

# A Study of the Master-Slave Dialectic Relationship of the "Other" in "The Ballad of the Sad Café"

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## Abstract

"The Ballad of the Sad Café" is one of the representative works of American writer Carson McCullers, which deeply explores the master-slave dialectic relationship of the "Other" under existentialism by depicting the complex relationships among three protagonists in a southern town. In the novel, the protagonists show both a longing for and a resistance to the "Other." Marvin Macy's obsession with Amelia and his manipulation of Cousin Lymon, as well as Amelia's dependence on Cousin Lymon and her disgust towards Marvin, reflect the complex and distorted relationship between them. This relationship is not only a master-slave relationship in emotions but also a dialectical process of self-awareness and other-awareness under existentialism. The novel reveals the eternal master-slave relationship between people by showing the power struggles and psychological changes between love and being loved, control and being controlled. In this relationship, the "Other" is both the object of love and control, while the protagonists constantly seek self-identity and freedom in their relationship with the "Other." Through an in-depth study of the master-slave dialectic relationship of the "Other" in "The Ballad of the Sad Café," we can better understand the complexity of interpersonal relationships under existentialism and the eternal exploration of self and the "Other" in the depths of the human heart.

## Keywords

"The Ballad of the Sad Café", "Other", master-slave dialectic relationship, existentialism.

## 1. Introduction

American writer Carson McCullers has always been controversial in the history of American literature. Her works are set in Southern small towns, with bizarre plots and characters who are either physically deformed or have mental disorders, often revolving around the theme of loneliness (B. Clark). In terms of content, her novels present readers with the alienation of residents in Southern small towns, their desire for communication, love, and being loved, but also their helpless anxiety and the cycle of loneliness. This state of existence, with the passage of time, has gradually become a spiritual dilemma faced by people in modern times, and the flickering light of existentialism in the 20th century also hints at the rich value hidden in it for literary researchers. Her masterpiece, *"The Ballad of the Sad Café,"* mainly tells the story of Amelia, a woman living in a Southern small town, and her cousin Lymon and ex-husband Marvin Macy.

*"The Ballad of the Sad Café"* depicts bizarre and grotesque love affairs, using a narrative mode of omniscient perspective and a disrupted narrative order to tell the story of a grotesque love triangle in this Southern small town (D. Fowler, 172). The handsome and evil playboy Marvin Macy in town falls in love with the outwardly masculine woman Amelia, whom he pursues but whom Amelia despises. Instead, she pours all her love onto her hunchbacked cousin Lymon. After Marvin decides to retaliate against Amelia's rejection, Lymon, in order to please his beloved Marvin, steals all of Amelia's money and runs away with Marvin. In this novel,

McCullers deliberately portrays three protagonists with different personalities but similar tragic endings, using her delicate and sorrowful style to depict their tragic and heroic grotesque love (B. Lin, 115), reflecting the absurd reality of people's universal existential crisis under alienation in modern society. In "*The Ballad of the Sad Café*," under the impact of Northern industrialization, the loneliness and strangeness of Southern society at that time, as well as the bizarre oppression of Southern small towns, the residents' eccentricity and futility of resistance perfectly coincide with the existentialist trends prevalent then and now. The grotesque relationship of mutual conquest and master-slave relationship among the three protagonists also resonates with the existentialist dialectical view of the "other" as master and slave. This portrayal of bizarre and grotesque plots vividly embodies the strong existentialist idea that "in love, both sides tame each other, becoming master and slave to each other."

## 2. Analysis of the Master-Slave Dialectical Relationship of the "Other" in "*The Ballad of the Sad Café*"

The term "other" has evolved and expanded in meaning over time, showing different connotations in various academic disciplines. In literary studies today, the "other" is often used as a high-frequency term in existentialist literary analysis, yet it is rarely connected to the master-slave dialectical relationship by researchers. However, the relationships between "subject" and "other," "master" and "slave," are intricately linked in the philosophy of master-slave dialectics represented by philosophers such as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Sartre. Therefore, in the following sections, the author will carefully explore the intricate connections between the existentialist master-slave views held by Hegel, Nietzsche, and Sartre, and "*The Ballad of the Sad Café*."

### 2.1. Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic

Although the concept of the "other" can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, it was Hegel who first discussed the "other" in the context of the master-slave relationship (T. Flynn). In his "*Phenomenology of Spirit*," Hegel proposed the master-slave dialectic that emerges from the binary opposition. In this dialectic, Hegel considers the independent consciousness as self-existing, i.e., the "master," while the dependent consciousness is seen as existing for the "other," i.e., the "slave."

The master-slave dialectic proposed by Hegel in his "*Phenomenology of Spirit*" can be seen as an embodiment of the binary opposition of self (self-consciousness) and other (consciousness of others) in Hegel's logic. Simply put, Hegel believed that two opposing consciousnesses emerge in struggle, "one is independent consciousness, essentially self-existent, the other is dependent consciousness, essentially existing for the other. The former is the master, the latter is the slave. (127)" The master's existence depends on the slave, while the slave regains subjectivity and self-existence through labor. However, under certain conditions, there can be a transformation between the master and the slave.

In "*The Ballad of the Sad Café*," the direct driving force behind the transformation of the master-slave relationship in Hegel's realm of the "other" is the emergence of love from Amelia, who originally saw herself as the "master," towards the "other," Lymon. Amelia's genuine love for Lymon leads to a shift from independent consciousness to attachment and obedience. In the novel, Amelia's transformation is evident. After accepting her cousin Lymon, Amelia's image undergoes a dramatic change in the eyes of the residents of this desolate town. She breaks her own previous rules, allowing customers of the store to drink in her room and allowing herself to be more feminine, and so on. Amelia's transformation symbolizes her beginning to transfer her "master power" to the hunchback Lymon, the "other" she loves. In the novel, when Amelia accepts her cousin, Lymon behaves in Amelia's love as if he were a master. McCullers describes

it as, "The hunchback came down the stairs, as proud as a man who owns every board in the floor beneath his feet (34)." Here, readers can see that Amelia's love and indulgence make Lymon seem like the owner of all of Amelia's possessions. Her love for Lymon also inspires her to transform her grocery store into a café. It can be said that without her cousin Lymon, Amelia's café would never have come into existence (M. Darren, 215). "The reason for all this, that is, Miss Amelia, almost stood at the kitchen door all night... Her skin turned pale, and her idle big hands sweated. In short, her appearance that night was like a lonely lover (39)." Amelia's image begins to change from a masculine and powerful woman to a woman in love. Originally, Amelia, who did not interact much with the "other," was depicted by McCullers as a female tyrant, a completely self-sufficient master personality who viewed the "other" as objects to be used and exploited, and could be called slaves. However, when she encounters her seriously physically handicapped cousin Lymon, the original strong Amelia transfers her master rights to the weaker hunchback Lymon. McCullers' contradictory arrangement not only demonstrates emotional power but also reflects Hegel's master-slave dialectic when confronting the "other" -- the assertion that "under certain circumstances, there can be a transformation between the master and the slave (112)".

## 2.2. Nietzsche's "Master Morality" and "Slave Morality"

In the attitude towards the master-slave relationship of the "other," Nietzsche's philosophy further interprets the master-slave relationship by dividing morality into "master morality" and "slave morality." "Master morality" is often associated with the concept of "will to power." These two concepts are products of Nietzsche actively abandoning Schopenhauer's "metaphysical" negative baggage and are also Nietzsche's counterattack against Schopenhauer's assertion that "people can only passively accept life."

The pursuit and affirmation of the "will to power" are the necessary prerequisites for master morality. Nietzsche firmly believes that the will to power is the vitality of spring, the affirmation of life. The strong are those who are more complete human beings, those who transcend the limitations of humanity, the "overman." They possess the majority of master morality and have learned to transform the will to power into vitality and creativity.

For the weak, they do not have enough strength to sustain this need continuously. Therefore, once this need is frustrated, it leads to the emergence of various systems of "slave morality," which attempt to constrain and suppress the development of the will.

In the novel, "master morality" is reflected in Miss Amelia's firm grasp of her "will to power," even in the face of pain and suffering caused by love. Her confidence, strong physique, and fighting spirit enable her to maintain a strong posture of "master morality" even in the face of the crumbling love and challenges from rivals (S. Jiang, 99). Miss Amelia's moral outlook has always been different from the "other." In the novel, Miss Amelia treats most people (including her ex-husband) with a detached or intentionally exploitative attitude. "For Miss Amelia, the only use of others is to make money from them, and she has been quite successful in this regard (22)." So, even though she deeply loves her cousin Lymon, Amelia does not give up her strong "master morality." What Amelia desires is to defend her love with the help of "master morality." In the final struggle with Marvin Macy, Miss Amelia has always been in the dominant position. She controls her own destiny and tries to regain her love. Therefore, the amazing strength shown by Miss Amelia even defeats her strong ex-husband. McCullers describes it as, "Now the time of trial has come, and at this critical moment, the stronger one is Miss Amelia. Marvin Macy was slippery and difficult to grasp, but Miss Amelia was stronger. Gradually, she pushed Marvin Macy back, inch by inch, pressing him close to the ground (76)." At this point, Miss Amelia's victory seems within reach, but when faced with the betrayal of her lover Lymon, Miss Amelia's "master morality" is shattered, replaced by a weak "slave morality."

As the plot develops, when Miss Amelia discovers the disdain and betrayal of her beloved, the original strong-weak relationship undergoes a transformation, and "slave morality" gains the upper hand. The failure and despair of love lead to Miss Amelia's defeat. Her once strong vitality dissipates, leaving only a strange and weak body and a more insane and sorrowful spirit. Once a master of fate, she falls into the sad state of being a slave to love and life, and can only soberly approach death. The café was originally a symbol of Miss Amelia's love for her cousin Lymon, but when love is shattered, the café naturally becomes dilapidated. The loss of love also completely plunges Miss Amelia into the sorrowful state of "slave morality." The novel describes, "Miss Amelia let her hair grow tangled and white. Her face also lengthened, her developed muscles atrophied, until she became thin and haggard like a crazy old woman. The gray eyes came closer day by day, looking for each other, exchanging eyes of sorrow and solace. What she said was also unpleasant, sharp and unbearable (79)." The rise of the café in the novel is due to Miss Amelia's love for her cousin Lymon, but when Miss Amelia's love is ruthlessly extinguished, the original "café" becomes the "sad café" (M. Ellis). Miss Amelia's original "master morality" is also ruthlessly worn away, degenerating into "slave morality."

### 2.3. Sartre's "Hell is other people" concept

Sartre's "Hell is other people" concept is vividly depicted in *"The Song of the Sad Cafe."* The characters in the work have complex and entangled relationships, where they gaze at, pursue, dominate, and depend on each other, forming a complex master-slave relationship that reflects the existential perspective of interpersonal relationships as described by Sartre. In terms of the "other" and ontology, Sartre's concept of "Hell is other people" creatively reinterprets Hegel's master-slave dialectic from an existentialist perspective. Sartre believes that "Hegel pointed out long ago that the existence of the self and self-consciousness depend on the other's consciousness of the other. The other constitutes my existence, and the self lives under the gaze of the other" (Sartre, 298). I and others are in an eternal mutual objectification, invasion, and entanglement, hence "Hell is other people." "Hell is other people" refers to the fact that each of us lives under the gaze of others, and this gaze leads to the "othering" of each self. If individuals cannot maintain their own subjectivity in social interactions, they will become slaves of the "other." This hell is strongly associated with "becoming a slave to others and being dominated." The presence of others itself constitutes a gaze, the gaze forms a relationship of strength and weakness, and this relationship develops into a master-slave relationship. Sartre's "Hell is other people" can also be seen as "self is also hell," where the split between others is actually an internal split of the self.

In Carson McCullers' *"The Song of the Sad Cafe,"* she writes, "The value and quality of love depends solely on the lover." She also writes, "Most of us are more willing to love others than to be loved by others. Almost everyone wants to be the lover. The reason is simple: people only feel something in their hearts, and many cannot bear to be in a state of being loved by others. Those who are loved are afraid of and hate those who give love, and the reason is very sufficient. Because the one who loves always wants to strip the one he loves naked. The one who loves desires to establish all connections with the one who is loved, even if this experience will only bring him pain (42)". In McCullers' portrayal, isn't the pursuit of the beloved precisely the most concentrated and cruel form of "gaze"? The active gaze of the lover makes the beloved passive, sensitive, and objectified. This is an extreme form of "othering" gaze, which, compared to the unconscious gaze of the general public, appears even more unfounded, mysterious, and absurd. In McCullers' writing, love becomes a romanticized master-slave relationship, conquest and resistance, domination and dependence, exhaustion and reservation, the "otherness" and "master-slave relationship" of love and being loved make McCullers firmly write, "People would rather love others than be loved (42)." From this passage by McCullers, it is clear that she believes there is not much relationship between loving and being loved. To actively love

someone is to impose a "slave-like" "othering" on the other person. In the language of love that is "othered," the lover tries to tame and even dominate the beloved, becoming the master of the beloved. This romanticized master-slave relationship is vividly portrayed in the novel.

The relationship between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon can be interpreted as a typical example of Sartre's "Hell is other people" concept (X. M. Jing, 68). Miss Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon is not just a matter of emotions, but a desire to subjugate Lymon to her will. However, when she discovers that she has been betrayed by Lymon, the object she tried to dominate becomes her "hell." This transformation demonstrates the complexity and uncertainty of interpersonal relationships emphasized by Sartre, even in love.

On the other hand, Marvin Macy's character also embodies Sartre's concept of "Hell is other people." His love for Miss Amelia is not out of genuine emotion, but out of a desire to dominate and control. His intense pursuit and love for Miss Amelia did not receive a response from her, but instead led to her disgust and hatred towards him. This mutual attempt to dominate and be dominated has plunged them into the "Hell is other people" described by Sartre.

Cousin Lymon's care for Miss Amelia for four years does not compare to his love at first sight for Marvin Macy. Marvin Macy's intense pursuit of Miss Amelia did not leave a trace of love in Miss Amelia's heart. The strange circle of the three protagonists in the story, chasing and tormenting each other, makes each person live under the gaze of others or their own "love." The hell among the three is at least consistent with the view that three people's perspectives must be included in Sartre's emphasized "Hell is other people." All three characters long to objectify and be objectified by the object of their love, as the wholehearted devotion of love longs to become the master of the loved one. However, they are repelled or even disgusted by those who seek their love. Because here, the pursuit of the lover for the beloved is itself an attempt to make the beloved a slave. The three protagonists in the story all hope to become the master of their own love, rather than become slaves to others' love. In other words, they do not want to be in the hell of being observed by others. Sartre's concept of "Hell is other people" is vividly reflected in "The Song of the Sad Cafe," where the work reveals the power struggles and complexities in interpersonal relationships, as well as the master-slave relationship in love.

### 3. Conclusion

In "*The Ballad of the Sad Café*" from the perspective of existentialism, the master-slave relationship of the "Other" has covered and dissected all aspects of social relationships—love, customers, acquaintances, enemies... All the social relationships Miss Amelia experiences are also a microcosm of all our social relationships today. Under the analysis of the master-slave dialectic of the "Other," Miss Amelia's hedgehog-like embrace of love becomes clearer. She embraces both the charm and absurdity of love, yearning to become the master of love, to control her emotional life. However, the inspiration and destruction of love have made her go from a "strong person" to a "weak person"; from a "master" to a "slave," but also let the originally alienated "Otherness" return to the "subject." After all, when the self awakens emotionally, who can deny that Miss Amelia is not truly regaining and reclaiming the control of her own desires? In McCullers's contradictory narrative, Miss Amelia is both a "master" and a "slave." Even in the end of the novel, Miss Amelia loses to the "Other"—Marvin Macy. But after the awakening of her love consciousness, the crumbling outcome of the shift from offense to defense, isn't it the most precious revelation that "*The Ballad of the Sad Café*" and existentialist master-slave perspective bring to us?

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