"if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed ..."

The Grotesque, Gender, and the Body in
Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*

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Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Introduction

Many Southern women writers describe how women rebel against rigidly defined roles of white Southern femininity. In Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, published in 1951, the main character Amelia not only rebels against these roles but does so in such a distinct manner that she appears *grotesque*. McCullers depicts grotesque bodies which "become premier sites for exploring the work of southern polity in which women are barred from public power but become central players in its symbolic scripts," as Patricia Yaeger puts it in "Beyond The Hummingbird"(295), arguing that McCullers and many other Southern women writers "who appropriate the grotesque are at work constructing a female tradition that refuses the genteel obsession with writing (or inhabiting) the beautiful body..." (312).

This paper will analyze how McCullers - in her "refusal of the genteel obsession" - appropriates the grotesque both to criticize and to open up possibilities of disrupting existing gender norms. Employing Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the bodily subject which is a sensual, social, historical, and individual body, I will argue that identity is constituted in a dialectical relationship of the bodily agent with others/society and that such a relationship is decisive in constituting Amelia's identity. In order to facilitate an analysis of her dialectical relationship with others, I will first briefly present Beauvoir's concepts and then give an account of the social and historical context in which Amelia is placed.

The female body and its "lived experiences"

In her study of women in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir draws attention to the female body-subject with its specifically *female* experiences. As literary scholar Toril Moi shows in her discussion of Beauvoir, the concrete body is "a fundamental kind of situation, in that it founds [one's] experience of [oneself] and the world. This is why the body can never be just brute matter to [one]. This is a situation that always enters [one's] lived experience" (63). *Lived experience* is a key term, since it designates "the whole of a person's subjectivity," a person's way of being in the world. Moi emphasizes that Beauvoir understands "lived experience" as an open-ended interaction between the body-subject and the world. "Lived experience" is not entirely determined by the numerous different situations one is placed in, but consists of the history of all of one's interactions (a "sediment over time") which then becomes part of the situation. One can make sense of the world through the body (which includes a person's sex) with its lived experience while at same time interacting in a dialectical relationship with the various situations in which the body is placed (68). It is a process of making and being made (72). The body can therefore

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1Beauvoir shares with Merleau-Ponty the notion of the "habitual body" and "lived experience" but criticizes his omission of a gender discussion.
never be just a pure biological body, nor can it be just meaning (69). Beauvoir shows clearly in *The Second Sex* that the body plays a significant role in how society sees a person and what kind of choices a person makes in reaction to society's picture of this person.

Although Beauvoir understands "lived experience" as an open-ended process, she underscores the importance of the difference between men's and women's "lived experience" in patriarchal society. She sees that having a female body creates a different situation for women and thus criticizes Merleau-Ponty who wants to call attention to the body as the background which cannot be reduced to a mere thing but enables its subject to come into being. As Moi points out, the body in Merleau-Ponty's concept is "at once what we are and the medium through which we are able to have a world" (195). Yet, since, in his view, the perceiving body is a background, Merleau-Ponty is not forced to define himself as a man whenever he is involved in a discussion or conversation: "A man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man" (Beauvoir, 15). Beauvoir, however, specifically defines herself as a woman since "on this truth must be based all further discussion" (Beauvoir, 15). She points out that a woman is imprisoned by "peculiarities" such as ovaries and a uterus that "circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature" (Beauvoir, 15). Although a man possesses certain "peculiarities" as well, in Merleau-Ponty he represents the general human being: "there is an absolute human type, the masculine" (Beauvoir, 15). Being a woman (in patriarchal society) entails that her perceiving female body is not merely background but often becomes part of the foreground, no matter whether it is relevant or irrelevant. A woman's bodily background is the body as it is perceived by the Other, whereas the body perceived as a general background, which enables its subject to come into being, does not involve the Other. Although Beauvoir insists on this different background it does not imply that the sexed body is essence. It merely underscores the fact that sexual difference is of "philosophical and social significance [but not] necessarily the most important fact about a human being" (Moi, 206). Contrary to Merleau-Ponty then, Beauvoir takes sexism into account, "indicat[ing] that for a woman living under patriarchy, the body is a far more inescapable fact than it is for a man" (Moi, 196).

Beauvoir's concept of the concrete female body will help me show how Amelia's "lived experience" influences and is influenced by the inhabitants of the little "dreary" town in the South, a place where "southern experience," as Louis D. Rubin Jr. puts it, "was still very much the affair of the complex patterns of community life, with the comings and goings of individuals taking place within a clearly recognized set of expectations and assumptions" (118). Although all men and women were expected to conform to the "set of agreed-upon manners and formalities," women were put under enormous pressure to comply with this set of norms strongly marked by the myth of the Southern Lady.

**The Southern Lady - the genteel obsession**

In his essay "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History," the historian George B. Tindall points out, that there is "always the danger of illusion, a danger that in ordering one's vision of reality, the myth may predetermine the categories of perception, rendering one blind to things that do not fit into the mental image" (2). The myth of the Southern lady is such a myth that renders "one blind to things." This myth has profoundly shaped the behavior of women in the South from the ante-bellum period until the early twentieth century and actually to a somewhat lesser extent even today. In particular, concepts of white Southern womanhood, as that of the Southern Lady, were formative for the lives of Southern women. Feminist historian Barbara Welter maintains that a woman was judged by herself and by her husband by how well she embodied the qualities of the Southern lady. Displaying the "four cardinal virtues" of "True

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2Moi points out that the translation of the verb "s'enlèvera" into "must" by H. M. Parshley is problematic. It gives the impression that Beauvoir argues that being a woman should always be taken into account. Moi does a more nuanced translation: being a woman "will be kept in mind whether the woman likes it or not, and whether it is relevant or irrelevant to whatever she is asserting" (Moi, 194).
Womanhood," piety, purity, submissiveness, domesticity, "she was promised happiness and power" (quoted in Carby, 23).

This myth "works" as part of a Southern ideology in which the belief in superiority in race and class is justified and perpetuated. One particularly successful strategy, which, as Anne Goodwyn Jones argues, is a typical one, is the distinction between what is natural from what is unnatural (1996, 45). The myth of the Southern lady prescribes "normal" and "natural" behavior for Southern women, a prescription impossible to comply with. It constructed gender norms for women, "essentially different from men," justifying women's inferiority (Jones, 46).

The Southern lady was an "ideal woman" who, on the one hand, possessed "tact, discernment, sympathy, and compassion," and who, on the other hand, illustrated her - innocent - charm by her lack of knowledge (Scott 1970, xi). Jones also points out that the image of the Southern lady "seemed the flower of a uniquely southern civilization, the embodiment of all prized most deeply - a generosity of spirit, a love for beauty" (1981, 3). The Southern lady was idealized emphatically in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. As W. J. Cash writes in The Mind of the South, the praise for the Southern woman "was downright gynelatry" (86). Although the connotations of wealth of family background attached to the position of the lady in the ante-bellum period almost disappeared in the 20th century, the power of the constructed values and norms of "ladyhood" still remained (Hall, 151).

However, to truly embody the Southern lady, "the finest production of masculine art" (Jones, 1996, 49), was impossible, since she was not a human being but a "marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still" (1981, 4). Jacqueline Dowd Hall also suggests that the effort to actually be a lady proved futile, because becoming a lady is a never-ending struggle, never a state of being. "One can only act 'like' a lady, but one never is a lady"(151, my emphasis). Nevertheless, the pressure to conform to that myth has been immense for Southern women of the white middle and upper classes (Jones, 1981, 9). In order to qualify as the perfection of excellence - as the Southern lady - a woman not only had to be delicate and docile but also to suppress all overt sexuality. Hazel V. Carby argues that "[f]emininity was limited to a display of heightened sensibilities and refinements and a titillating charm" (26). Sexuality could only be used to tempt and had to appear chaste and modest.

Not only did the Southern lady, the "ice goddess," as the absolutely inaccessible sexual property, guarantee white male supremacy (Hall, 155, 156), the myth helped also maintain class boundaries in the South. Wealthy plantation owners used their women as proof of their status (Clinton, 88). Women's often praised delicacy and refinement were visible signs that they were not required to do any physical work. The Southern lady was thus an ornament indicating the plantation owner's wealth and class. But female slaves and poor white women were forced to work in cotton fields and factories and physical strength was necessary for these women to survive. Their physical strength made visible their lower (lowest) class status.3

The real life even of plantation mistresses was, however, very different from that of the glorified lady on the pedestal. But, as Scott points out, although the contradictions in the image of the Southern lady were profound, it "was part of the comforting glorification of the past with which the South tended to evade present problems" (1989, 83). Being docile, subordinate, and

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3The myth of the Southern lady helped to maintain superiority in race and class. In particular in times of social and economic difficulties, the myth was thought to sustain social and racial boundaries. One indicator of the fact that white men reacted to a threat to their racial, social, and economic superiority was the number of lynching incidents, which increased after the Civil War. Sexual relationships between white women and black men, "tolerated" before the abolition of slavery, prompted mob attacks on both the white women and the black men. It was a response to "white women's challenge to the prescribed roles of race and gender" ("Miss Otis Regrets': Late 19th-Century Mob Violence Against Southern White Women,' 4). In the late 19th century the "one-drop rule" was established to reinforce stricter racial definitions. Along with the reinforcement of social and racial boundaries, the myths of the genteel plantation owner, the happy and loyal Negro, and the Southern lady in charge of domestic affairs but publically voiceless were revived in numerous novels.
above all pure, the Southern lady guaranteed white supremacy. As Louise Westling observes, "[t]he Southern lady had to represent a racial purity which was required by her men for the maintenance of their caste but which many of them regularly transgressed in their own sexual behavior" (9). Moreover, since the South was traditionally regarded as female, the Southern lady represented the land, a further addition to the weight of the myth (Westling, 9). Yet, although Southern men loved their land, they greedily abused it with destructive methods of farming. The same attitude can be discerned in their relation to their women. Though the Southern lady was adored and put on a pedestal, she needed to be subdued. Southern men revealed a fear of strong-minded women, and wanted them "kept in cages, peripheral, submissive, inert. Any movement towards independence was grimly opposed" (Westling, 20).

Carson McCullers was not only aware of the persisting image of the Southern lady but also actually fought against the narrow and constraining ideal of womanhood that was still vehemently defended in the 1930s (Westling, 26). In almost all her novels she depicts both the constraints of the myth of the Southern lady and how her female protagonists struggle with it. In The Ballad of the Sad Café Southern patriarchal norms have become part of Amelia's "lived experience." Sedimented over time they influence her interactions with the inhabitants of the town. In the following sections I will illustrate how Amelia perceives the set of "expectations and assumptions" in the South and how she reacts in a dialectical relationship with others and initially refuses to comply with these norms.

"... muscles like a man"

Miss Amelia in The Ballad of the Sad Café (BSC), does not in the least remind the reader of the Southern lady. Instead she seems to personify the strong-minded woman whom Southern men fear and oppose. She is rich, owns the only café in town, "operate[s] a still three miles back in the swamp, and run[s] out the best liquor in the country" (BSC, 8). Rather than possessing the traits required of a Southern lady such as "tact, discernment, sympathy, and compassion," the narrator notes that Amelia cares "nothing for the love of men and [is] a solitary person" (BSC, 9). She spends "her life alone" since she is not "at ease" with people. "The only use that Miss Amelia [has] for other people [is] to make money out of them. And in this she [succeeds]" (BSC, 9). Not only does her behavior deviate from the "set of expectations and assumptions" but her physical appearance is depicted as grotesquely masculine: "She [is] a dark, tall woman [one inch taller than Marvin with whom she was married for ten days - a "queer marriage," the narrator remarks], with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair [is] short and brushed back from the forehead, and there [is] about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality" (BSC, 8). Most of the time Miss Amelia is "dressed in overalls and gum-boots" (BSC, 9). Besides whiskey, she sells chitterlings and sausages and is skilled in masonry and carpentry (BSC, 9). The first few pages of the novel elucidate that Amelia’s success is, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar would have it, "associated with a culturally problematic eccentricity" (148). All her traits indicate clearly that Miss Amelia is a very independent woman who desires to "rule rather than to be ruled" (148). This "huge mannish Amazon," as Louise Westling calls Miss Amelia, represents "the tomboy grown up, without any concessions to social demands for social conformity" (119).

Miss Amelia's deviance in physique and behavior is a constituent which plays an important role in the constitution of her identity. It has become part, as Beauvoir would argue, of her "lived experience." Sedimented, it constitutes her as a body-subject, "makes her," influencing how others interact with her. As we will see in the reaction of the inhabitants, they do not tolerate Amelia's deviance and their reaction will contribute to a new formation of her "lived experience."

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4Black women, on the other hand, were used to breed more slave material. "[B]lack women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers" (Carby, 25).

5In The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and The Member of the Wedding McCullers depicts two adolescent girls as tomboys.
Another constituent of her sediments is her very early awareness that the town is dominated by "male power." Raised by her father, "a solitary man" (BSC, 20), since the early death of her mother, she has hardly any contact with other female relatives. Most of her family have died and the only living relative is "one double first cousin who [lives] in a town twenty miles away" with whom Amelia does not get along: "when they [chance] to pass each other they spit on the side of the road" (BSC, 12). Furthermore, in the novel women are mentioned very briefly. Only women who are "linked with a male," as Anne Carlton observes, possess a name and are depicted less "shadowy" like, for instance, Mrs Hale who raised Marvin Macy and his brother Henry. In her essay "Carson McCullers's The Ballad of the Sad Café: A Song Half Sung, Misogyny, and Ganging Up," Suzanne Morrow Paulson finds the women in the town silenced. Even when singing songs they have hardly any voice in this community. One night a female voice can be heard but her song is lonely and fragmentary: "Somewhere in the darkness a woman sang in a high wild voice and the tune had no start and no finish and was made up of only three notes which went on and on and on" (BSC, 50-51). "The Twelve Mortal Men" of the chain-gang, on the other hand, sing together, one voice starting a phrase and the others joining him after a moment (BSC, 84). Marvin Macy's tunes are not lonely nor are they unfinished, but glide "slowly from his throat like eels. His strong fingers picked strings with dainty skill, and everything he [sings] both lure[s] and exasperate[s]" (BSC, 74).

Seeing who has a voice in this novel it becomes clear that Amelia lives in a society where women are silenced and alienated, where Southern men want them "kept in cages, peripheral, submissive, inert" (Westling, 20). Amelia is aware of the practices of silencing and alienating women. Silencing and alienation have become part of her "lived experience" as "sediments over time" and constitute the history of all her interactions which strongly influences the situation she is placed in. As Carlton points out, "[t]he only power she knows is male power; the only language she possesses is the language of the dominant culture" (60). Carlton suggests that Amelia's lack of knowledge of anything other than the dominant culture is the reason why "processes associated with the female body embarrass and confuse her" (61). In fact, embarrassment and confusion are clearly discernable in Amelia's behavior. Normally, she is the town's successful and popular "doctor," but when she is confronted with a patient with "a female complaint she [can] do nothing. Indeed at the mere mention of the words her face slowly [darkens] with shame, and she [stands] there craning her neck against the collar of her shirt or rubbing her swamp boots together for all the world like a dumb-tongued child" (BSC, 23, emphasis mine). Whereas Carlton seems to think that Amelia, subsumed into the dominant culture, cannot deal with "female diseases" because she is unfamiliar with them, I would like to argue that Amelia's "lived experience" of male power influences her to such an extent that she refuses to treat these diseases because she does not want to associate herself with feminine weakness. As Morrow Paulson points out, "[h]er refusal to heal female ailments is her denial of her own gender, her own vulnerability to natural cycles" (198). Amelia denies everything that is linked with the female body and the physical world since she "cannot control the cycles of nature suffered by women" (198). Intuitively she connects the cycles of nature with female cycles and thus rejects both. When looking out of her window, she discovers snow for the first time, she stands "there for some time, then commenc[es] to draw the shutters and lock every window on the premises. She clos[es] the place completely, light[s] the lamps, and [sits] solemnly over her bowl of grits" (BSC, 69). Amelia denies the physical world, refuses to deal with it. Closing her place completely, she shuts out nature from her life. Her reaction is strongly influenced by her "lived experience" of patriarchal Southern society which regards women as weak and inferior and which Amelia cannot accept.

By denying her gender and the physical world Amelia reveals, like Mick in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, how strongly the sediments of her "lived experience" influence her behavior. As sediments they form her "habits" to such a degree that she not only refuses to acknowledge her female body but is actually frightened by it.6 Influenced by her motherless childhood and her

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6Merleau-Ponty discusses this phenomenon as the habitual body. The habitual body usually helps the subject to interact with the world in a smooth manner but in some cases certain experiences refuse to enter the past and,
"lived experience" of continuous silencing and alienating of women, she ignores everything that is associated with "feminine weakness," because she abhors and fears it. Her denial of her gender lets her appear grotesque and causes a behavior that visualizes her fear of female weakness and the body. This fear can be noticed when she takes out "two small, greyish stones" she usually keeps in a little velvet box, her kidney stones which had to be removed under surgery. As the narrator remarks: "It had been a terrible experience, from the first minute to the last" (BSC, 44). Indeed, it must have been a "terrible experience" because Amelia, suffering from immense pains, was unable "to control all mental and bodily processes," had to submit to the pains of her body and was forced to acknowledge this "physical world." Since her kidney stones symbolize "the excremental [of her] self," as Morrow Paulson argues, and since she associates them with "female weakness and the body" (196), she views them "with a mixture of fascination, dubious respect, and fear" (BSC, 44, my emphasis).

In another incident her fear of female weakness surfaces again and this too is a decisive part of her "lived experience." But here she is not forced to yield to the femininity she fears so much. After a courtship of two years, surprising in the eyes of the town, during which Marvin Macy changed from being a "fearless and cruel" man to a loving, well-mannered, and meek suitor, Amelia finally agrees to marry him for reasons no one understands (BSC, 37). For the occasion of the marriage ceremony she alters her appearance. Leaving behind her overalls and gum-boots, she puts on her mother's satin wedding dress. Unfamiliar with the apparel, symbolizing femininity and "at least twelve inches too short," "she [strides] with great steps down the aisle of the church" (BSC, 37). Many inhabitants of the town hope that the marriage will transform her into a "real" woman, pure, pious, and above all, submissive: "they [count] 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" (BSC, 38, my emphasis). Amelia, however, "a female non-conformist who does not accept her place as an inferior," as Morrow Paulson notes (190), is disturbed by the ceremony and expresses with gestures an uneasiness which lets her behavior appear as if it were a satirical performance of a bride. She keeps making an odd gesture [during the ceremony] - she [rubs] the palm of her right hand down the side of her satin wedding gown. She reach[es] for the pocket of her overalls, and being unable to find it her face [becomes] impatient, bored and exasperated. At last when the [marriage] lines [are] spoken and the marriage prayer [is] done Miss Amelia hurr[ies] out of the church, not taking the arm of her husband, but walking at least two paces ahead of him. (37-38)

Amelia obviously cannot understand "social necessities" and simply rejects them by ignoring her husband and running ahead of him, positioning herself as superior. Yet, even when acting like a woman and imitating the appearance of a bride, her performance becomes a subversive act, or to use Judith Butler's words, a "gender parody" which reveals that gender can never be true or false but is only produced as the true effects of a primary and stable identity (1990, 337). Amelia’s effort illustrates both the impossibility of trying to look like a woman and the constraints of womanhood. Since she does not accept her place as an inferior because of her "lived experience," the briefness of her marriage is not very surprising. It lasts 10 days.

As "sediments over time" of her "lived experience," Amelia's motherless childhood, her deviance of her physical appearance, her awareness of male power and of the silencing and alienating of women in this Southern town constitute her identity. Her reaction to the "dominant culture" and her fear of inferiority are in fact so strong that she has become superior to most, if not all, men in this town, as many of her skills and physical traits illustrate. She is a very successful business woman, produces the best whiskey in town, is creative in developing new cures, does not "chatter" but enjoys thoughtful conversations (BSC, 45). Her physical strength is awesome and every man who dares to challenge her will face his defeat. The inhabitants of the town remember a great fight where she beat a lawyer who had tried to cheat her, leaving him in fact, inhibit a smooth interaction.
"three-quarters dead" (BSC, 73).

Yet, as Carlton observes, "Amelia is part of the muted culture and expected by the onlookers to act like a woman" (60). Despite her persistent ignorance and rejection of female weakness and the body, she is still a woman living in the patriarchal South. Constrained by the set of norms of womanhood, for a woman "the body is a far more inescapable fact than it is for a man" (Moi, 196). Since Amelia possesses "certain peculiarities" and does not represent the "absolute human type," as Beauvoir puts it, her female body is not only a general background that enables her to come into being. Rather, her female body becomes part of the foreground, part of the situation and influences how the inhabitants regard her and how she reacts to their view of her.

The inhabitants view Amelia as "the female would-be usurper of white masculine power" (Morrow Paulson, 198, my emphasis). In the following section I will show that Amelia cannot sustain her independence because of her foregrounded "background."

One of many "dim faces, known in dreams - sexless and white"

When Cousin Lymon, a childlike humpback whose age is not easily determined and who suffers from consumption, comes to live with Amelia, her behavior changes remarkably. The woman who usually enjoys "lawsuits and the courts" and involves "herself in long and bitter litigation over just a trifle" (BSC, 9), now does not object to Cousin Lymon addressing her "by her bare name, without title of respect" (BSC, 28). Not even "her bridegroom and husband of ten days" is allowed to do so. In her relationship with Lyman, Amelia softens in behavior and shows more explicitly nursing and caring traits. Although she still exhibits "masculine" behavior - she eats "with both elbows on the table, bent over the plate, her knees spread apart and her feet braced on the rungs of the chair" (BSC, 17), wears her overalls most of the time, and still is very independent - her face expresses "pain, perplexity, and uncertain joy. Her lips [are] not so firmly set as usual, and she swallow[s] often" (BSC, 30). Her "lived experience" of love causes a change in her interaction with other people. She "herself turns generous," as Morrow Paulson remarks, "because of her love for Lymon. She is revitalized" (197). Actually, Amelia's and Lymon's relationship revitalizes the entire community. The café becomes a place of "company and genial warmth" (BSC, 28). Yet, after six years during which Amelia transgressed "conventional sexual boundaries," disastrous "male retribution" is certain (Westling, 159). In the patriarchal South it is impossible for a woman "to function successfully as a man" (159). "[T]he autonomous woman is a freak who must necessarily be sentenced to the defeat that is femininity" (Gilbert and Gubar, 148).

Amelia's defeat, forcing her to accept femininity, is soon accomplished. As the inhabitants of the town view her behavior as transgression and are not willing to tolerate her usurpation of white masculine power, she is forced to react to that image of her. The shift occurs when her former husband Marvin Macy returns from prison. Embodying masculine power, he is a "he-man," as Gubar and Gilbert put it (149). He cannot accept Amelia's rejection and on his return he takes possession of her café and grounds, and destroys her.

Marvin, however, cannot accomplish this defeat alone. Only by "ganging up," with the aid of male community, does it become possible to master Amelia. Lymon, "a lie-man, a no-man" (150), is attracted to male power and at first sight recognizes in Marvin true masculine power and is thus "miserable with longing" for Marvin (BSC, 63). They "gang up" against Amelia and

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7 Morrow Paulson, however, points out that Amelia has possessed these traits from the very beginning of the novel, something that can be seen in her ability to develop cures for the treatment of the inhabitants' diseases and in how she treats sick people. What makes it so difficult to notice these "caring" traits is the description of her. "The narrator is," as Morrow Paulson notes, "an ambiguous figure - conforming to patriarchal views at times and at other times demonstrating feminine compassion" (193).
"dethrone" her (Morrow Paulson, 198). Usually a single man would not pose a threat to Amelia because of a strength "not natural for a woman" (BSC, 20), but as she fears to lose Lymon, in a desperate attempt to please him, keep him, she alters her appearance: "For some reason, after the day of Marvin Macy's arrival, she [puts] aside her overalls and [wears] always the red dress she [has] before this time reserved for Sundays, funerals, and sessions of the court" (BSC, 64, my emphasis). And instead of throwing Marvin out of her café, "mak[ing] the issues clear for once and for all," she watches how "Cousin Lymon follow[s] Marvin about the town" (BSC, 64). Furthermore, the entire café is now colored in red: "The great iron stove at the back of the room roar[s], crackle[s], and turn[s] red. Miss Amelia ha[s] made red curtains for the windows, and from a salesman who pass[es] through the town she buy[s] a great bunch of paper roses that [look] very real" (BSC, 65). The color red is here clearly, as Morrow Paulson argues, "a symbol of feminine weakness and sexual waywardness" (194). By wearing a red dress and decorating her café in red, Amelia demonstrates how much her "lived experience" of a loving relationship influences her change of behavior towards Lymon. Her love for Lymon makes her relinquish her desire to rule and when trying to please him she accepts a place as an inferior. Thus, the feeling of uneasiness she expressed when wearing the wedding gown does not surface again. She makes no more "odd gestures" nor does she "stride in great steps." Yet, although she complies with "stereotypes of feminine weakness" for the sake of Lymon (194), she, at times, falls back into demonstrating her grotesque masculinity even when wearing the red dress: "When [Marvin insults Lymon] Miss Amelia w[ill] come out from behind the counter and approach Marvin Macy very slowly, her fists clenched, her peculiar red dress hanging awkwardly around her bony knees" (BSC, 68). The narrator describes another example of "unfeminine behavior" when Amelia lifts her skirt to warm herself at the stove:

She [does] not warm her backside modestly, lifting her skirt only an inch or so, as do most women when in public. There [is] not a grain of modesty about Miss Amelia, and she frequently seem[s] to forget altogether there [are] men in the room. Now as she [stands] warming herself, her red dress [is] pulled up quite high in the back so that a piece of her strong, hairy thigh [can] be seen by anyone who care[s] to look at it. (BSC, 71)

Switching back and forth from conforming to feminine weakness to male power shows not only "Amelia's return to a manly stance," as Morrow Paulson suggests but visualizes how two important constituents of her "lived experience" influence her behavior in contradictory ways. Her "lived experience" is constituted by the sediments of love and her desire to sustain her power. Since Marvin's return Amelia is forced to cope with two situations at the same time; showing her love for Lymon and her superiority over Marvin. This, however, creates an uncertainty in Amelia's behavior illustrating how these two sediments actually struggle against each other. Her love to Lymon has become a very crucial part of her life and since she does not consider "male power" important in her relationship, she does everything to keep Lyman. "Male power" is, however, a crucial element in her relationship to Marvin. Marvin and Lymon are two different "situations" which cause a clash of two sediments. Most significantly, the clash makes visible that Amelia's body with its sediments has become "a situation" itself as she faces the threat of losing Lymon and her power. Moreover, the struggle of her "contradictory" sediments illustrates something else; although Amelia does not consciously choose to behave in a certain manner, her strange conduct appears like a "performance" which parodies her efforts of the true, submissive woman and makes it a subversive act. Her "strategy" of pleasing Lymon and opposing Marvin, however, fails. Lymon is not attracted by female weakness but by male power.

Being initially merely marginally involved in the fight between Amelia and Marvin, Lymon is, nonetheless, decisive in helping Marvin eliminate the threat Amelia poses to male superiority. Marvin and Lymon demonstrate both that for a woman it is impossible to exercise male power

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8Morrow Paulson argues that Eve Sedgwick's analysis of homosocial bonds and love triangles provides further insight in Marvin's and Lyman's behavior. For a discussion see, 198-200.
and that if a woman does attempt to do so she will face "catastrophic male retribution" (Westling, 159). The fight, however, is not merely a wrestling match. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, the language depicting the battle is marked by a certain doubleness which likens it to a sexual act. During the fight "there is the sound of knocks, panting, and thumpings on the floor" (BSC, 79). As the fight reaches its critical moment, its climax, "Miss Amelia and Marvin [are] locked in a hold together. [...] For a while the fighters [grapple] muscle to muscle, their hipbones braced against each other. Backward and forward, from side to side, they [sway] in this way" (BSC, 80). Living in a society in which "sexuality is a projection of gender," as Lori Kenschaft puts it (231), the sexual battle ensures that Amelia will not reject her place as an inferior. Similar to Mick in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, it causes her defeat. At the end of this battle, precisely at the moment when she seems to win, when she has "him down, and straddled; her strong big hands [are] on his throat" (BSC, 80), Lymon lands on her back, "sailing through the air as though he had grown hawk wings," clutching "at her neck with his clawed little fingers." Through his intervention - as the agent "of Miss Amelia's symbolic defloration" (Gilbert and Gubar, 152) - Amelia is defeated.

Amelia's defeat can be elucidated with a Freudian understanding of sexuality which constitutes male and female identity. As sociologist Eva Lundgren reads Freud, "femininity" and "masculinity," understood as passiveness and activeness, are regarded as two dichotomous, stable, and unchangeable identities. Sexuality is identity, or, in other words, sexuality makes us feminine women and masculine men. Heterosexuality then, is regarded by Freud as biologically given, as a "natural" desire which determines the development and constitution of identity through heterosexual acts, pair relationships, and intercourse. Indeed, as the result of the battle and its consequences clearly demonstrate, Amelia's feminine identity is determined by this sexual "intercourse." After the fight she is passive and submissive: "Because of the humpback the fight [is] won by Marvin Macy, and at the end Miss Amelia [lies] sprawled on the floor, her arms flung outward and motionless" (BSC, 80, my emphasis). Later, when she drags herself alone into her house, she sobs "with the last of her grating, winded breath" and although she once "gather[s] her right fist together" and hits her desk with it, her hand then "open[s] feebly and [lies] palm upward and still" (BSC, 81).

Amelia's desire to rule rather than to be ruled and her denial of feminine weakness and the physical world have been crushed in this sexual battle. Her defeat becomes a highly formative constituent of her "lived experience." In fact, it contributes to a radical change in appearance and behavior. Whereas her knowledge of male power and the silencing of women in her town earlier lent force to her wish to be part of the dominant culture, she now lacks the energy and power; she embodies "feminine weakness." The formerly tall "Amazon" with "bones and muscles like a man" (BSC, 8) and a sunburned face shrinks to a more "appropriate" size, making visible her powerlessness. Shortly after Marvin's and Lymon's departure, leaving behind the vandalized café, "[h]er face lengthen[s] and the great muscles of her body [shrink] until she [is] thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy" (BSC, 83). Also her voice loses its power: "Her voice [has] lost its old vigour, there [is] none of the ring of vengeance it used to have when she mention[s] 'that loom-fixer I was married to', or some other enemy. Her voice [is] broken, soft, and sad as the wheezy whine of the church pump-organ" (BSC, 83). In addition, Amelia's abilities to cure the sick have diminished and thus her popularity has decreased drastically. Earlier she never "monkeyed with a patient's soul" but now she comes up with cures or recommendations which are "far-fetched and agonizing" (BSC, 82). The radical change of her affects the atmosphere of the café, the place of "fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behaviour" (BSC, 29). Amelia raises the price of everything she sells to one dollar and prioritizes business rather than "genial warmth."

Being "slightly cross-eyed"

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9McCullers's biographer Carr indicates that McCullers was aware of Freud’s theories. See, p. 39.
Most peculiar is, however, how her eyes are affected by her defeat. Her eyes make visible to the reader how the sediments of her "lived experience" form her. In the beginning of the novel Amelia is described as a woman who might have been "handsome if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed" (BSC, 8). Her slight esotropia is, just like her "unnatural" tallness, her physical strength, and her "unfeminine" skills, perceived as a troublesome, grotesque deviance by the inhabitants of the town. Yet, being slightly cross-eyed does not impair her vision. On the contrary, her vision is quite extraordinary: "Her face [has] the expression often seen in slightly cross-eyed persons who are thinking deeply, a look that appears to be both very wise and very crazy" (BSC, 16). Indeed, she is very wise since she is able to see her self and society. She sees that she lives in a society which silences and alienates women and this she refuses to accept. On the other hand, her refusal to be part of the muted culture cannot be tolerated: it is "crazy." After her defeat she loses her "vision" which can be discerned in the deterioration of her esotropia. Her eyes are defeated as well: "slowly day by day they [are] more crossed, and it [is] as though they [seek] each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition" (BSC, 83). And as her defeat becomes a sedimented part of her "lived experience," her face is one of many faces "known in dreams - sexless and white" (BSC, 7).

Amelia's eyes, however, do not only show the process of losing her "vision." The last description of her eyes reveals more. Much later after the battle we learn that the café does not exist, the town is "dreary," there is "not another soul [but Amelia] to be seen along the main street," and since there is "absolutely nothing to do, you might as well walk down to the Forks Falls Road and listen to the chain gang" (BSC, 8). The "soul" that can be seen for an hour is Amelia, confined to her house, completely boarded up, with a white face with "two grey eyes which are turned inward sharply" (BSC, 7). Her esotropia has deteriorated to such an extent that she loses more than her "vision:" her eyes are turned inward "sharply" (my emphasis) indicating that she is solely determined by Southern patriarchal norms. Her eyes are forced "inward," are locked inside. Amelia is kept in a "cage," like an ideal Southern lady, as Westling argues, "peripheral, submissive, inert" (20). Locked inside, her eyes can merely exchange "with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (BSC, 8, my emphasis). Not even her eyes can communicate with each other "openly." The secrecy of her gaze underscores only too clearly the complete loss of her desire to be part of the dominant culture. What is left in Amelia is grief.

Conclusion

The dreary little Southern town strongly marked by the norms of womanhood teaches Amelia the specificities of the dominant and of the muted culture. This knowledge becomes a sediment of her "lived experience" and causes her to deny everything that is associated with feminine weakness. She is the "tomboy grown up" and seemingly part of the dominant culture. Her relationship with Lymon, however, changes her radically. Since the sickly and childlike Lymon cannot force her to accept feminine inferiority, Amelia is "free" to express softness and caring traits which she earlier connected with feminine weakness. Because her love for Lymon, like her love for her father, does not involve a struggle for power, she does not need to prove her superiority. Amelia's "lived experience" is thus constituted by two sediments that are contradictory: her love and her desire to sustain her power. Upon Marvin's return she must cope with various "situations" at the same time. The threat of losing Lymon and her power to Marvin are two "situations" she has to face. But most significantly, her body, consisting of the two contradictory sediments that constitute her "lived experience," has also become a "situation." How her "body as a situation" deals with the "situations" of the threat is revealed in her shifting back and forth from conforming to feminine weakness to male power, from wearing a red dress to clenching her fists.

Her body and in particular her eyes make visible not only the clash of sediments but her transition from a "tomboy grown up" to a loving partner and finally to a defeated "sexless and white" woman. Since for Amelia living in the patriarchal South the body "is a far more inescapable fact than it is for man" (Moi, 196), she must indeed make "concessions to social
demands for social conformity" (Westling, 119). Her appearance and her behavior no longer deviate from "social demands." She is a woman who has lost all her power, her voice, and her "vision."

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