

11L2

English

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe by Carson McCullers is a story of love illustrated through the romantic longings and attractions of the three eccentric characters; Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy. McCullers depicts love as a force, often strong enough to change people's attitudes and behaviors. Yet, the author seems to say, if the love is unrequited, individuals, having lost their motivation to change, will revert back to their true selves.

The allure of the different characters, which is never revealed by the author, seems to indicate that feelings of love and attraction are not necessarily reasonable or understandable to others.

Miss Amelia is self-reliant, outspoken and very much a loner.

She stands six foot one inch tall and has a strong, masculine build. Her grey eyes are crossed, and the rest of her features are equally unattractive. Yet, the people of the small, southern town of Cheehaw accept her quirkiness because of the exquisite wine that she sells in her store and for her free doctoring and homemade remedies. Still, everyone is shocked when the handsome outlaw, Marvin Macy, falls in love with her.

Marvin is a "bold, fearless, and cruel" man who changes his unlawful ways to win Miss Amelia's love. Rather than robbing houses he begins attending church services on Sunday mornings. In an effort to court Miss Amelia, he learns proper etiquette, such as "rising and giving his chair to a lady, and abstaining from swearing and fighting". Two years after Marvin's reformation, he asks Miss Amelia to marry him. Miss Amelia does not love him but agrees to the marriage in order to satisfy her great-aunt. Once married, Miss Amelia is very aloof towards her husband and refuses to engage in marital relations with him. After ten days, Miss Amelia ends the marriage because she finds that she is unable to generate any positive feelings for Marvin. Several months after the divorce, Marvin reverts back to his initial corrupt ways and is "sent to a state penitentiary for robbing filling stations and holding up A & P stores".

Just as love had changed Marvin, so too did it change Miss Amelia. In the mid 1930's, several years after Miss Amelia's divorce, Lymon, a hunchback, comes to Miss Amelia claiming to be a distant cousin. She readily provides Cousin Lymon with food and board, and eventually any material object that he desires. The people of the town grow very curious of her new guest and of Miss Amelia's hospitality towards Lymon which is contrary to her characteristic untrusting and remote ways. The townspeople gather in her store one evening to meet Cousin Lymon. Unlike Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon is very sociable and enjoys entertaining the townsfolk with his patently tall tales. In a short period of time, Miss Amelia's store is converted into a cafe where people gather for food, drink, and gossip. They would discuss Miss Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon, indicating that they thought love between cousins is forbidden and incestuous.

Her changed behavior, in Lymon's presence, preoccupied and baffled them. Ever since Cousin Lymon's appearance, Miss Amelia would regularly wear a red dress that had been worn exclusively on Sundays. They also noted that, before he arrived, she would only leave her house to go to church or to pick up supplies for her store. While, when Cousin Lymon moves in, realizing that he loves

to travel, she would often drive with him into the city and go to see "movie-flicks" with him.

Before the story ends, Marvin Macy is released from prison and returns to Cheehaw. Cousin Lymon, unaware of Miss Amelia's short-lived marriage to the criminal is fascinated by Marvin's adventurous life. He leaves Miss Amelia, never having returned her love, to travel with Marvin. Broken-hearted, Miss Amelia returns to her original reclusive style of living.

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe enjoyably and precisely portrays the irrational nature of love in the ill-fated love triangle of Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy. None of the three characters are portrayed as particularly appealing people, yet they were loved. People love for very different reasons, " A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the poison lillies of the swamp."

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe

Story by: Carson McCullers

Copyright date: 1951

