

### ***Introduction***

Carson McCullers: an American writer of the South who belonged to the Southern Renaissance (along with famous writers like Faulkner, Caldwell, O'Connor, Welty, just to name a few), as well as Southern Gothic Literature, the main features of which were mixing realism with disturbing and grotesque characters, dull and isolated settings, and social issues typical of the history of southern America: guilt, alienation, crime, racism, lack of communication, justice, community.

**RGE:** the story is set in an army camp in Southern America and the outcome is announced from the opening lines of the novel: "There is a fort in the South where a few years ago a murder was committed. The participants in this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse". So the reader is warned and is expecting it all along the novel. The ending passage = a climactic moment since:

- main ingredients: suspense, progression towards tragedy +symbolism
- the story/the plot ends, a circle is completed, the reader is left to his/her own impressions once the book is closed: will the end meet his/her expectations?

**Pb:** While carefully sowing the seeds of a pending tragedy all along the novel, thus preparing the reader to the excipit, how does the heterodiegetic narrator turn this moment of epiphany into a grotesque tragedy ?

The progression that operates at different levels to reach the ultimate stage of the novel is akin to the Southern Gothic. The dramatic goal is sustained by a constant balance between the knowledge and ignorance of the characters and the reader's discovery of the events that eventually are carefully projected through the narrator's kaleidoscopic lens.

## **I. Progression towards an ultimate stage: concerning space, action/time and the interplay of light and darkness.**

### **1. *The setting: shift of setting, from one place to another: outside vs inside***

- 2 distinct places: the Pendertons' garden and the house itself which contrast greatly:
  - "pine trees", "lawn": open space, vast and continuous, devoid of boundaries; natural elements suggesting strength, root/anchor, energy
  - house: closed and discontinuous space with 3 separate rooms, delimited by vertical partition ("stairs", "divided the house", "the Captain's door", "his wife's bedroom", "the window"...)
  - yet, the doors (a) and stairs (b) may take on a further meaning: they constitute an explicit link between outside and inside (a), between one room and another (b)

- Different noises: from the rain, the wind outside to the silence of the Captain's room, the revelation of "a sound in the night" (being the Private's steps) to "shot twice" (the murder): from natural to man-made noises denoting violence
  - the narrator carefully and gradually leads both characters and reader towards the outcome of the novel that is to occur in Leonora's bedroom : the choice of such an intimate space - which is quite unexpected - appears as a microcosm where no escape is possible.

## **2. Action and time: linked with environment and depend on it:**

- clear distinction between movements of the whole body ...

"took his usual route", "the figure that crossed the lawn" (outside: Private Williams): part of his nightly routine + enhanced by "in all he had come six times" vs "he crossed the hall" (inside: Captain Penderton): the only time he goes into his wife's room = a strategic place, a common place despite distinctive aims for the 2 male characters

- ... and gestures, only performed by some parts of the body, which mainly characterize the Captain: focus on his hands: "clutched", "pressed his hands", "took", "switched on"... seem to announce the crime metonymically : using a handgun to kill the enemy and raising tension

- at the end: characters' actions reduced to positions: the Private: "squatting position" / the Captain: "had slumped against the wall"

→ discrepancy between usual actions and one-time actions/non constant qualities that prepare and reveal the dramatic impact of the scene since they lead to a murder

→ shift from action to motionlessness emphasized by the cramped space but also by the murder itself = stasis, no more action.

## **3. The interplay of light and darkness:**

The passage is interspersed with references to light and darkness: from a small flame (the Private: "he struck a few matches") to intense light in the Leonora's bedroom ("He blinked at the light"):

- from the light of matches in the garden that is necessary for the Private to stand up from the hole he has fallen into, towards a superficial and unexpected light ("blinked" as if disturbed) in the bedroom

- from the light that saved the Private's life to the light that is going to extinguish his life

- the light as the symbol of the Captain's awareness.

→ All these elements set a Southern Gothic atmosphere that builds up tension and increase the uncanny in these last pages, thus underlining the alienation of the characters involved in the murder which is also sustained by the particular use of focalization.

## II. A constant balance between knowledge and ignorance, due to the regular shift of focalization.

### 1. *An analytical mind : internal focalization*

- the reader can hear and see the scene through the Captain's perception: many allusions to sight and sounds as he perceives them = he is the focalizer and the reader is subjected to the time he takes to become aware of what is going on
- use of tenses: simple past / past BE+ing /past perfect ("was listening to the sough of the wind", "saw ... a tiny flicker of flame"): focus on the unexpectedness of the event + reinforced by "blown out in only a moment", "during that instant the Captain had seen a face" + "that face ... made the Captain stopped his breath": a play on echoes/parallels between the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph with the Private and the Captain's gradual awareness; a link is established ( "a face"/ "that face", "the figure"/ "a dark silhouette"/ "the one for whom he sought") and is emphasized by the lexis: from vagueness to precision
- the Captain's awareness is delayed by the overwhelming stress on time references ("waited", "at first", "then", "afterwards") that are combined with the character's feelings ("then he could feel rather than hear", "for moments of anguished suspense", "he was to tell himself that in this one instant he knew everything", "in that vulnerable instant")
- + shift in tenses: present /present perfect: "unknown shock is expected ... prepares itself ... when the disaster has defined itself...": part of Free Indirect Speech or narrative comment, we get into the Captain's analytical mind, his inductive reasoning, which leads us toward the inevitable consequence, according to his own point of view
- internal focalization sustains time delay and suspense while making the reader understand the character's mind, and but at the same time encourages us to question the reliability of the focalizer.

### 2. *The focalizer's reliability : the limits of internal focalization*

- the emotional context: the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph is devoted to the introduction of the Captain in his study at night; from the omniscient narrator, the reader learns enough information to take distance from this character: he always takes pills to sleep, "he was slightly drunk ... a little drugged": his perception may be blurred, not reliable; is he really able to understand what is going on?
- he is subject to fear ("stop his breath", "pressed his wrapper ... He closed his eyes and waited"): he is not willing to see at first, which is corroborated by "could see vaguely", "closed his eyes again" as well as the material situation ("door ajar", "through the crack"): the aperture of his door may seem too small to allow an objective account
- the Captain's abilities are reduced to instincts more than reasoning ; distance is created so that the Captain looks more like a case of observation than a reliable focalizer.

### 3. *Towards a fairer knowledge? : external focalization*

- External focalization is also mainly used in the passage, not only to describe the setting but to focus on the characters' actions (cf part I) and looks, especially at the end:
- from the moment the Captain seems to have understood everything, the reader is left to be an observer, to see the scene as if he/she were the spectator of a play: references to

sight again and movements that can be observed: “blinked”, “dazed”, “sat up”, “half-awake”, “knocked ... hurried”: all the characters are gathered for the final scene as if drawn by a logical event

- the narrator’s only intrusions being with “inexcusably disturbed” (adverb) and “stared ... as though witnessing some scene in a play ... not necessary to believe” (analogy) so as to help the reader visualize more accurately and provide clues for a better knowledge? (cf part III)

- the murder itself is reported as if a case to be observed as well: factual account of the action: “the Captain was a good marksman, ... only one raw hole was left in the centre of the soldier’s chest”; focus on the result/outcome; the underlying violence of the action is toned down/de-dramatized; emotional distance, no interiority but only observation: “no fear in his face” (for the Private) + no allusion to Leonora and Major Langdon’s emotions/personal reactions at the sight of the murder; no speech is rendered either; the only noise is suggested by “the reports” but no use of adjectives.

→ The reportorial style of this final scene raises more questions than gives an appropriate or definite answer. Yet, the narrator’s mastery of storytelling leads the reader towards his/her own reflections / interpretations of the tragedy.

### **III. Through a kaleidoscopic lens : “Reflections in a Golden Eye”**

The subtle presence of the narrator is felt all along.

#### ***1. Circularity of the passage (and of the novel): an encompassing view***

From the very first lines of the novel, the heterodiegetic narrator announces a tragedy to come and introduces the characters in keeping with this singular event; although the characters greatly contrast with one another, they share common points or features:

- in the explicit, although the Captain and the Private belong to 2 different worlds (nature/wide expanse vs civilization/cramped space: the house but also the army camp, cf part I), they share characteristics: the same words are used (“crossed”, “breast”, “breath”, “cold” ...); gradually the Captain’s universe is invaded by the natural elements, corresponding to the private’s intrusion in the house (wind, whisper, sight, ...)

+ this is made consistent textually speaking: 1<sup>st</sup> §: Private / 2<sup>nd</sup> §: Captain, then: both characters: Captain directly alluded to whereas Private suggested in the background / 2 last §: together again for the murder

- the murder has been carefully organized by the narrator: the explicit allusion to the Private’s last visit to Leonora’s room (“this was the seventh and would be the last”); the slow awareness of the Captain and the repetition of “he knew” ending with “He was only certain this was the end”, again underlining a parallel between the 2 characters

- the hole in which the Private falls into may also herald a bad omen, since it turns out to be “a recently dug hole”: to be buried in?

- the reference to “the kaleidoscope of half-guessed possibilities project themselves, and when the disaster has defined itself ... in a supernatural way” + “certain dormant fragments of memory”: interplay of past, present and future actions that come from the character’s mind but are controlled by the narrator (cf part II with limits of reliability),

stressing the suspense and the tragedy to come but leaving clues for the reader to interpret the denouement

→ the notion of fate, predestination is thus clearly emphasized. Yet, the reader may wonder about the motivations that bring about such a dreadful end.

## **2. *The final picture: voyeurism (seeing)***

The final scene depicts an army captain who kills a private, so a man who stands below him in the professional hierarchy: this mere summary actually reveals more than meets the eye:

- the Private receives a sanction; he is punished for being guilty of voyeurism, i.e. watching over the Captain's wife while she was asleep at night, on a regular basis; not only does this reprehensible act imply spatial transgression (intrusion into one's private home) but also moral transgression (intrusion into one's private life): as a husband, the captain obviously fails to perform his role (separate rooms, insomniac or sick?) + the Private was able to do what as a husband the Captain never did: entering his wife's room = symbol of his lack of virility (and authority in the camp? since the Major is above him), which was hinted at by the narrator with the allusion to "keenly sensitive to luxury", "a finicky dresser", his wrapper that "might have been bought for a recently widowed matron of a jail": the feminine analogy is supported by the adjective "queer" at the end (his homosexuality is mentioned several times in the novel)

→ the Captain's transgression is akin a kind of epiphany : by doing justice himself, he might have regained a certain dignity.

## **3. *Reversed images (being seen)***

- however, the focus on the characters' gaze (cf II,3) and the adverb "inexcusably" (disturbed) is meaningful here as it exonerates the Private in both Major Langdon and Leonora's eyes ("witnessing some tragedy that was gruesome but not necessary to believe") as well as in the reader's eyes

- the Private's innocence pervades the end of the novel in the last picture, looking like a 'tableau vivant': the young man is given a privileged position "palm upwards ... as though in sleep": religious connotation = sacrificial image of the Christ on his Cross?

+ he looks beautiful: "Even in death the body of the soldier still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave face was unchanged": permanent quality, peaceful and harmonious image, portrayed as if he were still alive ("sun-browned hands"): power of nature and life, a kind of energetic principle

- whereas the Captain looks grotesque: "slumped against the wall", "in his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk": he looks like a broken puppet, dehumanized but more, the analogy to the monk deflates him altogether: he has lost his dignity, his self + he is laughed at, he looks ludicrous since he is painted in total contrast with what he used to be (alive, a captain, a refined person); he has regressed to a lesser being, even hardly a being at all.

→ The circle is completed, revenge has been taken, but the narrator surprises the reader until the very end when the title of the novel takes on its full meaning: the kaleidoscope, changing shapes and colours, like reflections in a golden eye, conveys a reversal of the situation, allowing the transformation of the characters themselves = the natural, animalistic side supersedes the material, fickle nature of human beings and by the same token, foregrounds their social inadequacy, their alienation to one another.

### ***Conclusion***

By mixing genres and using a rather laconic style, Carson McCullers manages to build a distressing atmosphere in the microcosm of an army camp in the 1940s which magnifies the ludicrousness of a hierarchy that transforms the individual's true self to conform to the expected façade/appearance. By doing so she manages to deliver her powerful message on human nature: here, the characters' obvious differences and their inability to communicate effectively result in a grotesque murder, which in itself stands for the climax of destruction, betraying social uneasiness, isolation and failure, that are recurring themes in Southern Literature.

In her essay 'The Gothic and the Grotesque in the Novels of Carson McCullers'<sup>1</sup>, Dara Downey explains that in McCullers's fictional world, "everyone is warped in some way" despite the potential for them "to unite in their shared experience of otherness. However, as a result the South's nostalgic longing for a past founded on intolerance and sectarian hatred, it in fact divides them irreducibly and tragically. (...) In other words, McCullers's characters are portrayed as terrorised simultaneously by their own abnormality and the looming social threat of judgement and ostracism, creating an inescapable atmosphere in which gothic foreboding and unease pervade the quasi-rural environments they inhabit, attacking individuals both from within and from without."

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<sup>1</sup> Downey, Dara : 'The Gothic and the Grotesque in the Novels of Carson McCullers' in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Southern Gothic*, edited by Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, Palgrave Macmillan (2018, p.365-6)