

Research on the Hostage of the other in "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe"

Gao Juan

*School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China
Xisugj0414@163.com*

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Abstract: By virtue of close reading, this paper draws on the French philosopher Levinas's theory of hostage to analyze the abnormal love triangle among two men and a woman in "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe". They all have experienced three stages of change in which the three subjects become hostages for no reason, suffer for the other, and diminish gradually. Hence, it tends to explore the issue of how the subject live with the self within the contemporary context. In this way, the novel reveals the crisis of the subjects when they face the ethical choice to suffer for the other, which helps the readers to clarify the inescapability of loneliness and the significance of the build-up of the core within themselves.

1. Introduction

Carson McCullers is actually a veritable American Southern writer in the twentieth century. She is best known for her stories which concerns the spiritual solitude of the South in America. Her novella "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter" wins a great success and sets the tone for her later works. "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe" also falls into that category, which portraits a tragedy of the lonely and grotesque protagonists who are tirelessly searching for love, and eventually ends in failure. There is no denying that Carson McCullers gets inspirations from her own life experiences. She suffered serious rheumatic fever, which is the direct reason for her physical inconvenience. However, her illness exerts great influence on her writings. With her keen intuition and deep thinking, she gains insight into the mysteries of the protagonists' lives, in which there are isolations and pains. Furthermore, she "shoulder the responsibility of transporting the painful substance of life around her as accurately as possible" and uses her words to pierce the truth behind the harsh reality^[1]. She always takes the American South as the background of her works, and she reflects the social problems in the American South by depicting the real living conditions of these characters.

"The Ballad of the Sad Cafe" is Carson McCullers's novel about the eccentric love triangle, and the protagonists in it all reflects certain spiritual incapability. This novella first appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1943. Now it has been one of McCullers's best works. It is set in the small town in American South in the twentieth century, and Miss Amelia Evans is a woman who is giantlike and withdrawn. She is attracted to the hunchbacked dwarf Lymon, who claims to be her cousin, and then starts her journey to be the hostage of the other. For the handsomest man in the town Marvin Macy, he is in love with Miss Amelia at first sight and even is willing to give out all his property to win her heart, while most unexpectedly, Cousin Lymon becomes Marvin Macy's sidekick after a strange eye contact

with each other. Three subjects seem predestined to become hostages of the other, and at the same time the tragedy of the story is at the incapability of love. Obviously, this seemingly extreme and grotesque love triangle is full of pity and feelings of futility.

In fact, this novella is one of the most famous and controversial works of Carson McCullers. The American literary theorist McDowell has investigated this story in detail, explaining that it is “an intricate blending of the real and the mythic, of the comic and the desolate, and of provincial and the universal” [2]. Since the publication of this novella, it became very popular not only in America but also in China and many other countries. Many scholars are dedicated to the grotesque elements in this novella. Sarah Gleeson-White, a famous critic, analyzes the grotesque characters in the story, which delivers McCullers’ perspectives toward the androgyny phenomena [3]. Furthermore, the feminist readings of “The Ballad of the Sad Cafe” are popular. In the article “Carson McCullers’s Amazon Nightmare”, Lousie Westling determines that “there is actual an inversion of traditional roles of male and female” [4]. In short, foreign scholars mainly focus on the grotesqueness, the androgyny phenomena and feminist thoughts. In China, some scholars have the similar idea with Clare Whatling that the heroine Miss Amelia is the embodiment of the revolting femininity, and the gothic homosexual relationships. However, many other critics argue that in this story the effort to reconstruct the birth and death of a ‘Carnavalesque Utopia’ in this work reveals a subversive subtext that opposes the mainstream ideology and value system of the Southern American society.

To sum up, most of critics consider it as the representative work of grotesqueness and femininity. These scholars mainly focus on the analyses of the themes of this story, including the spiritual isolation and loneliness, the grotesque homosexuality, while this paper lays more emphases on the interpretations of the protagonists’ failure of the establishment of the subjectivity with the help of Levinas’s theory of hostage.

2. Theory of Hostage and Levinas

It attempts to conduct an analysis on “The Ballad of the Sad Cafe” on the basis of French philosopher Levinas’s theory of hostage. “The Ballad of the Sad Cafe” is a novella of the weird love triangle happened among two men and a woman. On the surface it seems to be a record of the flowering and subsequent demise of the café however, it is in fact the inescapable ethical responsibilities for the other of the three subjects that cause the tragedy of the doomed love among Miss Amelia Evans, Cousin Lymon and Marvin Macy. To some extent, it sketches out the spiritual situations of the American Southern people in the twentieth century.

Hostage, in fact, refers to one of the key concepts of Levinas’s theory of Hospitality. Hospitality from Old French *Hospitalité* means the friendliness to guests without any preconditions. Levinas is regarded as one of the most momentous philosophers in the twentieth century. He not only firstly introduces phenomenology into French philosophy, but also puts forwards his own debut theory of hostage which reveals the ethical responsibilities of the self to the other. He states that the subjectivity is reflected in the position where the individual takes the other as a guest, that is to say, only in this way can the subject serve as the host to show his hospitality to the other and it is this process that enhances his own subjectivity. For Levinas, the ethics of the other is a kind of the other-centered philosophy in which the other gains the upper hand, while the subjectivity of the self can be realized only by facing the other, namely, becoming an ethical subject wholly responsible for others. And the attention given to the other which is benefit to the other appreciated by the public will no doubt shed light upon today’s moral and ethical construction.

The self bears the absolute responsibility for the other, and on the contrary, the other is not obliged to reciprocate or assume reciprocal responsibility for the self. Thus, it sets a position of absolute otherness to which Levinas himself adheres. It goes beyond the phenomenological thoughts of his

teachers Husserl and Heidegger, and focuses more on the relationship of the self and the other. This relationship, from Levinas's perspective, is a *Mit-Dasein* of different subjects. The traditional ontology concerns that the subjects tend to violently transform and conquer nature to suit their needs, and they also use violence as a typical means to achieve the goals of the assimilation and repression over others. In fact, it is in essence the hegemony of the subjects. For Levinas, people in their very nature live for themselves, and likewise live for the other. The subjects always reflect on their relationships and make their next moves. That is to say, its subjectivity is generated precisely in the process of taking responsibility for the other and suffering for the other, so that it becomes the hostage of the other.

Derrida's point of view coins the idea of Levinas, to some extent. Derrida has pointed out that Theseus's credo to keep Oedipus's secret of not telling the real place he buried is inside the field of being the hostage of the other. He directly points out that being the hostage of the other is indeed the only way to show his responsibility to the other. This responsibility is of no choice. For Levinas, he illustrates that there is no denying that we are predestined to be the hostage of the other, which is the way to achieve our own subjectivity. Most importantly, once the other disappears, the subject would face the situation where he cannot finish the establishment of his subjectivity. Therefore, Levinas's theory of hostage provides us an efficient way to have a close observation on the inescapable isolation of the individual in the modern society. With the help of Levinas's theory of hostage, this paper will focus on the three protagonists' experiences of being the hostage of the other and further analyze the underlying reasons that lead to the tragedy of their love.

3. Becoming the Hostage of the other for no Reason

Miss Amelia, Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon all have experienced three stages of change in the regard of their own subjectivity, from the stage of becoming the hostage for no reason, to the stage of suffering for the other and at last, the failure of establishing the subjectivity. It is a totally passive process to be the hostages of the other. The three protagonists all show their admiration upon the individuals who have the special quality which they are short of. In other words, it is the way they achieve the integrity of their subjectivity. However, it seems to be useless because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the other. As a result, they slowly lose their own subjectivity as if they are soulless. On the basis of the interpretation to the three stages of change, it finds that the three protagonists have experienced the unescapable loneliness and the failure of the fulfillment of their own subjectivity, and simultaneously, it gives some hints to regulate our emotions in the modern society.

Becoming the hostage of the other is a totally passive process, and the subject's responsibility to the other is a voluntary choice to bear the sufferings and sins for them. It is more like a selection without initiative and without active refusal. The unusual love that occurred among the three is the best illustration of this view.

Marvin Macy is the handsomest man in the town. He is wealthy but in fact an evil in nature. "For year, when he was a boy, he had carried about with him the dried and salted ear of a man he had killed in a razor fight"^[5]. He was an evil character in this town, and he even shamed several young girls. Apparently, Marvin Macy had been a self-centered evil man before he met Amelia. At that time, Marvin Macy was not capable of love, which was the direct result of the absence and alienation of love in the modern context, and he attempted to relieve his loneliness by committing these crimes. What is puzzling is that when he first met Amelia at the age of 22, he fell in love with her. It is the beginning of becoming a hostage to the other. As we all know, Miss Amelia is a solitary and gangling woman, who does not belong to the traditional type of the beautiful lady. She refuses to share her personal space with others and never communicate with others about her private life except business. However, "nor did he want her because of her money, but solely out of love"^[5]. It is unexplainable

at that time that Marvin Macy falls in love with Miss Amelia.

According to Levinas, the ethical subject is completely a hostage of in its prehistory, and it arises even earlier than the ego. This unexplainable love leaves no possibility of escape for Marvin Macy. It is the beginning to be a hostage for the other. Marvin Macy is willing to change for her. When he met Amelia, he tried to be friendly to people around him and began to attend church services. After the marriage, he wants to please Amelia, even if she did not treat him well. The presence of Miss Amelia makes Marvin Macy has no other choice but to be a hostage to please his lover. As a result, Marvin Macy gradually loses his subjectivity and seeks the integrity of his own subjectivity from Miss Amelia.

Likewise, Amelia plays the role of her ex-husband Marvin Macy in her relationship with her cousin Lymon. At her first glance, Miss Amelia fell in love with this short, hunchbacked, Lymon. She not only treats him well by offering him drinks, food and lodging, but also takes good care of him, and becomes obedient to him. It is known that Miss Amelia was not benevolent to these beggars who accosted her. In this regard, Cousin Lymon's transformation after meeting Marvin Macy also confirms Levinas' point of view to some extent. The other evokes the subject's infinite responsibility, and thus the subject shoulders this responsibility and gradually becomes the hostage of the other.

The strange love triangle among the three occurs for no reason. This is also similar to the Chinese playwright Tang Xianzu's "The Peony Pavilion", in which he says, "love without knowing when it arises is a deeper feeling." All three of them have become hostages of the other and suffer for the other because of the occurrence of love. That is to say, the subject is indebted at the beginning.

4. Suffering for the other

Levinas states that the ego is a hostage of the other, and that the ego suffers for the persecution that the other endures. In experiencing this inescapable suffering for the other, the ego suffers the wrongs and pains of the other, turning from the self to the other.

Marvin Macy first encountered Miss Amelia and fell in love with her, so did Miss Amelia when she first met Cousin Lymon, while for Lymon, after a strange glance with Marvin Macy, he became the sidekick of Marvin Macy. All three of them become hostages of the other, and also start a difficult journey of being entangled in the other and suffering for the other. The subject tries to make use of all the resources of the self and all the abilities of him to take responsibility for the other. They are all overwhelmed with the desire to please the beloved, to satisfy the needs of the other infinitely, and to respond to the demands of the other constantly.

It said that because of poverty, Cousin Lymon came to this town to seek shelter from Miss Amelia. Although it was difficult to prove their kinship, Amelia took him in. Since then, Lymon had been enjoying all the benefits brought by Amelia. He not only received a blue enamel snuff bottle of Miss Amelia's father as a gift, moved into her father's room, but also learned the map of Amelia's wine collection, which means that Lymon has the priority to all the properties. "That was one of the ways in which she showed her love for him. He had her confidence in the most delicate and vital matters"^[5]. Amelia changed the old grocery store into a café for the sake of Lymon. His happiness seems to become the only criteria for Miss Amelia's every move of actions. The behaviors of Miss Amelia are always consistent with Lymon's needs. The subject constantly responds to the needs of the other and becomes a hostage of the other. Thus, only in this way can the integrity of Amelia's own subjectivity be established in Cousin Lymon.

On the contrary, Marvin Macy's love for Amelia and Lymon's adoration for Marvin Macy both follow the same criteria of the loved one. During this process, they still chase slavishly after being ignored, a purely ideological movement that takes no account of the fulfillment of their own subjectivity. Marvin Macy prepared gifts and flowers for the pleasure of Amelia, even if he endured

his lover's indifference. In their marriage, which lasted only 10 days, he gave all his possessions to Amelia and at last left in despair. However, the lover's inhospitality makes what he did futile. Likewise, Lymon became a hostage of Marvin Macy, and he played in a funny way to catch Marvin Macy's eye. "The hunchback was smiling at Marvin Macy with an entreaty that was neat to desperation" ^[5]. He took Marvin Macy in without Miss Amelia's permission, gave him the room, and even helped Marvin Macy win the fight later regardless of Amelia's death. The actions of the three subjects reveal the fact of the inescapable destiny of becoming hostages of the other. Only by giving and pleasing the other, and suffering for the other can the subject's own subjectivity be truly fulfilled. However, the tragic ending of the story shows that in the process of opening up to and responding to the other, the subject himself is also dissolved.

5. Failing to Fulfill Their Own Subjectivity

In the process to be intimate with the other, the subject will never have the chance to reach the other, which ultimately makes it impossible for the subject to realize the highest demands of its subjectivity. For this reason, it leads to a tragic end of this story. Finally, due to the absence of the other, the subject is "traumatized" by the other physically and spiritually for no reason and the subject fails to achieve his own subjectivity.

After Cousin Lymon's leaving, Miss Amelia lost interest in living and just pined away day by day. "Her voice was broken, soft, and sad as the wheezy whine of the church pumporgan" ^[5]. From the change of the appearance of Miss Amelia, it is clear that the departure of Cousin Lymon has caused the despair of her. The once crowded and lively café now becomes dilapidated. The residents here no longer join together to communicate with each other. Miss Amelia loses the love of her life and is unable to realize the integrity of her subjectivity in Lymon. In addition, after the divorce, her ex-husband, Marvin Macy, becomes a criminal again, robbing shopping malls and becoming a well-known villain in the town. The indifference of his lover Miss Amelia makes Marvin Macy lose his hope and pursuit for a better life, and he seems that he has no choice but to go back to his previous harsh living environment to numb himself. He even takes a more despicable means to paralyze his heart to escape the heartbreak of losing his lover. Lymon also disappeared with him. The rumor has it that he was bought to a vaudeville. After giving up the comfortable and wealthy life with Amelia, a simple wish of Lymon to choose to be Marvin Macy's little sidekick could not be fulfilled, and he was brought to a tragic end. The tragic love of the three comes to an end.

Apparently, the subject, in the absence of the other, finds it difficult to ensure the integrity of his own subjectivity, which in turn makes the subject's absence. Chinese scholar Toming states in his article "From 'Correspondence' to 'Aura': The Aesthetic Experience Inspired by Spleenful Ideals" that "perhaps because people in modern society are no longer sure of the abode of their souls, they are sometimes in the embarrassment of losing their minds." It is the lonely situation of the modern people alienated from the outside, but also the incompetence and sadness of love in the context of modernism.

The tragic end of the novella, at the same time, has an echo to the eternal theme of the author Carson McCullers who is concerned about the incompetence to love. The music in the café no longer drifts, not even the clamor. Instead, the Ballads of twelve laborers flow throughout the town, producing a lamentable comparison between the once-bustling atmosphere and the deathly silence now. People used to gather in the town's café to talk and drink, but now that the café is gone, the only gathering activity is the labor of these twelve laborers. To put it another way, residents of the town have shifted their gathering activity to listening to the Ballads of the twelve laborers. In virtue of this metaphorical way, the author conveys to the readers that everyone is the mortal man throughout their own lives, like Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy, who are immersed in their labor of

love, and that the town's residents are also struggling to move forward in their mundane lives. It also reveals the cruel social history. In the early twentieth century, the social civilization of the American South was being influenced by the industrial civilization of the North. In this context the traditional culture of the Southern region collapsed, and Southern people were suffering from all the pains brought about by the social changes of the capitalist society in which money and power ruled. It exposes the reality that people are isolated from each other and no longer communicate with each other in modern society, with the rapid advancement of the capitalist industrial civilization.

Miss Amelia, Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon serve as the representatives of the typical grotesque individuals with local color in the South of America, and anti-normal behaviors and emotional distortion of the characters can be interpreted as Carson McCullers's own criticism and deep reflection upon the industrial civilization of the northern capitalist in the post-Civil War period. In the early twentieth century, the tradition of the southern America was strongly impacted by the northern capitalism, which made the southern people generally feel disorganized and fragmented, especially the southern American writers. They had a strong sense of belonging to the spiritual home of the American South where they were nurtured, however, it was difficult to deal with this kind of emotion. As a result, their works were surging with ideological ruptures and turmoil. Miss Amelia in essence is the epitome of the state of spiritual isolation and desolation of modern people. Cousin Lymon is of unknown origin and he also feels confused about where he wants to go. He symbolizes the kind of person who is confused about their own identity. As for Marvin Macy, he serves as the ruthless machine cultivated under the modern civilization. All of them are the lonely people isolated from the outside world in the modern society. It has been a universal feature among the individuals. The tragedy of the story lies in which the emotional dilemma of the three in the southern traditional order is impossible to reach a reconciliation, which is not only the humanistic concern for the southern society and the struggle of sticking to the southern literary tradition, but also the deep sense of crisis for the southern society as a writer.

6. Conclusion

"The Ballad of the Sad Cafe" illustrates the unescapable loneliness of human beings and the significance of the fulfillment of our own subjectivity. The three main characters, even the residents of the town in this story are isolated with the outside world, which is one of the permanent topics that the author prefers. At the moment of encounter with the other, the subject seems destined to become a hostage of the other, and this is the beginning of suffering for the other. The subject mobilizes all his available resources in order to gain the affirmation of the other, and in so doing, he achieves the goal of closeness with the other. However, if the other refuses to accept the subject's sacrifice, the subject's subjectivity cannot be fully established, and the subject is then plunged into great pain and depression. There is full of endless loneliness and despair after the transient intimate relationship. It seems to the author Carson McCullers, getting rid of the spiritual isolation and making meaningful connections with others is impossible. In this novella, the protagonists all go through the three stages of becoming hostages for no reason, suffering for the other, devoting themselves to the other endlessly, and at the same time they are struggling to find the integrity of their own subjectivity. However, there is no answer to their love, and apparently, it results in the tragic end of the three subjects. Although Marvin Macy is wicked, he still changes his ways and gives his all after meeting Miss Amelia for the first time. Even though Amelia is independent and wealthy, she is devoted to her cousin Lymon, and she disburdens her mind and tries her best to please him. Lymon, proud and domineering, becomes a heel after seeing Marvin Macy. In fact, the aberrant love among the three is a profound metaphor for the indifferent and alienated situation of people in our modern society, revealing the social reality of human loneliness and incompetence of love, which deserves our reconsideration in

the current social discourse.

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