

## A CHILD-WOMAN SOUTHERN WRITER OR IMAGINATION TRUER THAN REALITY

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*Abstract : Fiction as a made-up story covers a lot of territory. Fact and fiction, old terms derived from Latin words are associated with `reality` and `truth` versus `unreality` and `falsehood`. Still, the intricate relation of fact and fiction with the `real` and the `true` is not exactly what appears on the surface. Truth is really stranger than fiction and the job of the writer under scrutiny is to fracture truth in a purposeful way taking refuge from life, her fiction being at once similar to her eccentric life, still so different from it.*

*Keywords: storyteller, fiction, reality, fantasy, isolation*

### WIZARDRY

**Angel disarmed, lay down your cunning, finally tell  
The currents, stops and altitudes between Heaven and Hell.  
Or were the scalding stars too loud for your celestial velleities,  
The everlasting zones of emptiness uncanny to your imperious  
hand?  
Did you admit the shocks and shuttles of the circumstance,  
And were the aeons ever sinister  
Or were they just vulgar as a marathon dance?  
Did you keep camping all through chaos  
Comparing colors of infinity to neon lights?**

.....  
(Carson McCullers – “The Dual Angel”)

The definition of fiction as a made-up story covers a lot of territory, from lies and casual jokes we hear and /or use in cunning, polite or impolite conversation to great visionary works of literature or the Bible itself, that is fiction, because it is a made-up story and this does not mean that it lacks truth. Nor does it mean that the Bible may not contain fact. The relation between fact and fiction is definitely not as simple as one might think, and definitely it is essential to the understanding of fiction.

Fact and fiction are old terms both derived from Latin words: “fact” from *facere* – to make or do, “fiction” from  *fingere* – to make or shape words, not necessarily loaded with overtones of approval or disapproval beneficiary of unequal fortunes in the world of words. “Fact” is associated with “reality” and “truth” as vital elements of verbal society, “fiction,” on the other hand, being known as “unreality” and “falsehood.” Still, the relation of “fact” and “fiction” with “the real” and “the true” is not exactly what appears on the surface. Fact still means “a thing done” while fiction has never lost its meaning of “a thing made.” But in what sense do things done or things made share truth or reality? A thing done has no real existence once it has been done. It may have aftermath, and there may be many records that point to its former existence (if we consider the Civil War, for example); but once it is done its existence is finished. A thing made, on the other hand, exists until it decays or is

destroyed. Once it is finished, its existence begins such as the Civil War story from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Fact has no real existence, while fiction may last for centuries and so does Southern literature in the U.S. In Robert Scholes's authoritative opinion:

We can see this rather strange relation between fact and fiction more clearly if we consider one place where the two come together: the place we call history. The word "history" itself hides a double meaning. It comes from a Greek word that originally meant inquiry or investigation. But it soon acquired the two meanings that interest us here: on the one hand, history can mean "things that have happened"; on the other, it can refer to "a recorded version of things that are supposed to have happened." That is, history can mean both the events of the past and the story of these events: fact-or fiction.<sup>1</sup>

The very word "story" prowls in the word "history," and is derived from it. What begins as investigation must end as story. Thus fact, in order to survive, must become fiction. Seen in this way, fiction is not the opposite of fact, but its complement. It gives a more lasting shape to the fading deeds of men.

Another aspect of fiction is implied by the fact that we *do* think of it also as something quite different from historical records or mere data. We consider it as a made-up, non-natural, unreal product of the human fancy. So fiction can be very factual, maintaining the closest possible correspondence between its story and things that have actually happened in the world, or it can be very imaginative, defying our sense of life's ordinary possibilities.

Taking these two extremes as the opposite ends of a whole spectrum of fictional possibilities, between pure history and pure imagination, we can distinguish several nuances, all radiating truth, which is entirely present in history books but partially present in fairy tales, or other works of fiction proving that "truth is stranger than fiction". The job of the writer of fiction is to fracture truth in a purposeful and pleasing way using certain shades.

The same critic rightly claims that though fiction itself has a real existence – a book has weight and occupies space – our experience of fiction is unreal. When we are reading a story we are not "doing" anything. We ceased the ordinary course of our existence, interrupted our connections with friends and family, in order to temporarily abandon ourselves into a private and unreal world. Our experience of fiction is more like daydreaming, exercising our imagination. Though fictional world is unreal, we seem to be part of it. We feel involved in the events we are reading about, without attempting to alter them. We *experience* the events of a story, they might affect us, so that emotionally and intellectually, we come out as different human beings, hopefully enriched by the literary experience, an intimate, rewarding one. Critical terminology is not an end in itself. Terminology is needed in order to analyze more accurately, and the analysis in its turn improves our reading abilities.

We should always keep in mind that all history recorded by men becomes fictional whereas all human fantasy implies some resemblance to life. So for any student of fiction the *combination* of historical and imaginative materials becomes crucial. This is so because our understanding of fiction depends on our grasping the way in which any particular work is related to life. This is what we tried in the case of Carson McCullers.

Life itself is neither tragic nor comic, neither sentimental nor ironic or is it both tragic and comic, both sentimental and ironic? With the Southern writer it is a sequence of sensations, actions, thoughts, and events conveyed through language.

Literature helps us in making sense of our own experience. We can both take "refuge" from life and equip ourselves for our predictable return to life. Though an "imitation" of life, it helps us understand life, and life helps us understand fiction. Fiction interests us because of the complicated ways in which it is at once similar to life, still so different from it. Our experience of fiction implies both pleasure and understanding. The intricate relation between pleasure and understanding renders them inseparable in the reading of fiction.

Thus on studying fiction we must focus on understanding, and hope that pleasure will follow because of the special connection between the two. Understanding a work of fiction begins with recognizing what kind of fiction it is. Between the extremes of history and fantasy we might locate two major points of reference. There are two principal ways by means of which fiction can be related to life: “realism” and “romance”. Realism is a matter of perception. The realist presents his impressions of the world of experience. A part of his/her vocabulary and other technical instruments (s)he shares with the social scientists such as psychologists and sociologists, giving the reader a sense of the way things are. The realist’s truth is general and typical but vivid and memorable.

Romance is a matter of vision. The romancer presents not so much his impressions of the world as his ideas about it. The shape and color of the world are altered, on purpose, by the filters of philosophy and fantasy.

Realism and romance are not absolutely different: they share some qualities. Realism itself is more romantic than history or journalism. And romance is more realistic than fantasy. In fact if we start from the idea that the greatest works of fiction are those that successfully blend the realist’s perception and the romancer’s vision, creating fictional worlds close to our sense of the actual, then we can consider Carson McCullers’s works as rich and complicated admixtures of romance and realism.

The concepts of fictional modes and patterns are worth insisting upon. Romance diverges from realism, along that line which leads from history to fantasy. There are two obvious ways in which reality can be distorted by fiction, it can be made to appear better or worse than we actually believe it to be. Certain aspects of reality may be seen more clearly at the expense of others by presenting a “true” picture of either the heroic or the debased side of human existence. A fictional work that presents a world better than the real world is in the mode of romance. A work that presents a fictional world worse than the real world is in the mode of anti-romance, or satire. Both these distorted views depend on our sense of the actual to achieve their effects.

According to Robert Scholes:

The world of romance emphasizes beauty and order. The world of satire emphasizes ugliness and disorder. The relations between individual characters and these distorted worlds constitute a crucial element of fiction, for these relations determine certain patterns or master plots that affect the shaping of the particular plot of every story. One of these master patterns deals with the kind of character who begins out of harmony with his world and is gradually educated or initiated into a harmonious situation in it. This pattern may operate in either the ordered world of romance or the chaotic world of satire, but the same pattern will have a quite different effect on us when we observe it working out in such different situations.<sup>1</sup>

An initiation into a world of beauty and order amounts to a comic rise and we react with approval and pleasure, while an initiation into a world of ugliness and disorder might amount to an ironic rise and our reaction is one of disapproval and disgust.

Another master pattern may operate in the character who begins in harmony with his world but is finally rejected or destroyed by it. The heroic figure might experience a tragic fall due to his flaws. Also doomed to fall is the virtuous or delicately creature. Ironically, his fall is a kind of rise.

The comic ascension and the tragic decline happen because in an orderly world human virtue is a value raised to a heroic power. The *satiric* rise and *pathetic* fall are ironic like in a Swiftian *monde à rebours* since the values themselves are inverted and subverted. Satire and pathos debase the world in order to criticize it, tragedy and comedy elevate it to make it

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Scholes, et al., eds., *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), p.126.

acceptable. The two romantic patterns promote resignation. The two satiric patterns promote opposition. With the fictional universe of the child-woman Southern writer we consider that everything is intricate, the distinctions between the various patterns fade, combine or interact; thus, rise and fall, success and failure – all these values or flaws become problematic, requiring from the reader of her fiction the flexibility of response by careful attention to the workings of traditional patterns in her modern fiction.

We resort again to the insightful approach of Robert Scholes who discerns among the musts in analyzing the plot of a work of fiction:

Fiction is movement. A story is a story because it tells about a process of change. A person's situation changes. Or the person is changed in some way. Or our understanding of the person changes. These are the essential movements of fiction. Learning to read stories involves learning to "see" these movements, to follow them, and to interpret them. In the classroom we often – perhaps too often – put our emphasis on interpretation. But you cannot interpret what you cannot see.<sup>2</sup>

So, the critic goes on giving us plain but intelligent advice on how to perceive and follow fictional plotting, i.e. things to be done while reading and things to be done after a first reading, since a good story may be enjoyed many times, and undoubtedly a second or third reading will be more satisfying in every respect than the first time through. This reminds us of Faulkner's advice to his students to read *The Sound and the Fury*, at least four times in order to fully understand it.

One of the greatest mistake is to insist on fictional characters' "reality" as characters in fiction are *like* real people, but also very *unlike* them. As a genuine realistic writer we think that Carson McCullers has tried to draw the reader away from her interest in the movement of fiction and to lead him/her toward an interest in character for its own sake and exactly like the realistic writers she admired being enthralled by the discoveries in psychology, she has offered us instruction in human nature. The motivation of characters, the workings of conscience and consciousness, became the focal point of most of her novels, novella and short stories.

In the best tradition of the realists she offered us a shock of recognition through which we share her mis/ perception of human behavior. She too yielded both to the impulse to individualize and to the impulse to typify. Thus some of her memorable characters are the result of a powerful combination of these two impulses.

Worth mentioning are the individualizing touches as part of the storyteller's art. They amuse us or engage our sympathy for the character as it happens with Cousin Lymon. At the same time we witness McCullers's typifying touches as part of the story's meaning e.g. the painful isolation of Miss Amelia, the eccentric of the small Southern town. We find with Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* representatives of a social class, a race, a profession; as well as psychological types, analyzable in terms of this or that "complex" or "syndrome" and of course we also come across characters that are mixtures of social and psychological qualities.

If we take Scholes's advice, for a rewarding literary analysis we must not only look carefully *at* the work itself but also look *awayfrom* the work toward the world of ideas and experiences. Then we discover themes or meanings in her work that help us in making connections between the work and the world outside it and obviously these connections *are* the meaning. We sensed this truth when we placed Carson McCullers on the map of American Southern literature proving the validity of the thematic materials we discovered hesitating over what we "read out" of the story or "read into" it. We hopefully considered as

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Scholes, et al., eds., *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), p.128.

fruitful any connections between story and world necessarily implied by the story itself.

Besides just narration, description, or dialogue, the title of a work might function as a clue to the story, pointing out the importance of a particular element in the work. Like the titles themselves, poetical and suggestive, with McCullers we detect passages in her writings that are themselves commentary *on* or interpretation *of* spiritual isolation, loneliness, eccentricity etc.

Often, interpretive passages are not presented directly by a narrator, with all his authority behind them. On the contrary they are uttered by a character, and this means that we must evaluate the reliability of the character before we decide to accept his/her interpretation as legitimate, like Miss Amelia's in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Sometimes the narrator will be characterized in such a way as to question even his/her reliability. The narration and description of a character or a scene may be done in such a way as to make the reader aware of the intricacy of a situation dealt with. Places and characters are presented to us with suggestive names (apronyms like Sucker) that carry the clues to a better understanding of the plot such as in McCullers's short stories e.g. "The Haunted Boy".

Whenever the author refrains from direct commentary, we must look for subtler clues. In the same inspired study Robert Scholes adds :

Patterns of repetition, ironic juxtaposition, the tone of the narration – devices like these must lead us to the connections between the particular world of the book and the generalized world of ideas. And the more delicate and subtle the story is, the more delicate our interpretation must be. Thus, taking care that our interpretation is rooted in the work itself is only one aspect of the problem.

The other aspect involves the outside knowledge that the interpreter brings to the work. If the story is realistic it will be understood best by those readers whose experience has equipped them with information about the aspect of reality toward which the story points.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently we feel the conflicts depicted by McCullers intensified by what the author called "the immense complexity of love" that appeared first as an idea in her short story "A Domestic Dilemma" are but the trigger for the latent love relationships repressed, unconsummated so never reaching maturity. Even if we do not quite understand from the very beginning what the narrator – an *alter ego* of McCullers herself suggests in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* i.e. "the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself", her entire fiction might help us clarify and order our life and love experiences – be them shared , unnoticed , rejected or unrequited.

As Scholes put it, we as readers are left with an understanding of the stories and with an enriched store of general notions that we developed in order to understand.

Fiction generates its meanings in innumerable ways, but always in terms of some movement from the particular characters and events of the story to general ideas or human situations suggested by them. The reader comes to an understanding of a fictional work by locating the relevant generalities outside the work and fitting them to the specific instances within the work.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to acquiring new notions, the reader may have refined his attitudes toward his old notions and toward experience itself.

Fiction is justified not as a means of conveying ideas but as a means of generating attitudes toward ideas. The meaning of fiction must finally be seen in terms of emotions

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Scholes, et al., eds., *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), p.131.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Scholes, et al., eds., *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), p.132.

directed toward impressions of experience or toward ideas about life.<sup>5</sup>

Emotions and impressions stirred in our case by the poignant confessions of vulnerable lovers whose knowledge or lack of knowledge of “the science of love” pushes them into expecting for their affection nothing in return, like in the touching story of the tramp in the short story “A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.”

The outcome of our experience of fiction is but the attitude toward the events presented, our understanding of those events and the shaping of ideas about life, all conveyed by the author through her technical management of point of view – a term that stands for the way a story is told. The subject of fictional viewpoint is twofold, one dealing with the nature of the storyteller in any given fiction, the other dealing with his/her language.

The nature of the storyteller involves the extent to which she is herself a character whose personality affects our understanding of her statements, and the extent to which her view of events is limited in time and space or in her ability to see into the minds of various characters. Carson McCullers’s fictional point of view is without any doubt an intricate, refined one. Sometimes the viewpoint in the stories is “partial” – in the sense of incomplete or in the sense of biased so that we as readers have to adjust and to compensate in appropriate ways to such dimensions of the language of narration as wit and intelligence. If we focus on *tone*, we should trace the way unstated attitudes are conveyed through language, if we focus on *metaphor*, then we follow the way language conveys different images and ideas. We will analyse characters who appear in a similar light several times; so that by their last appearance, we are prepared to regard them unsympathetically helped by the strength of typical McCullers sentences and we will be able to catch the tone. We resolve some of the conflicts by reading the sentences as *ironic*, meaning the opposite of what they seem to say, and acquiring thereby a sarcastic tone. The way a character’s behavior mechanically mimics another one’s adds a fresh satiric dimension to the little scene. We refer here to the hunchback Lymon from the novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

If we pay close attention to McCullers’s choice of words, trying to keep in mind the whole context of one or another of her stories we come to the truism “the more we read a particular author, the better we become at catching her tone”, at perceiving the emotional shades that color the sense of her words.

With the Southern writer under scrutiny love proves dangerous and destructive, submissive and self-annihilating. We take advantage again of Robert Scholes’s sensible and sensitive approach to understanding fiction and try to apply it to our study. In sum, we will trace the two most important dimensions of the art of language – tone and metaphor – operating in certain passages of McCullers’s short fiction.

When we look at a painting up close, we can see its details clearly and the texture of its brush strokes, but we cannot really see it as a whole. When we back away, we lose our perception of these minute qualities but gain, with this new perspective, a sense of its design. Similarly, as we read a story, we are involved in its details. And in a story we are involved especially because we experience it as a flow of words in time, bringing us impressions and ideas, moving us emotionally and stirring us intellectually. It is natural to back away from a painting and see it as a whole. But it is less natural and more difficult to get a similar perspective on a book. We can never “see” it all at once. Yet design is an important part of the writer’s art, and a sense of design is essential to a full reading experience.<sup>6</sup>

The critic insists upon design as having to do both with juxtaposition

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Scholes, et al., eds., *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), p.132.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Scholes, *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p 137.

(*what* is put next to *what* in the arrangement of the story) and with repetition (images, ideas, or situations that are repeated - often with interesting variations-in the course of the narrative). So we will apply these theoretical notions to the proper analysis of McCullers's short fiction distinguishing chronological arrangement of actions, actions rearranged in time so out of their chronological sequence (flashbacks) or some other device, the reasons behind a certain manipulation of chronology by the author, the grounds for having chosen to place a particular scene from the "past" next to a particular scene in the "present". Told as one long flashback the story of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* actually begins at the end.

We also find interesting parallels: similar situations that amount to a kind of repetition with variation, comparisons, and contrasts between the characters' behavior, all leading us to generalizations about the meaning of McCullers's work and last but not least we experience the complicated notion of structure, thus enabling us to see a meaningful pattern in the whole work close to design, i.e. repetition of images or metaphors.

Carson McCullers's stories are complicated fictions that call for both laughter and tears sharing an ironic dimension matching Scholes's definition of the greatest tales as well as modern fictions:

They exploit the difference between what humans hope for and what they get, or between what they say and what they do, producing either the pathetic irony of frustrated dreams or the ironic comedy of satire and ridicule.

More modern fictions have been frequently based upon the difference between what a character thinks to be true about the world and what is actually the case. Such an ironic gap between appearance and reality may lead to the realistic story of education. The ancient tales seldom if ever took this form. Most of them were in fact simple stories of hopes and wishes fulfilled, like many fairy tales.<sup>7</sup>

### **Summing up**

We daresay that unlike the simple stories of hopes and wishes fulfilled, Carson McCullers's stories are never simple, her characters' dreams, hopes and wishes never come true and quite often the atmosphere is rather nightmarish, with fairy-tale dwarfs turned into malignant wizards, and with witches and bitches instead of fairies. In fact we refer to her novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, a "strange fairy-tale" as the writer described it in her dedication to David Diamond, a composer the McCullerses became both enamored of.

If for Margaret B. McDowell the most important theme was that of *eros/agape*<sup>8</sup>, Louise Westling provided us with an insightful discussion of the hermaphroditic and androgynous aspects of Miss Amelia in an entire chapter entitled "Tomboys and Revolting Femininity"<sup>9</sup>.

In another study published as early as 1988 Margaret Walsh called the novella an "anti-fairy tale" depicting Cousin Lymon as a "faithfully -sketched fairy-tale dwarf" in all characteristics except his lack of a beard. Her arguments for the label "anti-fairy tale" were printed in *Pembroke Magazine* 20:

Unlike the redeeming love of fairy tales, love in McCullers's tale is the spell that weakens the will, the enchantment that can dwarf giants...to lay oneself bare to love is to be open to disloyalty, to be meek, powerless, and defenseless, to be at the mercy of love's unpredictability.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Scholes, et al., eds., *Elements of Literature*, fourth edition, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), p.140.

<sup>8</sup> Margaret B. McDowell, *Carson McCullers*, (Boston : Twayne, 1980), pp. 71-72.

<sup>9</sup> Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), pp.110-132.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Walsh, "Carson McCullers' Anti-Fairy Tale: The Ballad of the Sad Café", *Pembroke Magazine* 20 (1988), pp.43-48

Though trapped in a “marathon dance” we consider Carson McCullers another dual angel, a shuttling figure, one whose movement between Heaven and Hell, outside and inside, violence and poetry, the work of history and the underworking of fiction, may allow us to frame some notions about the place of her art audaciously transcending hardship and failure.

Like she confessed in “Who Has Seen the Wind”: “the empty page summoned and sorted memory”<sup>11</sup> condensing and transfiguring the past into words to pour in her works. She did feel entirely at home only in the South of her childhood memories which triggered her short stories and made her experience that sad distance between middle age and youth we could witness in the conception of her unfinished autobiography. When she was writing her books she was in a way split between two realities – her New York routine life and the remembered cadence of her Georgia childhood and youth, with a painful fear that the reality would not match her dreams, that the colors of infinity would turn neon lights, like she phrased in the poem we chose for the previous motto.

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<sup>11</sup> Carson McCullers, *The Mortgaged Heart,* (London: Penguin, 1975), p.186.