereas Frankie is only after a confidant for her dreams about the wedding. Her violent rejection of the soldier expresses once again Frankie's unconscious escape from the sexual aspect that the wedding entails. Consequently, her house and kitchen are now, more than ever, a refuge against outside menaces. Very glad to find her father home, Frankie, who wants to continue to be a child, has six spoonfuls of condensed milk to counteract the bitterness of her experience with the soldier; then she goes to bed with the innocence represented by her six-year-old cousin John Henry.

The Blue Moon is, significantly, the place where Frankie is definitely trapped by reality, after her futile attempt to run away from home¹⁶. It is in this place for adults that Frankie, at the end of her odyssey, becomes fully aware of the essential loneliness of the individual. Everything is even worse than at the beginning, and the illusory connection with the world that she experienced in this same place only the day before has fallen to pieces, as the geographical image expresses:

Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross (183).

Frankie's exclusion from the world coincides with her realization of the impossibility of connection with other humans. It comes home to a deeply distressed Frankie that the café proprietor does not even look at her and is not in the least interested in her as an individual. When the policeman who captures her looks into Frankie's eyes, «he looked at her with eyes as china as a doll's, and in them there was only the reflection of her own lost face» (184). The eyes, means and symbol of communication and connection, are often in the fiction of Carson McCullers nothing but mere mirrors that reflect his own image back to the individual and reveal to him the impossibility of escaping from the confines of the

¹⁶ In her frustrated attempt to escape from home we see once more Frankie's inner contradictions. Her avowed desire to run away clashes with her continuous procrastination owing to various reasons. Frankie never leaves behind the familiar setting she claims to hate so intensely; she wants independence and freedom but is hindered by the fear of loneliness and individuality in a hostile universe.

self. It is at this juncture that Frankie makes an explicit identification of the town jail with her lonely and unsatisfactory situation:

It was her father who had sicked the Law on her, and she would not be carried to the jail. In a way she was sorry. It was better to be in a jail where you could bag the walls than in a jail you could not see (183-84).

After my analysis of Frankie's experience in the Blue Moon, to stress the remarkable difference between this café and those that play such important roles in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* would be to state the obvious. Unlike the Portuguese owner of the Blue Moon, cold, withdrawn and apparently concerned exclusively with money and business, Biff Brannon is involved in the action of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and the New York Café is for him a vehicle to increase his knowledge of man and to foster love and fellowship in the lonely hunters of the world. The café of the ballad is born with, and follows a course parallel to, the love of Amelia and Lymon, and its patrons go there to find a deeper and nobler dimension in their lives. On the contrary, the Blue Moon poses a serious threat to Frankie, and is the setting of her lonely confrontation with a world she finds unacceptable. If the cafés of Biff and Amelia represent the positive and festive side of life, the Blue Moon seems to be the embodiment of its darker and more negative aspects.

A café is also the setting—in this case the only one—of «A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud», one of McCullers' most celebrated and anthologized tales¹⁷. The all-night streetcar café is for «an undersized boy of about twelve» who sells papers a temporary refuge in the early, dark and rainy morning before he finished his round. As in the case of Frankie Addams, the café, which «after the raw, empty street... seemed friendly and bright» (147), becomes for the anonymous boy the place of confrontation with reality and of initiation into a bewildering world. But the experience of the newsboy is not as dangerous and traumatic as that of Frankie in the Blue Moon.

What the protagonist encounters in this café is an old tramp who forces him to be the confidant of a strange «science of love». According to this theory, before attempting the love of woman, a man must learn to love things on a lower plane: «A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud». 'For six years', the tramp says, 'I have gone around by myself and built up my science. And now I am a master. Son. I can love anything. No longer do I have to think about it even. I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet a traveller on the road. Everything, Son. And anybody. All stranger and all loved!' (156).

¹⁷ McCullers wrote this tale in February of 1942, when she took a break from her arduous work on *The Member of the Wedding*. First published in *Harper's Bazaar* in the November issue of 1942, «A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud» was included in *The O. Henry Memorial Prize Stories of 1943*. My page references are to: C. McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

Some critics have identified, in my opinion too readily, the old tramp's words with McCullers' conception of love, for which he would be a mouthpiece¹⁸. Most of these critics assume that the old man is the protagonist of the story and forget that the point of view is centered in the boy, with whom the story begins, and that he is the recipient of the experience and has the final word¹⁹. If we look closely at the development and at the different elements of the tale, it does not seem so obvious that McCullers has chosen to identify with a man —this theory of love appears in the mouth of a character, not of the narrator, as in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*— who is probably a drunkard who sips beer from a large mug in the early morning to quell his loneliness and whose obsession to communicate his weird «science» makes him a lonely Andersonian grotesque. The life he presumably leads would seem incompatible with the possibility that he has found the answer and the resulting psychological equilibrium. The tramp's persistence in sermonizing the newsboy, rather than listening to and establishing real communication with him as a concrete individual, and his departure without any further interest in the boy once he has concluded his sermon, seem to contradict his theory of love and the 'I love you' with which he had initially accosted the protagonist. And there are grounds to suspect that the tramp's theory is nothing but wishful thinking and a psychological therapy to get over his disastrous emotional experience with his wife.

The central point of attention in the tale seems to be in the experience of the boy, caught between the optimistic platonic theories of the old man and Leo's cynical and rude interruptions, as persistent as «the mild, grey endless rain» outside, and the indifference of the other clients. In his perplexity, the boy craves an answer from the adult world represented by the stingy bar owner. When he looks up at Leo, «his flat little face was desperate, his voice urgent and shrill» (157). The boy asks if the old tramp was drunk, a dope fiend or a lunatic, «but Leo would not answer him. Leo had run a night café for fourteen years, and he held himself to be a critic of craziness... But he did not want to satisfy the questions of the waiting child. He tightened his pale face and was silent» (157). Not so withdrawn and indifferent as the Portuguese owner of the Blue Moon, Leo observes the conversation between the boy and the tramp, not to understand and help, as Biff Brannon would do, but only to jeer and make offensive remarks.

¹⁸ See: Frank Baldanza, «Plato in Dixie», *Georgia Review*, 12 (Summer 1958), 151-67; Oliver Evans, *Carson McCullers* (London: Peter Owen, 1965), pp. 88-96; Simeon Mozart Smith, Jr., «Carson McCullers: A Critical Introduction», Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1964, pp. 161-63, and Sue B. Walker, «The Link in the Chain Called Love: A New Look at Carson McCullers' Novels», *The Mark Twain Journal*, 18 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 8-12.

Some criticism has considered this tale to be McCullers' «Ancient Mariner», owing to its structural and thematic resemblances to Coleridge's poem. Both the wedding guest and the newsboy are short of time and forced to listen by old men of eccentric appearance who have learned a lesson about the nature of love which they seem to be condemned to spread for the rest of their lives (See: Evans, op. cit., pp. 90-92 and Mary Dell Fletcher, «Carson McCullers' 'Ancient Mariner'», *The South Central Bulletin*, 35 [Winter 1975], 123-25).

¹⁹ See: J. R. Millichap, «A Critical Reevaluation of Carson McCullers' Fiction», Diss. Univ. of Notre Dame 1970, p. 135.

The newsboy has found in Leo's café a temporary refuge from the cold and the rain outside, and even a free coffee, but he has also had the baffling experience of a confusing, even indifferent, world, and we can assume that when he leaves the establishment he is not such an innocent child anymore.

