

## Original Paper

# Spatial Perspectives on Amelia's Changing Power

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### Abstract

*Carson McCullers writes about lonely people, and the themes of loneliness, isolation and alienation run through all of her work and are engraved in all aspects of her personal life. In one of her novels, there is a heroine called Amelia. Her house undergoes a series of changes, from a store to a café and to a closed mansion. At the same time, Amelia's power also changes as the space changes. This dynamic relationship of power is in part consistent with Foucault's theory of power. Therefore, this paper attempts to link space and power and further analyze the reasons behind Amelia's final tragedy.*

### Keywords

*Amelia, space, power*

## 1. Introduction

Carson McCullers is a Southern female writer with outstanding achievements in the history of 20th century American literature. Her works mostly depict lonely people, and loneliness and alienation are the inseparable themes of her works. In her novels, reciprocity in love seems impossible. One can never play the roles of both the lover and the beloved at the same time. In her middle novel, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, she depicts a grotesque love story between three freaks that takes place in a small southern town. The masculine Miss Amelia, the deformed and hunchbacked Lymon, and the violent and evil Marvin Macy, whose attempts to connect with others in order to escape their loneliness ultimately lead to a tragedy.

Critics have examined this novel from a variety of perspectives. There have been studies from feminist, black humor, and narratological perspectives, as well as from the aesthetics of the grotesque and the poetics of space. However, there is still relatively little research on space and power in the novel. The function of Amelia's house changes three times in the novel, and in these three changes, her power also changes. Therefore, this paper will analyze Amelia's power from the perspective of space and try to find the reasons behind the ultimate tragedy.

## 2. Store: Access to Power

For Foucault, “space is fundamental in any exercise of power, or the container of power.” (He, 2005) “Miss Amelia inherited the building from her father, and it was a store that carried mostly feed, guano, and staples such as meal and snuff.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 8) In this novel, the store symbolizes a certain power that Miss Amelia inherited from her father, and the store before the appearance of the café is the spatial basis for the operation of Miss Amelia's power.

In terms of economic status, Amelia is the richest woman for miles around. She's an astute businesswoman that the only use that she had for other people is to make money out of them. She is also highly skilled in her craft, she makes chitterlins and sausage by her own, and she can make the best liquor in the county. Through her liquor, “things that have gone unnoticed, thoughts that have been harbored far back in the dark mind, are suddenly recognized and comprehended.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 15) “A spinner who has thought only of the loom, the dinner pail, the bed, and then the loom again” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 15) can warm his soul by her liquor. Not only that, Miss Amelia also likes to study medicine. She uses a small room in the store as an office and receives patients here. “She possessed great imagination and used hundreds of different cures. In the face of the most dangerous and extraordinary treatment she did not hesitate, and no disease was so terrible but what she would undertake to cure it.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 22) She never charges people in the town and power is her payment. Therefore, she's always got a ton of patients, and people all trust and respect her. What's more, unlike traditional Southern women, Miss Amelia possesses some masculine traits. She is tall, with bones and muscles similar to those of a man; she likes to do crafts; she eats like the people who work the farm every day; she has no interest in the affection expressed by men, and she often appears in masculine clothing as a sign of her toughness and strength. Overall, Miss Amelia is a power owner in this town, both in terms of her economic and social status and her personal image.

One thing worth notice is that most of the people in the town except Amelia share a common identity: spinners. During the period of social transformation in the South, things have not been easy for workers. “There were always plenty of people clustered around a mill—but it was seldom that every family had enough meal, garments, and fat back to go the rounds. Life could become one long dim scramble just to get the things needed to keep alive.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 62) Workers are the specific target of being squeezed by capitalists and the rich, who put in tremendous labor but still struggle to make a living. This is a world dominated by money. “All useful things have a price, and are bought only with money, as that is the way the world is run.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 62) The great disparity between the rich and the poor is the basis on which power operates. From this, we can see that behind this space, “the implicit power relations are running every moment, and people can only act as enslaved machines.” (He, 2020) Unlike the working class, Miss Amelia is undoubtedly the privileged class of the town and continues to consolidate her power through her superior winemaking skills and shrewd business acumen. In Foucault's view, struggles consist of taking the “forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point.” These forms of resistance try to ‘dissociate’ power relation. (Foucault,

1982) The long period of oppression and the disparity of power has caused the workers of the town to “rebel”. They spy on Amelia's every move in the store and feed their twisted psyches by fabricating rumors of Miss Amelia's murder during the days when the store is not open.

Overall, Amelia is the holder of power while her house exists as her private space of the store. As the person at the center of the town, she wears both the respect of the people and the malicious speculation of the other classes.

### 3. Café: Transfer of Power

According to Foucault, power is a field of relational confrontation of forces, which is fluid and constantly operating. When Amelia's house is transformed from a private space store to a public space café, her power is also transferred.

The café is the only entertainment venue in this town and brings a whole new sense of pride to the people here. “There, for a few hours at least, the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in this world could be laid now.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 62) People meet in café to have fun and try to escape the boring life in factories. And the hunchback's instincts that “establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 25) make him fit smoothly into the space of the café. Lymon is good at chatting and can always quick to sense changes in the conversational mood of a crowd; he is a great mischief-maker, taking pleasure in stirring up trouble; he likes to pry into other people's privacy and is always trying to find ways to get into other people's lives. His existence makes the café popular. “Things were never so gay as when he was around. When he walked into the room there was always a quick feeling of tension,... People are never so free with themselves and so recklessly glad as when there is some possibility of commotion or calamity ahead. So when the hunchback marched into the café everyone looked around at him and there was a quick outburst of talking and a drawing of corks.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 46) While Miss Amelia, the real owner of the café, stands most of the time in the doorway that leads to the kitchen, silently watching it all. In this way, after the appearance of the café, Lymon becomes the central figure in the town by virtue of his characteristics. While Amelia's power gradually shifted towards Lymon, and her lack of conformity also pushed her to the margin of the town.

In addition to the passive transfer of power, Amelia's love for Lymon also causes her to voluntarily giving up some of her power. Lymon's first appearance seems to indicate that he is different. Miss Amelia, who never allows credit, offers Lymon her liquor, and Miss Amelia, who seldom invites anyone to her table, treats him to a meal. And that had never happened before for the astute Miss Amelia. And when the door of the store closed for some days open again, people are surprised to find that Miss Amelia has given Lymon her father's snuffbox. “The snuffbox was of blue enamel with a dainty embellishment of wrought gold on the lid.” (Mccullers, 2018, p. 24) This snuffbox, familiar to the townspeople, represents the majesty inherited from Amelia's father, a symbol of the privileged class' power. In this case, the transfer of the snuffbox also implies the flow of power. What's more, Amelia's

spoiling of Lymon causes her to lose her sanity, and softer feminine qualities begin to appear in her. She starts to wear crimson dresses on Sundays, and no longer cold-bloodedly and ruthlessly extracts money from her fellow man. "As an extension of social space, the configuration of power in domestic space is a continuation and reproduction of the configuration of power in social space." (Zhang, 2020) In the novel, Miss Amelia offers to give Lymon the large, luxurious room where her father once lived, and takes a small, simple room for herself. The difference in room configuration also reflects Miss Amelia's loss of power. Not only that, Miss Amelia, the aloof miser, is willing to talk to Lymon about her father, whom she never mentions in front of anyone, and is even willing to share her entire fortune with him. Lymon "owned almost everything on the premises, for when he was cross Miss Amelia would prowl about and find him some present—so that now there was hardly anything left close at hand to give him." (Mccullers, 2018, p. 43) Love makes Miss Amelia gradually lose herself. In order to keep Lymon, she makes concessions over and over again, giving Lymon everything she has, including her power.

The café is a very precious place for the people of the town. Miss Amelia provides a lot of cheap drinks so that everyone in the town, even the children, can come and sit in the café. "Almost everyone, with the exception of Reverend T.M. Willin, came to the café at least once during the week." (Mccullers, 2018, p. 62) In this public space, people are able to enjoy respect and acceptance, forgetting for a while about the difficulties of real life. People's chatting brings them closer together, and the egalitarian consumer environment eases the class conflict, and there is no more tension between Miss Amelia and the rest of the town.

The emergence of the café has changed the lifestyle of the people in the town and brought a little comfort to their difficult lives. At the same time, Lymon's lively nature and Miss Amelia's favor gradually make him the center of the town, while Amelia gradually moves to the edge of power.

#### **4. The Closed Mansion: The Loss of Power**

At the end of the novel, the conflict between Macy and Amelia reached its peak and a fierce fight broke out between them. Finally, the fight ended with Lymon's betrayal and Ms. Amelia's crushing defeat. Before Macy and Lymon left town, they destroyed the café, they vandalized the still, they did everything that would bring devastating consequences to Miss Amelia. This series of heavy blows has completely demoralized Miss Amelia. She refused the offer of the townspeople to come and help clear up the mess; she no longer sold cheap things, but raised the price of everything in the café to an unreasonable level; and as a doctor she was far less attentive, "she told one-half of her patients that they were going to die outright, and to the remaining half she recommended cures so far-fetched and agonizing that no one in his right mind would consider them for a moment." (Mccullers, 2018, p. 77) At this point, Amelia has lost her mind, as can be seen from the fact that "everything in the café suddenly went up in price to a dollar," she no longer trusts anyone, and now only money can satisfy and reassure her; she is no longer sympathetic, and she only gives out painful treatments to the patients who

come to her for help. Thus, Miss Amelia has lost the means she used to consolidate her power. Her valued possessions were taken away by Macy and Lymon; she can no longer make the best liquor in the county; she was no longer a good and respected doctor; “the great muscles of her body shrank” and “her tongue had sharpened terribly” (McCullers, 2018, p. 77), her body was never as strong and powerful as it once was. All indications are that Miss Amelia's power is shrinking. And “it was in the fourth year that Miss Amelia hired a Cheehaw carpenter and had him board up the premises, and there in those closed rooms she has remained ever since.” (McCullers, 2018, p. 78) In this way, Miss Amelia's house has transformed from a public space café to a closed mansion, and she has closed herself into this space, away from the crowds, completely losing her power. And the town, deprived of its café, once again fell into a dreary state. “The house of Miss Amelia leans so much to the right that it is now only a question of time when it will collapse completely, and people are careful not to walk around the yard.” (McCullers, 2018, p. 78) In the end, the once-prominent Miss Amelia is abandoned by the townspeople and her house becomes a shunned presence.

Miss Amelia's final tragedy seems inevitable from the start. In such a small town full of loneliness and alienation, no one really knows how to love and be loved. “As the lover, each is a slave; as the beloved, each is a tyrant. None can achieve a satisfactorily balanced human relationship. He cannot love without sacrificing his own individual integrity, nor can he beloved without exerting his power and superiority.” (Broughton, 1974) Marvin Macy, who is in love with Amelia, has completely given up his power. He went from being a notorious, womanizing thug to a law-abiding, woman-respecting good guy. However, his loss of self did not earn Miss Amelia even an ounce of pity. After they were married, Amelia “treated her groom in exactly the same manner she would have used with some customer who had come into the store to buy a pint from her.” (McCullers, 2018, p. 36) She refused to have an intimate relationship with Macy and even violently drove him away and took all his possessions for herself. In this relationship, Macy, who has lost himself, becomes a slave to love, while the loved one, Miss Amelia, becomes a cold-blooded, heartless tyrant who ignores Macy's dedication and shrewdly benefits from it to make herself richer. The series of humiliations also causes Macy to nurture a grudge that sets the stage for subsequent revenge. Similarly, in Amelia's relationship with Lymon, Amelia becomes the slave who willingly loses herself. In order to make Lymon happy, she constantly changes herself and even actively gives Lymon the power she possesses. Lymon, on the other hand, as the beloved, enjoys all of this, frankly and ingratiatingly shares with Macy all that Amelia has given him. In the novel, McCullers describes the beloved in this way. “And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being be loved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved.” (McCullers, 2018, p. 32) It also explains exactly why Miss Amelia can calmly use Macy's love to her advantage, and why Lymon betrays Miss Amelia in the final fight and gives her a fatal blow. As a result, this unbalanced love relationship also finally brings them devastating consequences since the characters cannot be both the lover and the beloved at the same time.

## 5. Conclusion

Throughout the story, Miss Amelia's house undergoes a series of changes, from the initial private space of the store to the public space of the café to the final closed mansion, and Miss Amelia's power changes as well; she begins as a privileged person of the small town who gradually transfers her power to Lymon, and by the end of the novel, she completely loses all of her power and closes herself off forever.

However, Miss Amelia's final tragedy is not accidental, but is predestined from the very beginning. Whether it is Amelia, Macy, or Lymon, none of them know how to love others while keeping themselves, nor do they know how to become a loved one who is not just trying to take advantage of others. And this monstrous love relationship only fosters a birth of hatred and ultimately brings destruction.

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