The Ballad of the Sad Café Study Guide

The Ballad of the Sad Café by Carson McCullers

BOOKRAGS

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We are introduced to a small southern town one August afternoon. It is very hot and dreary, and there seems to be little movement or activity. The largest house in the center of town is practically a ruin; it's boarded up, and leans to one side almost ready to collapse. However, it does have an occupant: Miss Amelia, who can sometimes be seen in the upstairs window. The rest of the narrative will tell her tale in flashback.

Amelia had inherited the house from her father, and operates it as a general store. She also makes excellent liquor. She's a strong, mannish sort of woman, gruff and unsociable. She's very rich, as she has a head for real estate deals. She's also very petty and will go to court and sue for the most minor of infractions. She was once married for ten days to a man named Marvin Macy, who will figure in to the story later. Other than that odd little period, Amelia has led a fairly normal life.

One day, out of nowhere, a hunchbacked little man approaches Amelia's home, asking for her. He claims they are related in a distant way, somewhere between first and second cousins. When everybody expects rough, uncaring Amelia to show this hunchback out on his ear, Amelia instead is very tender, comforting the hunchback as he sits on the stoop crying, and eventually inviting him into her home, something she never does for anyone. This hunchback will be known as Cousin Lymon.

The next day, Amelia does not open her general store, and the hunchback is not seen. A rumor swirls that Amelia has murdered the hunchback for something in his suitcase. A few men get together on Amelia's porch. The author describes this as an "evil festival" over which the men have little control. It is safe to assume the presence of a "freak" like the hunchback along with Amelia's unusual behavior has made them anxious. Essentially they let themselves into Amelia's house meaning to do some violence, probably upon the hunchback.

Cousin Lymon, perhaps sensing their intent, puts on a very calm and confident air, and begins to talk to the men and find out details about their lives. Lymon is described as a person who can make an immediate and deep connection with someone, and soon he is the "life of the party." All thoughts of violence go away. Amelia comes down, surprised by the men, and asks them if they'd like to buy some liquor. For the first time, she lets her customers drink inside her home, as they chat with Lymon and enjoy the warmth of the stove. Some women come and are also treated to liquor. This marks the unofficial opening of Amelia's cafe.

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 1 - 23 Analysis

McCullers uses a sort of frame story, starting the story at the "end," depicting the end state of Amelia and the town, and only after establishing this aftermath does she delve

into the meat of the story. This decision lends a fatalism and pessimism to the story; as the story unfolds, the reader already knows what will happen. It is as if the characters are marching to their doom, and there is nothing anyone can do to change the sorry course of events.

The brief mention of Amelia's ten day marriage to Marvin Macy is foreshadowing that develops tension, as the reader wonders how this man will fit in and where he will make his appearance in the narrative.

Cousin Lymon, small and hunchbacked, is the kind of misfit that McCullers seems to often write about. Sometimes her misfits are merely emotional or spiritual outcasts; here, Lymon's deformity is a physical manifestation of his outcast status. Amelia's attraction to and pity for Lymon is chalked up to the complexity of love. Also consider that Amelia and Lymon share a very powerful common bond; they are both misfits, and this fact helps inform the reader as to Amelia's behavior towards Lymon.

If Amelia's love for Lymon is puzzling, the gathering of men intent on entering Amelia's home and harming Lymon, the so-called "evil festival," is inexplicable. In several of the short stories in this collection, McCullers displays some odd and inexplicable behaviors, and leaves it to the reader to decipher. Other times she will offer some explanation. Where Amelia's care for Lymon is blamed on love, there is little reason given for this gathering of men.

On the contrary, the reader is told that Lymon has an inability to establish a deep connection with anyone around him, and this is the ostensible reason for the "evil festival" of men refraining from harming him.

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 23 - 48

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 23 - 48 Summary

Four years pass. During that time, the cafe expands and becomes more official. Amelia serves food along with drinks. Saturday is the busiest night, and nearly everyone from town comes to her cafe. Lymon convinces Amelia to buy a mechanical piano, which spits out lively tunes.

Cousin Lymon has risen to a clear level of authority over Amelia. She tends to his every need, feeds him, showers him with attention, takes him to nearby picture shows or cockfights. It is clear to the townspeople that Amelia loves Lymon. The author describes this kind of love as one-sided, in that Amelia is the lover and Lymon the beloved. Lymon does not love Amelia like she does him, and so he can take advantage of the situation and get away with a great many things. Eventually he has access to the entire house, the cash register, and the keys to everything.

On the topic of love, there is a flashback to Miss Amelia's ten-day marriage. Her husband is 22-year-old Marvin Macy, an evil man who killed a man when he was just a boy, cut the tails off squirrels for amusement, and tempted despairing people with marijuana. Just as inexplicable the bond between Amelia and Lymon, so Marvin falls in love with Amelia, and for two years he doesn't declare his love, but simply waits. In that time he reforms his character, goes to church, cleans up, etc., and then finally proposes.

Amelia accepts (no one quite knew why), and they are married. However, on the couple's wedding night Amelia stomps down from the bedroom angry and spends the night alone in her office; a bad sign for the couple to be apart on wedding night. Marvin tries to ply Amelia with gifts, but she simply puts them up for sale in her general store. The next night Amelia makes her own mattress and sleeps apart again. Perhaps in desperation to get her to love him, Marvin then signs over all his family's land to Amelia, but it is no use. Amelia takes a swing at him when he gets close to her, and from then on she seems ready to attack Marvin at any provocation. She kicks him out, and he suffers publicly. He writes her a letter, professing love but also threatening her and promising to get even, and he leaves town. The marriage lasts ten days. Eventually Marvin is convicted of a murder and other heinous crimes and is sent to the Atlanta penitentiary.

Back to Cousin Lymon and the cafe, a full six years has passed since his arrival. The cafe is buzzing with activity. Henry Macy (brother to Marvin) is in the cafe with a sick child. In addition to her other pursuits, Amelia enjoys acting as a sort of country doctor, administering tonics and treatments for the sick at no charge. This child has a painful boil on his thigh, but Amelia's strategy has been to treat the child to ice cream and good food all day. The child falls asleep, and only then do Amelia and Henry quickly take him to her office, where she lances the boil before the child hardly knows what him. There is a minimum of pain and the sickness is solved.

Henry reveals he got a letter from Marvin, and that Marvin is out on parole and out of jail. Other than that, Marvin didn't state what he intends to do. Amelia gets into a very dark mood, while Lymon is insufferably curious about who Marvin is.

Soon Marvin is forgotten, and the fall is probably the best fall of Amelia's life. Finally, the first cold spell of winter comes, and with it, Marvin Macy comes to town. Cousin Lymon happens to spy him, and he is entranced by the man for some reason, following him around. Eventually the whole town learns of Marvin's presence, and they all gather to Amelia's cafe, where Amelia has slaughtered a pig and is having a barbecue. Marvin arrives as well (everyone keeps their distance from him), and the townspeople expect a brawl when Amelia learns Marvin is there and on her property.

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 23 - 48 Analysis

In the years that follow, Cousin Lymon clearly rises to a level of superiority over Amelia. This ties to the narrator's conception that, in matters of love, there is a lover and a beloved. Love is not an equal exchange, and clearly Lymon is taking advantage of Amelia's feelings. Perhaps there is even a resentment, as the narrator hints, of being beloved.

By placing Marvin Macy's courtship of Amelia right next to Amelia and Lymon's situation, the reader is meant to compare and contrast the two relationships, and perhaps draw some parallels. Like Amelia's love for Lymon, Marvin's love for Amelia is somewhat inexplicable and sudden. Like Amelia deferring to Lymon, Marvin reforms his wicked ways for Amelia, going to church and cleaning himself up. In both cases, the lovers change their behaviors for the beloved. Unfortunately, the ruin of Marvin and Amelia's marriage foreshadows the ruin of Amelia and Lymon's relationship. Just as Amelia leaves Marvin unloved and wrecked, such that he regresses into his criminal ways, so Lymon leaves Amelia unloved, and she becomes an unhappy hermit for the rest of her days.

Amelia's tender treatment of the child with the boil is a hint that Amelia has the potential to in fact assimilate into society. The cafe, and Lymon, has helped her to do this. As the narrator states, the cafe helps to provide a sense of worth to people, and Amelia is no exception.

The tranquil, healthy autumn gives way to bitter winter, and Marvin arrives on the first cold spell. "Ballad of the Sad Cafe" strongly associates Marvin with the weather. It is said that the fact he doesn't sweat is an evil omen. This gives Marvin a magic to his menace, which helps to explain his power over Lymon, which is said to act "like a charm."

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 49 - 71

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 49 - 71 Summary

Amelia finally arrives, and spots Lymon and Marvin at the same time. Cousin Lymon is trying to ingratiate himself to Marvin by wiggling his ears, something that Amelia loves. But Marvin only asks if the 'brokeback' is having a fit, and he becomes annoyed with Lymon's friendliness, finally bashing him over the head. Everyone holds their breath, expecting Amelia to react to this violence, but Amelia seems to be in a trance, not reacting. Perhaps she does not want to hurt her love's object of love, Marvin, because she can see the attraction Lymon now has for Marvin. Marvin, triumphant, walks away from the barbecue.

Marvin spends the next few days loafing around, taking advantage of his poor foster mother, and generally raising a little hell and fear around town. Lymon is drawn to him and is constantly trying to tag along and befriend Marvin. Marvin either ignores him or responds with a punch, but Lymon will not relent. Amelia asks Lymon what the cause of the attraction is, and Lymon says that he is impressed that Marvin has been to Atlanta and been to jail.

Over the next few weeks, the cafe becomes a place of increasing importance and community to the town, though Marvin (alongside Lymon) is also let in, and strangely Amelia does not respond. Instead, Amelia tries bizarre, poorly-planned stunts to try to get rid of Marvin, like sticking a leg out to trip him on the stairs, or poisoning his food (and here she accidentally switches plates and gives herself the poison). She doesn't otherwise say a bad word against Marvin.

One day Marvin arrives with Lymon and a packed suitcase, and Lymon announces Marvin will stay in the house for a spell. Still, Amelia does not react. Soon Amelia is crowded out of her own room upstairs, and spends her nights in her downstairs office. Everyone wondered why Amelia didn't do anything; the author insists that Amelia was fearful of living alone again, and that anything obviously done against Marvin would alienate Lymon. However, inevitably, the sense was that Amelia and Marvin were going to come to blows to settle the unease in the house.

This fight happens on Groundhog day in February. It is not announced; it is more a feeling in the town. Both combatants eat a lot to gain strength, and rest. Marvin makes himself slippery with hog lard. Everyone gathers at the cafe; tables are cleared in order to make a sort of boxing ring. At 7 o'clock the combatants enter the 'ring.'

They exchange simultaneous punches to start the fight, and for the next half hour exchange a flurry of blows in this manner. It is a hell of a fight, and both seem evenly matched. After that half-hour, Marvin manages to pin Amelia's arm, and it becomes a wrestling match rather than a boxing match. Ever so slightly, Amelia gets into a position to win, and she almost has Marvin pinned and defeated when a cry erupts in the crowd,

and Cousin Lymon leaps off the counter and onto Amelia's neck, battering her. The next few minutes are a blur for everyone, but in essence Cousin Lymon has betrayed Amelia, and Marvin wins the match. The sad townspeople disburse. Amelia retreats to her office, despaired and exhausted.

Before daylight, Marvin and Cousin Lymon leave town together, but not before wrecking the cafe, including stealing many of Amelia's possessions, vandalizing the tables, wrecking the alcohol still, pouring syrup all over the kitchen, and wrecking the mechanical piano.

Amelia is never the same after this. She becomes stingy and unkind, ceases to administer medical aid, and eventually she boards her shop up. She loses her vitality, and soon her hair greys and her once-strong voice becomes weak. Back to the present, Amelia sits in her house, a hermit and spinster. The town has similarly experienced decay, and it seems lonely and bereft of any activity.

Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 49 - 71 Analysis

Lymon was earlier said to have a powerful ability to establish a deep connection with people; this ability prevented him from being murdered by the mob. This power importantly fails Lymon with Marvin. Even trying his hardest by wiggling his ears for amusement, Lymon fails to establish any connection with Marvin, who only hits Lymon and dismisses him as a 'brokeback.' Here is the final side of the love triangle; Cousin Lymon has become the lover, and Marvin the beloved. Like Amelia before him, Lymon changes his behavior drastically around Marvin, following him everywhere and enduring his insults and physical blows, all in the name of love, or something like it.

Marvin's association with the weather, his role as a sort of harbinger of evil, is complete when Marvin's loafing around town is associated with a terrible heat spell that spoils sausage and causes the death of one family.

The last third of the short story is a sort of culmination of semi-inexplicable behaviors. Amelia's restraint with Marvin and her goofy murder attempts, the unsaid decision to wrestle, Lymon's betrayal of Amelia by attacking her and then running off with Marvin, are all ostensibly bizarre and uncharacteristic behaviors. McCullers intimates that a certain level of absurdity is a part of life; human beings cannot hope to unravel the complexity of their nature. Regardless, back to the notion of the story as fatalistic, history has repeated itself. Just as the doomed love between Marvin and Amelia changed each for the worse, so the doomed love between Amelia and Lymon has changed Amelia for the worse.

Wunderkind

Wunderkind Summary

A 15-year-old girl, Frances, arrives at her piano teacher Mister Bilderbach's house for her regular piano lesson. She is early, and is content to listen to the current student's lesson from the hallway. In the room is another piano teacher, Mister Lafkowitz. In her head, Frances is struggling with dread for the lesson, as for the past couple of months her playing, while technically sound, has been flat and lifeless.

Mister Lafkowitz steps out of the piano room, says hi to Frances, and points her to an issue of a magazine called Musical Courier, which provides an article and picture about Lafkowitz's prize student, Heime. Heime is a 14-year-old violinist who seems destined for greatness in the musical world. He has already been invited to play at a prestigious venue. Heime and Frances have played together often, and they have both been dubbed "wunderkinds" or child geniuses by many. While Heime seems to wear such a crown effortlessly, Frances struggles and begins to believe she may not be the great piano player everyone thinks she is destined to become.

Frances recalls a concert in which Heime and she played a piece called the Bloch. Frances thought they both did well at the time, but afterwards critics praised Heime's mastery and criticized Frances for her "thin" playing that lacked emotion or proper temperament. Her fears were somewhat solidified in a piano lesson about a year ago in which Mister Bilderbach calls her rendition of a Bach piece 'cold.'

Frances recalls her spiral into depression and obsession with music. Mr. and Mrs. Bilderbach take her to the department store one evening, dressing her up, and she doesn't recall caring one bit about what she wore. Her sole focus is music.

However, starting about 4 months ago, her playing became flat and dead, and she doesn't have a good reason for it. Surely, Frances tells herself, she couldn't have lost the 'wunderkind' gift just like that.

The lesson starts, and Mister Bilderbach picks a Beethoven sonata that Frances knows well. He interrupts her constantly, criticizing her playing style, calling it "salon style" and "shallow." She has perfected the piece technically, but in Frances' daze of despair, her fingers won't obey her mind.

Finally Mister Bilderbach gives up, and tries another strategy. He wants Frances to play the Harmonious Blacksmith, a piece she used to play with much happiness. Unbeknown to Bilderbach, Frances is essentially having a nervous breakdown. He sees every detail of Bilderbach's face and throbbing temples, and she feels suffocated by him, as if he is crowding out her very existence. She cannot play the piece, and she leaves the house before Bilderbach can say a word. The reader senses that this is the final time she will play piano, and that she believes she cannot ever be a great pianist.

Wunderkind Analysis

Much of "Wunderkind" happens on an internal, inner thoughts level, and McCullers employs several devices in an attempt to represent the inner turmoil and panic of Frances the protagonist. Frances' thoughts are somewhat jumbled; while no where approaching the fragmentation of stream of consciousness-type prose, Frances nonetheless jumps from memory to memory, word to word. Musical notes swirl in her head, her fingers unconsciouly tap out some fugue on an invisible piano, she keeps repeating the world "wunderkind" as a sort of (failing) assurance that she is worthy of the title.

Frances' physical exasperation elevates in the end to a kind of hyper-perceptive mania, in which she perceives every line on Mister Bilderbach's face, every detail of his glasses and hair, every throb of the veins in his temple. His very face seems to crowd in on Frances, suffocating her. Her mind, manic with exhaustion, desire to be perfect and please Mister Bilderbach, and the creeping sense of her own failure, crescendo in a world-changing decision; she abandons piano.

The Jockey

The Jockey Summary

A jockey named Bitsy Barlow steps into a busy dining room. He is dressed elegantly. At one table sits three people representing the management sector of the horseracing industry - a rich man investor, a horse trainer, and a bookie. The men see Bitsy. One declares that Bitsy is crazy, stemming from an incident about six months ago in which a good friend of Bitsy's, a fellow rider, got trampled on the track and broke his legs bad. Bitsy had often had the young rider to his room to play cards or read the sports pages, and Bitsy took it very hard and has not been the same since. The rich man dismisses the accident with 'these things happen.'

Bitsy walks through the dining room and confronts the three men. Bitsy had just ridden the horse of the trainer and rich man. The table is full of rich, luxurious dishes, which Bitsy looks at with a combination of longing and disgust. They ask him if he'd like seltzer water, but Bitsy ask for Kentucky Bourbon. The men react negatively to his order, telling him to be reasonable. An angry Bitsy informs the men that the young rider victim aforementioned wrote Bitsy, and that the rider's one leg is two inches shorter than the other. He will never ride again. The men offer their sympathies, but Bitsy doesn't believe they are sincere.

Bitsy sarcastically asks if the men would like him to fetch them any more dishes. He puts a rose petal from the table in his mouth, as a sort of protest against the grand meal they're having. Bitsy leaves them to get another drink from the bar. The men in hushed tones reveal that Bitsy is gaining weight and can't stop. Apparently for a horse jockey this is a sort of career death knell, an inability to stay at a tiny weight, and it explains Bitsy's disgust for the men's feast (as he cannot partake), and their admonition of Bitsy for drinking (as it leads to more weight).

Bitsy returns to the table, sneering, and he stuffs some potatoes in his mouth. He chews, then spits the pulpy mess out on the carpet. He calls the men "libertines," and then Bitsy stomps away.

The Jockey Analysis

Bitsy Barlow the jockey, like Cousin Lymon, is an outcast, physically and otherwise. His is a world of restriction and self-abnegation. He must starve himself to keep himself small; that, or eat and then furiously exercise to sweat it off. He must abstain from alcohol and any other rich foods that might gain him weight. This is contrasted to the men in the dining room, their table a feast of rich and creamy dishes. McCullers takes particular care with the details that would serve to infuriate Barlow - the rich man's dipping of his buttery fingers into his water glass, and a full inventory of the various

delicious dishes on the table. Barlow conflates the gross excess of food he sees before him with a lack of morals, specifically the exploitation by these men of jockeys.

In addition to this disgust, Bitsy is dealing with his own mortality. He is gaining weight unlike he used to and cannot shed it; this is probably the beginning of the end for his career as a jockey, especially considering the way jockeys are handled in this world. The bad accident of his friend has both forced Bitsy to examine mortality and the passage of time, and witness first hand the cold cruelty of the horseracing world, who will dispose of the injured rider like so much garbage the moment he cannot perform. Bitsy dismisses the whole wretched affair with "Libertines!" meaning people without morals.

Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland

Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland Summary

Mr. Brook is the head of the music department at Ryder College. He has recently won the department great acclaim for hiring renowned composer and music teacher Madame Zilensky on. He has taken every care to make sure her move to Ryder is a successful one, even securing her a home.

Mr. Brook meets Zilensky at the train station to welcome her and take her to her new home. She is accompanied by three children. Oddly, they have no luggage; it has apparently been lost. Instead of expressing outrage or fear for her lost luggage, Zilensky only laments the loss of one item, which she cannot name, referring to it as 'tick-tick-tick.' Brook guesses that she means a metronome. The fact that Zilensky, a composer, forgot the name of a metronome, and the fact that she expressed no emotion over her lost luggage, plants a seed of suspicion in Brook that all is not well mentally with Zilensky.

The next few weeks at school go well. Zilensky is a fine teacher. However, Mr. Brook frequently checks in on Zilensky's home to see that all is well, and he finds several odd things. The rooms are still bare and empty, as if no one had moved in. Odd too are the Zilensky children themselves, who only speak to each other in a strange mixture of a variety of languages, and who follow each other single-file, and who consciously avoid stepping on carpets.

Even odder is a conversation Brook has with Zilensky over lunch, in which she calls the father of one of her children 'that French' instead of 'that Frenchman,' and she insists the three children have three different, international fathers, when in fact Brook notices they all look very much alike, but nothing like Madame Zilensky.

Finally, something Madame Zilensky says, as part of her usual stories about far-fetched places and amazing adventures she's had, sticks with Mr. Brook. Zilensky had mentioned "The King of Finland" in one of her stories. Brook realizes there is no king of Finland. All of the tall tales Zilensky tells are lies, and Zilensky is a pathological liar. Brook realizes that Zilensky has created this amazing world because she has left little room in her life for anything but music and composing. In order to feel like a fuller, rounder person, Zilensky has made up lies that she has even herself come to believe.

Mr. Brook feels this is a danger to the music department, and he confronts her about her lying, and about the non-existence of the King of Finland. She is taken aback and doesn't seem to understand what Brook is driving at, and Mr. Brook presses. Just when it appears Zilensky will fall to pieces or finally "crack" to Brook's pressure, Brook is filled

with compassion and pity for the poor woman, and he relents, and instead asks her if the King of Finland is nice, letting Zilensky have her little fantasy world.

Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland Analysis

Mr. Brook is described as a "pastel" person, a proper, by-the-book man who never has taken a chance in life. However, he is also described as somewhat of an eccentric; he skips out on a faculty trip to Peru, and we are told he "rather relished the ridiculous." Mr. Brook is thus a very mild version of the McCuller outcast, and perhaps it is this mild eccentricity that allows him to connect with Zilensky and establish some compassion in the end.

If Mr. Brook is an outcast then Zilensky is of course an outcast in the extreme. Like Amelia in "Ballad of the Sad Cafe," he lives in a sort of self-imposed exile, crafting for herself a universe all her own, where her "pathological lies" are very real to her. Zilensky's character flaw is mania, a sort of over-enthusiasm. She attacks her musical work with such zeal and emotion that life outside music is barren by comparison. This condition is to Zilensky insufferable, and so she must fabricate a reality quite opposite her humdrum home life, full of international adventure and intrigue. Zilensky's outcast nature, unlike many others in the collection, is of a beneficial nature. By leaving her to it, Mr. Brook shows compassion, and importantly leaves Zilensky with her dignity.

The Sojourner

The Sojourner Summary

John Ferris is in a New York hotel, midway between Paris (his recent home) and Georgia, where he had just attended the funeral of his father, Papa Ferris. The occasion prompts John to think about mortality and the passage of time. His address book, filled with acquaintances of the past, force him to muse about the fates of each of the people in the address entries and what's become of them. Suddenly, his past visits him quite literally as he sees his ex-wife, Elizabeth, pass his window and walk down the street. After their divorce she had remarried a man in New York.

John rushes outside to greet Elizabeth, but finds he doesn't have the courage to approach her, and he watches her go on. Back in his room, John decides to call Elizabeth. After initially not recognizing him, Elizabeth seems happy he's called. She invites him to her new home and he accepts.

John, arriving at Elizabeth's apartment, is greeted by a red-headed child, one of Elizabeth's new sons by her new husband. John is then greeted by Bill Bailey, Elizabeth's gregarious and polite husband who invites John in. The men make small talk, and then Elizabeth comes in. John feels she is as beautiful as ever, and he suddenly feels like an intruder in this happy family home. John reveals his father died, and Elizabeth expresses shock and condolences. The little son asks who Papa Ferris is, and Elizabeth must inform him that John and she were married once. Bill takes his son to supper, leaving Elizabeth and John alone. John asks her to play the piano, and she does so. She plays beautifully, and the music takes John back to happier times when they were married.

Everyone sits down to supper. John reveals he has a fiance back in Europe, Jeannine, and they expect to be married soon. She has a boy who John is fond of, though he secretly neglects him and feels bad about it. The family has a birthday cake in honor of John's 38th birthday (another thing to make John feel old and worn-out), and then they must cut the evening short because of a previous engagement.

John boards the plane back to Paris. He thinks again of Elizabeth and of her beautiful piano playing. He feels the weight of time and mortality, and arrives at his Paris home in despair. He is greeted by Jeannine's son. He tells the boy they will go to the carnival often, and that he will neglect him no longer.

The Sojourner Analysis

The central theme in Sojourner is regret and loss, and the inescapable nature of time. John Ferris is forced to return to his birthplace to deal with his father's funeral; his physical return to Georgia compels an emotional and spiritual journey as well. John's address book becomes a symbol of the passage of time as John lists off the various

fates of the people in his book. Most of all, John regrets his failed marriage, and a chance meeting in New York provides a chance to touch that past, however briefly, once again.

It is clear Elizabeth does not struggle with the problems John does; she has moved on, she has a family and love and duties. John also has a significant other and a surrogate son, but his situation is a sort of carnival funhouse mirror image of Elizabeth's; he does not love Jeannine as deeply as Elizabeth seems to love Bill Bailey, and he is estranged rather than close to his would-be stepson. In fact John feels like an intruder amid such a warm and loving family. John is changed for the better, stuck by the knife of mortality, and in a classic character change he vows to live life to the fullest from here on out, manifested as his promise to take his son to the "guignol" at the amusement park. When his son tells him the guignol closes, McCullers is telling the reader that the past is irretrievable.

A Domestic Dilemma

A Domestic Dilemma Summary

Martin Meadows leaves his office job early on a Friday to spend more time with his family. He arrives to find his son Andy and baby girl Marianne trying to put up and assemble Christmas decorations. He mildly admonishes Andy for playing with electricity (Christmas lights), but he is thrilled to see his children. He asks if they had supper yet, and Andy says he could not eat the supper the wife/mother, Emily, prepared. Martin goes into the kitchen to discover uneaten toast caked in cayenne. Emily had mistaken cayenne powder for cinnamon powder.

Martin storms into the upstairs bedroom, angry at Emily and intent on confronting her. Emily is sipping sherry from a plastic tumbler, and is drunk. She puts on a false vivacity in greeting Martin, putting on a slight English accent that she acquires for some reason when she's drunk. Emily wants to go down to fix supper for her kids, but Martin tells her to stay upstairs, he doesn't want the kids to see her in this state, and they have a fight. Martin eventually manages to keep her upstairs and quiet as he goes down to tend to the children.

As Martin fixes supper, joins in his son's enthusiasm for a loose tooth and visit by the tooth fairy, and takes joy in bathing his children, Martin wonders how it came to this point with Emily. They had moved from Alabama to the big city, and had had a habit of drinking to end the nights. Somehow that habit had turned into an addiction for Emily. Martin recalls one horrible night in which Emily, drunk, had dropped Marianne on her head. Though Marianne was all right, Emily swore off all drinking, but inevitably she had started again.

Emily comes downstairs, still in a rage about her fight with Martin. She believes Martin has been telling lies about her to her children in order to drive a wedge between them. Emily states Martin has always shown partiality to Marianne, so he can keep her, and Emily will take Andy. Andy is confused and anxious by this talk, and Martin urges the children to go upstairs. Emily realizes she's made a scene, and she sobs as she sits at the table. Martin tells her to go upstairs and go to sleep, that the children will forget everything in the morning. Again Martin's blood boils with the thought of what Emily is doing to the family.

Martin undresses for bed, and catches sight of Emily sleeping in bed. The sight of her erodes most of the anger he's built up, and instead he feels a great love for her.

A Domestic Dilemma Analysis

"A Domestic Dilemma" is a tender story about love and forgiveness. Martin is outraged when his drunken wife Emily switches cayenne for cinnamon powder for their children's supper, and further outraged when Emily frightens the children and states Martin always

loved Marianne more than Andy. However, his anger melts when he gazes upon a now-peaceful Emily asleep in the bed. The dilemma of the title is what McCullers refers to as "the immense complexity of love," and the deep conflict Martin feels within himself. He is essentially torn between protecting his children, whom he dearly loves, and his love for Emily. It is a choice without a solution. In the end, Martin restrains his feelings and lets his wife be, maintaining some degree of dignity for her, and in this way he is much like Mr. Brook relenting in his probing of Madame Zilensky. Like Zilensky, Emily has created her own world (for whatever reason), a place to escape to due to some unbearable facet of "real" life. She is a victim, someone to pity, and this is precisely what Martin does.

A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud

A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud Summary

A boy enters a diner late at night for a cup of coffee after finishing his paper route. Just ready to leave, he is instead called for by an old man in the corner. The old man tells the boy, "I love you." The boy is naturally taken aback by such a confession, shrinking away from the old man. The old man begs time to explain, and Leo the cafe owner fetches the boy another cup of coffee. The boy hesitantly sits down.

The old man shows him an old picture of a woman who was his wife. He reveals he was married to her for little over a year when she suddenly left him and abandoned the house. The old man says that he had never been satisfied in life, that fleeting pleasures had "laid around loose" in his soul, but with this woman, it was like the loose pieces in him had been put into a row and completed like a car assembly line.

For years the old man searched for the woman (and the man she ran away with), but he never found her. Eventually, his search became so obsessive, her memory so present, that it was like she was chasing him instead of the other way around. And so the old man spent years of regret and despair, locked with the memories of this woman, until time healed all wounds and the old man arrived at a sort of peace.

From then on, the old man decides to take a systematic, scientific approach to love. The problem with love is that a man begins loving the most complex thing he can - a woman - without first building up. The old man's theory is that a man must love much simpler things - a tree, a rock, a cloud - and only after years build up to the maturity and experience needed to love a woman. And that is the process the old man is currently going through. He has loved rocks and trees, and is now able to love the young boy. When the boy asks if the old man can love a woman, the old man replies he has not gotten that far yet. The old man leaves, re-emphasizing to the boy that he loves him.

The boy asks if the man was drunk or on drugs, or a lunatic. Leo the cafe owner won't answer. The boy is left to puzzle over the strange old man and his theory of love.

A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud Analysis

If love is immensely complex as the narrator states in "A Domestic Dilemma," the old man of "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud" has attempted to simplify this love by developing a system and going about love in a scientific way. Like many things the solution has created its own problems, and the old man seems not very near to the ability to love a woman. As in many of McCullers' stories, there are really no easy answers; human nature is infinitely complex, behaviors inexplicable (as the old man's sudden confession of love to a 10-year-old paper boy), resolutions or solutions impossible.

Leo, the cafe owner, has a unique place in the narrative. He mocks and heckles the old man throughout his explanation of love and his life story, even becoming angry at him, seemingly in an attempt to dilute the old man's oratory power and make the paper boy feel more at ease. However, in the end he refrains from offering any comfort to the paper boy or dismissing the old man as a lunatic or drunk. This non-resolution, this lack of any explanation or easy answer, we have of course seen in several stories.

Characters

Miss Ameliaappears in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe

Miss Amelia, in the past, is the proprietor of a small cafe in the center of a sleepy Southern town. She is rugged and built like a man, slightly cross-eyed, and inept socially. She is rich, partially from her father's holdings and partially from her own business savvy. She is quarrelsome, given to arguing over prices and taking people to court if she feels she has been wronged in the slightest. Her spinster ways change when Cousin Lymon comes to town. She comes to love the hunchback, and in time defers to him. As Lymon likes company, the two join forces to open a cafe in Amelia's home where all the townspeople can share meals, alcohol, and gossip.

Amelia begins to creep out of her shell after years of operating the cafe, eventually even administering the sick as a would-be country doctor. However, her violent ex-husband, Marvin Macy, comes back into her life, and as fortune would have it, Lymon becomes infatuated with the man in something akin to Amelia's own love for Lymon.

Amelia again changes behavior with this new dynamic, losing much of her trademark toughness and straightforwardness as she eventually concedes to having her hated ex-husband live in her own home. Amelia comes to blows with Marvin, and at the crescendo of the match, Amelia's beloved Lymon betrays her by attacking her and letting Marvin win the fight. Marvin and Lymon leave town, but not before wrecking Amelia's cafe. Similarly, the betrayal left Amelia a wrecked person. The strength leaves her body and voice, her hair grows gray, and she retreats into her old, bitter hermit ways. By the time we visit her in the present, she is a spirit-broken spinster who hardly dares to peek out the window.

Cousin Lymonappears in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe

Cousin Lymon is a hunchback who arrives mysteriously to town one day, searching for Amelia, who he claims he is distantly related to. Lymon is an outcast in the McCuller mode, and here his physical deformity telegraphs his misfit nature. Amelia invites Lymon into her home and comes to love Lymon. Unfortunately for Amelia, Lymon does not return such love, resulting in an unequal relationship in which Lymon takes advantage of Amelia.

Lymon is said to possess an ability to establish a deep connection with anyone he meets in a short amount of time. A group of townspeople are ready to kill Lymon for being a freak, but instead he uses this "charm" to ingratiate himself, and soon he is the center of attention in town, a very sociable chap who talks at length on any subject.

The townspeople try to guess Lymon's age, and (perhaps due to his hunchback condition) no one can tell if Lymon is 15 or 75 or anything in between, and Lymon

prefers to keep it that way. Lymon loves spectacles like cockfights and movies, and Amelia frequently takes him in her ancient Ford car to another town for such spectacles.

Eventually Lymon becomes infatuated with Marvin Macy, Amelia's ex-con ex-husband. Like much of the behavior in McCullers' stories, the reason behind this infatuation is pretty bare, but Lymon mentions being envious at Marvin having seen the inside or prison and the city of Atlanta. It is this strange infatuation that compels Lymon to attack Amelia in her fight with Marvin, ruining the match. He runs off with Marvin, wrecking Amelia's cafe and heart.

Marvin Macyappears in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe

Marvin Macy is Amelia's ex-husband (for ten days), who after the marriage robbed three filling stations and supposedly killed a man, crimes for which he spent time in the Atlanta penitentiary. His return to the town after many years is an ill omen, and it results in Lymon's betrayal of Amelia, the ruin and closure of Amelia's cafe, and Amelia's own broken heart. He is an evil man without any redeeming characteristics, and he uses Lymon's attraction to him as a weapon against Amelia.

Francesappears in Wunderkind

Frances is a 15-year-old piano prodigy who realizes she may not have the talent necessary to go on to become a master piano player. This uncertainty and dread manifests itself in a panic attack, and she abandons her lesson with longtime piano teacher Mister Bilderbach.

Bitsy Barlowappears in The Jockey

Bitsy Barlow is the titular character who confronts his superiors (the investor, the trainer, and the bookie) about their moral bankruptcy and exploitation of jockeys. As a jockey, he is forced to starve himself to keep a certain weight, while his superiors are free to gulp down one luxurious dish after another.

Mr. Brookappears in Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland

Mr. Brook is the head of the music department at Ryder College, and has won much acclaim for landing Madame Zilensky as a new faculty member. He realizes Zilensky is mentally unbalanced and a pathological liar. He confronts her, but relents out of pity and lets her remain delusional.

Madame Zilenskyappears in Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland

Madame Zilensky is a master composer and music teacher new to Ryder College. She has crafted a rich and detailed imaginary world for herself, in which she has tea with monarchs and other multinational adventures. Mr. Brook confronts her about her pathological lying, but in the end she is left to remain in her fantasy world.

John Ferrisappears in The Sojourner

John Ferris is a divorced man, born in Georgia but living in Paris, who returns to the States to attend his father's funeral. While in New York he visits his ex-wife Elizabeth, sees what a rich and lovely family life she has, and vows to live better and more fully, especially in regards to his would-be stepson back in Paris.

Martin Meadowsappears in A Domestic Dilemma

Martin Meadows is an office professional dealing with an alcoholic wife. He loves his two children dearly, and is furious when his drunk wife Emily spoils the children's dinner with her carelessness and makes a scene in front of the children. However, he is torn between love for his children and a desire to protect them, and love for his wife.

The Old Manappears in A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud

The old man is a cafe dweller who tells a young paper boy that he loves him. The frightened young boy is then told a tale of the old man's failed marriage and theory of love. According to the old man, love must begin with the simplest of objects - a tree, a rock, a cloud - and only after a man has mastered loving those can be work up the ladder toward the ultimate goal, a woman.

Objects/Places

Amelia's Cafeappears in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe

On the influence of Cousin Lymon, Amelia's deserted old mansion is eventually converted into a lively cafe, where the townspeople nightly gather for drinks, gossip, and music. The cafe mimics Amelia's own social development. However, when Lymon leaves abruptly, betraying Amelia by ruining her fight with Marvin Macy and trashing the cafe, Amelia is similarly wrecked in spirit. The cafe closes and Amelia ends up a hermit.

The Blochappears in Wunderkind

The Bloch is the piece Frances had played with Heime, the boy genius. Her teacher warned her against playing the Bloch, but Frances insisted. Heime is given great praise by critics for his performance of the Bloch, while Frances is criticized as lacking the proper feeling and playing "thin." The Bloch demonstrates to Frances that she may not be the "wunderkind" everyone thinks she is.

Beethoven's Variation Sonata, Opus 26appears in Wunderkind

Mister Bilderbach, Frances' piano teacher, has Frances play this sonata for her last piano lesson. It was among the first pieces Frances played, and she has mastered it technically. However, the notes come out dull and void of life, and Frances realizes she doesn't have the sort of artistic temperament to be a truly great pianist, and so she abandons the sonata, and her lesson.

The Rich Man's Tableappears in The Jockey

The table, occupied by the rich investor, the trainer, and the bookie, who represent the management of horse racing, is full of luxurious creamy dishes and gourmet items. Bitsy Barlow confronts the men at the table and sees their feast. Meanwhile, jockeys are taught to starve in order to maintain their small weight for racing. The feast becomes a symbol for the excess and moral decay of horse racing.

The Music Department of Ryder Collegeappears in Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland

Mr. Brook is the head of the music department of Ryder College, and the entire college considers it quite a boon that Brook has convinced composer Madame Zilensky to come teach at the school. Ryder College has a conservative and exemplary reputation, and

when Zilensky begins to reveal her insanity, Mr. Brook feels he must protect the school and its reputation by confronting her.

The Metronomeappears in Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland

Madame Zilensky, having lost all of her luggage on the trip to Ryder College, is focused on but a single item, the metronome, only she cannot name it, referring to it only as her 'tick-tick-tick.' This is the first clue for Mr. Brook that Zilensky may have a mental problem.

John Ferris' Address Bookappears in The Sojourner

John Ferris has an address book of most everyone he knows, past and present. It becomes a symbol for the passage of time, as he recalls the various fates of those in his book. Tellingly, his ex-wife Elizabeth is listed under her new husband's last name.

Elizabeth's Bach Fugueappears in The Sojourner

Elizabeth plays a Bach fugue for ex-husband John Ferris when he visits her and her new family. The music is beautiful, and takes John back to when they were happy and married, increasing his regret and nostalgia.

Cayenne Toastappears in A Domestic Dilemma

Alcoholic wife and mother Emily, in her drunken state, gives her children toast powdered with hot cayenne pepper instead of cinnamon. The children couldn't eat it, and when father Martin gets home he discovers they haven't eaten. This raises his ire, and he confronts his wife about her alcoholism.

A Tree, A Rock, A Cloudappears in A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud

"A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud" are the old man's answers to the young boy as to what one should love first. The old man's reasoning is that most men fall in love with the most complex thing they can, a woman, rather than first loving the simple things and then working towards loving a woman.

Themes

Outcasts

Many of the characters in these stories are outcasts and misfits, seemingly doomed to forever be on the outside of society looking in. Miss Amelia is a classic outcast in this mold in "Ballad of the Sad Cafe," distanced from people, a hermit who stays inside and can only relate to people when she engages them in lawsuits for petty matters. The arrival of Cousin Lymon literally opens her home, and also her heart, as for the first time she finds that she loves someone. However, Lymon does not reciprocate; we are told love is always a matter of unbalanced forces. When Lymon breaks Amelia's heart by leaving with her hated ex-husband and trashing her cafe, the symbol for her blossoming sociability, it's as if human connection is impossible for Amelia, or that it can only end in betrayal and sadness.

In "Madame Zilensky," the titular character creates her own fanciful world, a sort of self-imposed hermitage based upon mental instability. When Mr. Brook refrains from pressing Zilensky about her pathological lying, it is an act of compassion, leaving Zilensky to her world, as that is where she is truly happy. Bitsy Barlow in "The Jockey" purposefully rejects the gross, decadent, and seedy world of horseracing, retreating into alcohol (and it should be noted McCullers was a lifelong alcoholic). Here alcohol becomes the "world" to retreat to, as with the wife in "A Domestic Dilemma." In "The Sojourner," the past versus the present is the dividing line; John Ferris feels ill at ease in the present because of his regret and nostalgia for the past. So he, too, is an outcast, proving that the notion of the "outcast" can come in many forms.

Love

McCullers refers to "the immense complexity of love" in the short story "Domestic Dilemma," and indeed McCullers frequently depicts many sides to love. In "Ballad of the Sad Cafe," Miss Amelia's inexplicable taking in of hunchbacked Cousin Lymon is described as love. Stepping outside of the story a bit, the narrator informs the reader that in matters of love, there are not equal lovers but a lover and a beloved, with the beloved not feeling nearly as strong an attraction as the lover. In this case, Amelia is the lover and Cousin Lymon the beloved. McCullers doesn't tread much further than that in her analysis of Amelia's odd behavior toward Lymon, including her refusal to confront her violent ex-husband Marvin Macy only because Lymon has developed a strange attraction to the man. McCullers show us how very one-sided love can be when Lymon and Marvin Macy abandon the town, wrecking the Cafe in the process, leaving Amelia shattered and alone.

Love comes in several other forms as well. Frances' pressure to perform in "Wunderkind" is mingled with physical attraction for her piano teacher (along with a desire to please him), and the result is utter confusion and despair. John Ferris' love in

"The Sojourner" is the pain of regret and the past, while Martin Meadows' love in "A Domestic Dilemma" is more about a desire to forgive and forget in order to share a future with his alcoholic young wife. And the old man in "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud" also demonstrates the "immense complexity" of love when he attempts to systematize love into a science.

Music

Before Carson McCullers became a novelist, she was a gifted pianist who only missed out on attending Juilliard School of Music because she could not come up with the tuition money. Evidence of McCullers love for music, and her knowledge of music terminology, can be located in several stories. Most obvious is "Wunderkind," which certainly draws from some very personal disappointment in McCullers' own life, about a girl named Frances who realizes she is not good enough to continue as a professional pianist. In a kind of chicken-and-egg scenario, either Frances' enervated playing style and lifeless tones are indicative of her deteriorated mental state, or her faltering confidence manifests itself as inferior playing. Regardless, her bone-deep obsession with playing piano results in a kind of nervous tic in which Frances' fingers play her music even when she's not at the piano, and constant chords and musical phrases swirl in her mind constantly, even in dreams.

Beyond "Wunderkind," there are several other instances of music coloring the narrative. The tunes from the mechanical piano become a symbol of the liveliness of the Cafe in "Ballad of the Sad Cafe." When Cousin Lymon and Marvin Macy crush the piano, it seems as if the Cafe itself is crushed, and Amelia along with it. In "Madame Zilensky," Zilensky gives her life to her music, such that she lies pathologically in order to create a world apart from music. And in "The Sojourner," the beautiful piano playing of his ex-wife increases John Ferris' sadness and regret; when he recalls Elizabeth on the plane going home, he is trying to recall the notes from her playing, as if the person and the music were one and the same.

Style

Point of View

All seven stories are universally conducted in the third-person perspective. Usually, this manifests itself in the limited form; that is, third-person limited in which experiences and thoughts are restricted to one character. In "Wunderkind," we are "in the head" of Frances as she suffers under the weight of expectation; in "A Domestic Dilemma" we are restricted to the thoughts and experiences of Martin Meadows the protagonist; in "Domestic Dilemma" actions and thoughts are restricted to John Ferris.

Some stories are third-person omniscient, in which the narrator knows all and sees all. In "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe" the narrator is free to mine the thoughts of the townspeople and their perceptions of Miss Amelia. In "The Jockey" we are privy to the actions of both the trio of horse racing men and the jockey, Bitsy Barlow. In " A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud" we have access to the thoughts of both Leo, the bartender, and the paper boy who is accosted by the old man.

In most of these stories, McCullers gives herself a few passages to go outside the bounds of the story somewhat and deliver some truth or wisdom about human nature. A character may behave in some way, and then McCullers might comment and state why that behavior is indicative of some aspect of humanity. In "Ballad of the Sad Cafe," for example, a passage is devoted to the Forks Falls highway chain gang, a subject otherwise not ostensibly related to the rest of the novella, but which arguably resonates emotionally or spiritually with the other section of the novella.

Setting

Primarily, the setting for most of these stories is the contemporary South, specifically the first half of the 20th century in Georgia. As the author, Carson McCullers, grew up in this time period and location, the setting is unsurprising.

"Ballad of the Sad Cafe" takes place in a lonely rural Southern town. Setting becomes very important in "Ballad," as it helps to mirror the inner states of the main characters. Modern-day Amelia, broken and forlorn, lives in what is practically a ghost town in a house ready to fall over; by contrast, Amelia at the height of the Cafe's popularity is an active member of the community, and her home is full of people and the town seems like a very active, gregarious place. When Marvin Macy comes to town, the very weather seems to reflect it, as it becomes very hot (hot enough to spoil everyone's pork sausage). This is known as the Pathetic Fallacy, when weather is used as a device to reflect character or inner states and emotions.

Setting can also help to define the dilemma of the character. In "The Jockey," Bitsy Barlow suffers in the world of horseracing that would oppress him, treat him like an animal, restrict his diet so that he remains small. In "The Wunderkind," through the eyes

of the prodigy pianist suffering a breakdown, the very rooms seems to crowd in and become suffocating. In "Domestic Dilemma," the family household, shone to be a loving and comforting place, is under attack by the alcoholism of the mother and wife.

Language and Meaning

In many of the stories, there are certain words and phrases that become touchstones in the narrative, succinct ways to get at a larger meaning in the story. In "Wunderkind," Frances repeats the word "wunderkind" in her head over and over. She struggles with this label of herself; it has become a prison for her, a moniker she cannot live up to, a burden of tremendous weight which she finally shrugs off in dramatic fashion at the story's end. In "The Sojourner," John Ferris is called an "expatriate" by his ex-wife Elizabeth for living in Paris, whereas John prefers the term "sojourner." For John, the word expatriate externalizes his feelings that he is a traitor in some way, that he has betrayed his marriage and betrayed Elizabeth, that he has escaped. "Sojourner" has lighter connotations of a mere traveler, and in some ways thinking himself a sojourner instead of an expatriate dulls the pain and regret John feels over his failed marriage.

In "The Jockey," Bitsy Barlow powerfully indicts his superiors with the exclamation "libertines!" In the investor, trainer, and bookie's exploitation of jockeys and horses, Bitsy believes they have become morally bankrupt or dissolute. In "Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland," Mr. Brook notices something is wrong with Madame Zilensky due to language; Zilensky cannot summon up the word for 'metronome' even though she is an accomplished composer, referring to it as her 'tick-tick-tick,' and Zilensky refers to a former lover as 'that French,' rather than 'Frenchman.' Zilensky's unique language idiosyncrasies, much like her children who speak a sort of multi-national Esperanto, hints at a separate and isolated world Zilensky inhabits.

Structure

This book contains seven stories. The first story, "Ballad of the Sad Cafe," is regarded as a novella, simply because of its greater length (about seventy pages in this edition). The other six, much shorter at an average length of about 15 pages, are more accurately regarded as true short stories.

"Ballad of the Sad Cafe" features a narrative flashback device. The story begins at the end, so to speak, with the Cafe a dilapidated ruin and Miss Amelia a broken spinster. The narrative then flashes back to the time before Miss Amelia's house became the Cafe, and then relates the establishment of the Cafe up until its destruction at the hands of Marvin Macy and Cousin Lymon, and Miss Amelia's consequent shattered psyche. A brief, epilogue-like flash forward shows the reader once again the sorry state of the town, and the mental and physical deterioration of Miss Amelia, who finally boards herself up in the closed Cafe to become a hermit.

Other stories in the volume, being quite short, are unfurled in a more conventional and straightforward way. "The Wunderkind" spans a single piano lesson, and "The Jockey"

takes place in about 10 minutes over a single dinner. Other stories span larger periods of time but nonetheless bear the customary singular focus of the short story form; "The Sojourner" happens over a period of days, perhaps, while "Madame Zilensky"'s span is a week or more.

Quotes

"There is a type of person who has a quality about him that sets him apart from other and more ordinary human beings. Such a person has an instinct which is usually found only in small children, an instinct to establish immediate and vital contact between himself and all things in the world. Certainly the hunchback was of this type. He had only been in the store half an hour before an immediate contact had been established between him and each other individual. It was as though he had lived in the town for years, was a well-known character, and had been sitting and talking there on that guano sack for countless evenings. This, together with the fact that it was Saturday night, could account for the air of freedom and illicit gladness in the store. There was a tension, also, partly because of the oddity of the situation and because Miss Amelia was still closed off in her office and had not yet made her appearance." (Ballad of the Sad Cafe, page 20)

"First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons - but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer. So there is only one thing for the lover to do. He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world - a world intense and strange, complete in himself." (Ballad of the Sad Cafe, pages 25-26)

"Marvin Macy brought with him bad fortune, right from the first, as could be expected. The next day the weather turned suddenly, and it became hot. Even in the early morning there was a sticky sultriness in the atmosphere, the wind carried the rotten smell of the swamp, and delicate shrill mosquitoes webbed the green millpond. It was unseasonable, worst than August, and much damage was done. For nearly everyone in the county who owned a hog had copied Miss Amelia and slaughtered the day before. And what sausage could keep in such weather as this? After a few days there was an atmosphere of dreary waste. Worse yet, a family reunion near the Forks Fall highway ate pork roast and died, every one of them. It was plain that their hog had been infected - and who could tell whether the rest of the meat was safe or not? People were torn between the longing for the good taste of pork, and the fear of death. It was a time of waste and confusion." (Ballad of the Sad Cafe, page 51)

"But it was not only the warmth, the decorations, and the brightness, that made the cafe what it was. There is a deeper reason why the cafe was so precious to this town. And this deeper reason has to do with a certain pride that had not hitherto been known in these parts. To understand this new pride the cheapness of life must be kept in mind. 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. And the

confusing point is this: All useful things have a price, and are bought only with money, as that is the way the world is run. You know without having to reason about it the price of a bale of cotton, or a quart of molasses. But no value has been put on human life; it is given to us free and taken without being paid for. What is it worth? If you look around, at times the value may seem to be little or nothing at all. Often after you have sweated and tried and things are not better for you, there comes a feeling deep down in the soul that you are not worth much." (Ballad of the Sad Cafe, page 54)

"What had begun to happen to her four months ago? The notes began springing out with a glib, dead intonation. Adolescence, she thought. Some kids played with promise - and worked and worked until, like her, the least little thing would start them crying, and worn out with trying to get the thing across - the longing thing they felt - something queer began to happen - But not she! She was like Heime. She had to be. She -
Once it was there for sure. And you didn't lose things like that. A Wunderkind. . . . A Wunderkind. . . . Of her he said it, rolling the words in the sure, deep German way. And in the dreams even deeper, more certain than ever. With his face looming out at her, and the longing phrases of music mixed in with the zooming, circling round, round, round - A Wunderkind. A Wunderkind. . . ." Wunderkind, pages 84-85)
"His face seemed to throb out in space before her, come closer with the lurching motion in the veins of his temples. In retreat, she looked down at the piano. Her lips shook like jelly and a surge of noiseless tears made the white keys blur in a watery line. 'I can't,' she whispered. 'I don't know why, but I just can't - can't any more.' [...]
Her coat. The mittens and galoshes. The schoolbooks and the satchel he had given her on her birthday. All from the silent room that was hers. Quickly - before he would have to speak.
As she passed through the vestibule she could not help but see his hands - held out from his body that leaned against the studio door, relaxed and purposeless. The door shut too firmly. Dragging her books and satchel she stumbled down the stone steps, turned in the wrong direction, and hurried down the street that had become confused with noise and bicycles and the games of other children." (Wunderkind, page 89)

"Sylvester clucked his tongue and shook his head. 'I realize how you feel.'
'Do you?' The jockey was looking at the dishes on the table. His gaze passed from the fish casserole to the corn, and finally fixed on the plate of fried potatoes. His face tightened and quickly he looked up again. A rose shattered and he picked up one of the petals, bruised it between his thumb and forefinger, and put it in his mouth.
'Well, those things happen,' said the rich man.
The trainer and the bookie had finished eating, but there was food left on the serving dishes before their plates. The rich man dipped his buttery fingers in his water glass and wiped them with his napkin.
'Well,' said the jockey. 'Doesn't somebody want me to pass them something? Or maybe perhaps you desire to re-order. Another hunk of beefsteak, gentlemen, or -'
'Please,' said Sylvester. 'Be reasonable. Why don't you go on upstairs?'
'Yes, why don't I?' the jockey said.
His prim voice had risen higher and there was about it the sharp whine of hysteria.
'Why don't I go up to my god-damn room and walk around and write some letters and

go to bed like a good boy? Why don't I just -' He pushed his chair back and got up. 'Oh, foo,' he said. 'Foo to you. I want a drink.'" (The Jockey, page 97)

"Mr. Brook finished off the rest of the brandy. And slowly, when it was almost midnight, a further understanding came to him. The reason for the lies of Madame Zilensky was painful and plain. All her life long Madame Zilensky had worked - at the piano, teaching, and writing those beautiful and immense twelve symphonies. Day and night she had drudged and struggled and thrown her soul into her work, and there was not much of her left over for anything else. Being human, she suffered from this lack and did what she could to make up for it. If she passed the evening bent over a table in the library and later declared that she had spent that time playing cards, it was as though she had managed to do both things. Through the lies, she lived vicariously. The lies doubled the little of her existence that was left over from work and augmented the little rag end of her personal life." (Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland, page 109)

"Elizabeth was very beautiful, more beautiful perhaps than he had ever realized. Her straight clean hair was shining. Her face was softer, glowing and serene. It was a Madonna loveliness, dependent on the family ambiance.
'You've hardly changed at all,' Elizabeth said, 'but it has been a long time.'
'Eight years.' His hand touched his thinning hair self-consciously while further amenities were exchanged.
Ferris felt himself suddenly a spectator - an interloper among these Baileys. Why had he come? He suffered. His own life seemed so solitary, a fragile column supporting nothing amidst the wreckage of the years. He felt he could not bear much longer to stay in the family room." (The Sojourner, pages 119-120)

"The next day he looked down on the city from the air, burnished in sunlight, toylight, precise. Then America was left behind and there was only the Atlantic and the distant European shore. The ocean was milky pale and placid beneath the clouds. Ferris dozed most of the day. Toward dark he was thinking of Elizabeth and the visit of the previous evening. He thought of Elizabeth among her family with longing, gentle envy and inexplicable regret. He sought the melody, the unfinished air, that had so moved him. The cadence, some unrelated tones, were all that remained; the melody itself evaded him. He had found instead the first voice of the fugue that Elizabeth had played - it came to him, inverted mockingly and in a minor key. Suspended above the ocean the anxieties of transience and solitude no longer troubled him and he thought of his father's death with equanimity. During the dinner hour the plane reached the shore of France." (The Sojourner, page 124)

"The room was dark except for the shafting light from the half-opened bathroom door. Martin undressed quietly. Little by little, mysteriously, there came in him a change. His wife was asleep, her peaceful respiration sounding gently in the room. Her high-heeled shoes with the carelessly dropped stockings made to him a mute appeal. Her underclothes were flung in disorder on the chair. Martin picked up the girdle and the soft, silk brassiere and stood for a moment with them in his hands. For the first time that evening he looked at his wife. His eyes rested on the sweet forehead, the arch of the fine brow. The brow had descended to Marianne, and the tilt at the end of the delicate

nose. In his son he could trace the high cheekbones and pointed chin. Her body was full-bosomed, slender and undulant. As Martin watched the tranquil slumber of his wife the ghost of the old anger vanished. All thoughts of blame or blemish were distant from him now. Martin put out the bathroom light and raised the window. Careful not to awaken Emily he slid into the bed. By moonlight he watched his wife for the last time. His hand sought the adjacent flesh and sorrow paralleled desire in the immense complexity of love." (A Domestic Dilemma, pages 139-140)

"'It was like this,' the man continued. 'I am a person who feels many things. All my life one thing after another has impressed me. Moonlight. The leg of a pretty girl. One thing after another. But the point is that when I had enjoyed anything there was a peculiar sensation as though it was laying around loose in me. Nothing seemed to finish itself up or fit in with the other things. Women? I had my portion of them. The same. Afterwards laying around loose in me. I was a man who had never loved.'" (A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud, page 146)

Topics for Discussion

What role can music play in the short stories of Carson McCullers? Choose two stories featuring music of some kind.

Why does Cousin Lymon ruin the fight, wreck the cafe and run off with Marvin Macy in "Ballad of the Sad Cafe"? How does this comment on McCullers' conception of human nature?

Many of these short stories feature outcasts of one type or another. Choose two stories with outcast characters. How are they outcasts? What prevents them from assimilating into normal society? Is their isolation self-imposed, or the fault of society?

Why does Mr. Brook cease his interrogation of Madame Zilensky regarding her pathological lying in "Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland?"

What accounts for Miss Amelia's uncharacteristic behavior when Marvin Macy arrives in town back from prison in "Ballad of the Sad Cafe?" The townspeople all think she will immediately drive him from town or yell at him or punch him out, but instead she is reserved, and Marvin eventually moves into her own home.

What is the old man's conception of love in "A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud?" How should one love? Why does he ascribe to a "science" of love, something which is otherwise quite unscientific?

Bitsy Barlow, the titular character of "The Jockey," dismisses the owner, trainer, and bookie as "libertines" at the end of the story. What does he mean by this? What sort of world has McCullers set up in "The Jockey?" What separates Bitsy from these men?