From an aesthetic and critical standpoint, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and *Bastard Out of Carolina* belong to two separate eras of southern gothic literature. Though she wrote her novel during the 1950s, Carson McCullers sets *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* in the 1940s in an unnamed Georgia mill town, whereas Dorothy Allison sets *Bastard Out of Carolina* twenty years later in the early 1960s in her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina. More importantly, McCullers characterizes her novel with touches of whimsy that present a magical realism lens; however, her work maintains a genuine, yet gloomy perspective of southern small town life. Dorothy Allison, on the other hand, deliberately writes *Bastard Out of Carolina* as an ode to her troubled childhood, and uses gritty realism to bring her novel to life. Despite the generational and the stylistic disparities, however, McCullers's and Allison's work share a common thread: grotesque protagonists treated as outsiders in their communities. Through their respective depictions of Miss Amelia and Bone, McCullers and Allison criticize division in the South and confront their own personal experiences as grotesque women.

Throughout *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, McCullers takes special interest in Miss Amelia's physical appearance, offering a multitude of details that set her apart from the other townsfolk and signify her as grotesque. From the very first mention of Miss Amelia, McCullers establishes her as androgynous, describing her face as, “sexless and white, with
two gray crossed eyes” (1). Further descriptions of her face and body include that Miss Amelia has, “bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality” (McCullers 2). These details such as her short hair, muscles, and androgynous face, place Miss Amelia's gender into a new category. However, it would be wrong to categorize Miss Amelia as a man trapped in a woman's body because, fittingly, McCullers never places a label on her protagonist's gender. This is indicative of McCullers's own fluid perception of gender, as Virginia Spencer Carr suggests in her biography, *The Lonely Hunter*. From a young age, McCullers showed the same penchant for men's clothing as Miss Amelia did; consequently, her schoolmates described her as “weird and freakish-looking and queer” (Carr 30) and often threw rocks at her. As an adolescent, McCullers stood taller most of her classmates at five-foot-eight—a characteristic, Carr notes, that made her feel even more self-conscious—and she passes on this abnormality to Miss Amelia, making her a giant at six-foot-two. This creative decision further secures the character's role as an intimidating, larger-than-life grotesque woman in her small, close-minded town.

In another act of art imitating life, Miss Amelia reflects McCullers's own fluid gender identity, which gives the reader an opportunity to see the advantages of straddling the gender binary during this particular time period and region. Critics such as Jan Whitt have theorized that perhaps McCullers's gender fluidity in life and in writing was not merely self-expression, but was also an attempt to gain more power in the hostile structure of southern culture. In “Living and Writing in the Margins,” Whit wonders if, “it is possible that McCullers was also expressing her own discomfort with being female in a world that denied her other forms of sexual and personal self-expression” (98). By all accounts, it was simply easier to be a man living in the South in the 1940s, and comparatively, it was risky to be a woman exuding
masculinity. However, because of her overnight success at age twenty-three with the publication of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers managed to escape much of the ridicule she experienced during her childhood by surrounding herself with like-minded writers. Among contemporaries and friends in the New York literary scene, she was certainly no longer considered a freak, and instead her androgyny became part of her literary reputation (Carr). It is curious to wonder if McCullers's masculine tendencies, in fact, helped garner additional respect in the male-dominated world of publishing.

Similarly, in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, Miss Amelia achieves a certain level of status in her small town based upon her natural healing abilities—but it is doubtful that she would have the same amount of power in town if she were a traditional feminine woman. As Gleeson-White points out in “A 'Calculable Woman' and 'Jittery Ninny','” “In light of the oppressive position reserved for women in the novel's Southern social setting, it is not difficult to see why these women identify with men, for masculinity promises freedom, power and status” (48). Though already a fiercely independent woman by nature, embracing masculinity as part of her identity only further accumulates power for Miss Amelia. The proof lies in the text, as she conducts a successful business, cafe, and medical operation all by herself. Comparatively, with the exception of Marvin's adopted mother Mrs. Mary Hale (21), no other woman in the town is mentioned by name in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, much less given an active, independent role in the novel. Arguably, if Miss Amelia were a more traditionally feminine woman with longer hair, a shorter stature, and less of a fondness for overalls, she might not have such a successful business. This represents an exacting creative decision on McCullers's part; in showing that Miss Amelia receives respect because of her masculine traits, McCullers criticizes the gender divide in the South and suggests that women should have agency no matter how they dress or conduct themselves.
Although in life her masculine traits distinctly outweighed her feminine traits, McCullers creates a gender balancing act in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, and lets Miss Amelia display femininity in crucial moments. Miss Amelia wears overalls every day of the week except for Sundays (McCullers 17), when she dons a red dress and works in the cafe. However, wearing the dress does not turn her into a lady, as McCullers notes when Miss Amelia warms herself immodestly in front of a fire for all to see. McCullers writes, “There was not a grain of modesty about Miss Amelia, and she frequently seemed to forget altogether that there were men in the room. Now as she stood warming herself, her red dress was pulled up quite high in the back so that a piece of her strong, hairy thigh could be seen by anyone who cared to look at it” (44). The dress serves as a symbol of controlled femininity for Miss Amelia, a symbol of power and a device to retain agency. Although the dress itself is feminine, her behavior and attitude are still decidedly masculine, as evidenced through her immodest lifting of her skirt to show her thigh. Gleeson-White notes that this is Miss Amelia’s attempt to make a bold statement with her body and writes that, “Once more, Amelia turns her nose up at those who hope she will become a ‘calculable woman’ and she does this, ironically, by becoming what woman is expected to be: feminine. The tableau of Miss Amelia in a dress, then, makes a mockery of so-called natural gender categories” (51-52). The only other occasion when Miss Amelia wears a dress is on her wedding day; incidentally, when Marvin Macy makes his unwelcome return to town, Miss Amelia wears the red dress upon his visit to the cafe. McCullers places this in the text as another symbol of gender defiance mingled with feminine agency. The dress, in each of these cases, might initially put Miss Amelia in a traditionally feminine, subservient role as a pretty, well-dressed wife. Instead, Miss Amelia shirks Marvin Macy’s affections on their wedding night (22), and serves him with a clenched jaw during his return to her cafe (39). In these scenes, McCullers
gives all the power to her grotesque woman as she once again shows Miss Amelia moving fluidly between her masculine and feminine traits and retaining the upper hand the entire time. In her own life, it is unclear whether McCullers ever conformed to femininity and simultaneously retained agency; certainly, it is possible that through her fiction, she projected her desire to retain agency and be treated as an equal regardless of what gender she chose to perform.

While McCullers offers her protagonist Miss Amelia a taste of power within her role as a grotesque, masculine woman, Dorothy Allison’s protagonist Bone in *Bastard Out of Carolina* grows up in Greenville, SC in the 1960s just as disempowered as Allison herself. Allison creates a purposeful parallel between herself and Bone, identifying them both as grotesque outsiders in multiple ways, from their roles as bastards, to their working class backgrounds, to the physical and sexual abuse they suffered at the hand of their stepfathers. Allison openly describes *Bastard Out of Carolina* as both an autobiographical novel and a cathartic release in her essay “A Case of Class,” stating that, “Writing *Bastard Out of Carolina* became, ultimately, the way to claim my family’s pride and tragedy, and the embattled sexuality I had fashioned on a base of violence and abuse” (34). Because of her disempowered role in the South which categorized her as grotesque, Allison felt urged to reclaim the agency lost to her through the various traumas she suffered during her childhood. Unlike McCullers, however, whose protagonist begins the novel from an empowered position in her town, Allison cuts no breaks for her protagonist.

From the beginning of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Allison establishes Bone's role as a grotesque outsider through her family's working class background. Bone struggles with hunger for most of her childhood as her mama and stepfather work around the clock to make ends meet. Her classmates often insult her and call her 'white trash' because of this, but
Bone’s mama reassures them that they aren’t bad people, saying, “We’re not even really poor. Anybody says something to you, you keep that in mind. We’re not bad people. And we pay our way. We just can’t always pay when people want” (Allison 82). This does little to comfort Bone, however, and after her mother says this, Bone considers her sister and thinks, “We didn’t believe her. We knew what the neighbors called us, what Mama wanted to protect us from. We knew who we were” (82). Allison shows a sense of resignation within Bone; a heavy-hearted acceptance not of her class, but of the ridicule she experiences as a result of her class. By internalizing the remarks from her peers, Bone allows her class to become part of who she is, an irrevocable part of her identity that will always be shameful. She begins to hate herself for being poor white trash, just as others hate her for it.

In her own life, Allison experienced this same sense of shame over her class, and witnessed the hatred others can inflict upon each other when they perceive a lower class as grotesque. At the same time, however, Allison feels frustration over the divide between the “poor” who gain respect from others, and the “poor” like her own family, who do not. Allison explains:

“There was an idea of the good poor – hardworking, ragged but clean, and intrinsically honorable. I understood that we were the bad poor: men who drank and couldn't keep a job; women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from working too many hours and bearing too many children; and children with runny noises, watery eyes and the wrong attitudes... We knew ourselves despised. My family was ashamed of being poor, of feeling helpless” (18).

As Allison says, a multitude of reasons motivated her to tell the story of her family in the context of the Boatwrights: a desire to break down class stereotypes, to bring visibility and
authenticity for her working class roots in literature, and, finally, a simple desire to tell her story and alleviate the sense of shame she felt throughout her life. By writing down her story as Bone's story, Allison had the opportunity to empower herself through her fiction and raise herself above her marginalized status. Bone's struggle elevates herself above her status as an outsider, mirroring Allison's refusal to accept society's chosen role for her as an outsider.

In addition to her working class background, the physical and sexual abuse Bone suffers at the hand of her stepfather, Daddy Glen, renders her grotesque. After raping her for the first time at age seven, Daddy Glen continues his abuse through irregular beatings and molestations for the better part of Bone's adolescence. Though Bone keeps the abuse a secret from her family for most of her childhood, she cannot escape the physical signs of the abuse. Allison describes evidence of years violence on Bone's body: “I was always getting hurt, it seemed, in ways Mama could not understand and I could not explain... There were lumps at the back of my head, not swellings of flesh and tissue but a rumpled ridge of bone. My big toes went flat and wide, broken within a few months of each other when I smashed into doorjambs, running while looking back over my shoulder” (111). Long-term abuse from Daddy Glen changes Bone's body in small but significant ways, and alters her appearance forever. Broken bones and lumps mark her body with suffering and, to a discerning eye, make her appearance more grotesque. Perhaps the most grotesque aspect of the abuse, however, is not simply the way her appearance changes, but the way she internalizes the abuse. Remaining silent despite these injuries and offering no explanation to her mother creates an inner wound just as profound as a broken bone. As Bone grows older and the abuse intensifies, so does her internal reaction to his sexual and physical abuse.

Besides the abnormal changes in her body, Bone becomes grotesque through what some might call sexual dysfunction, which occurs as a result of her abuse. As a teenager,
after a beating or unwanted sexual contact from Daddy Glen, Bone begins to have sexual fantasies about what happened. Allison writes, “My fantasies got more violent and more complicated as Daddy Glen continued to beat me with the same two or three belts he’d set aside for me... I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but I was the one who masturbated. I did that, and how could I explain to anyone that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told myself about it?” (113). This is another example of Bone silently internalizing her grotesque, bodily abuse. She is ashamed of these fantasies and the physical release she receives from masturbation, but does not know how to justify these urges. As much as she hates the violence inflicted upon her, Bone desires violence sexually, a thought which confuses and shames her. However, J. Bouchon points out in her essay “Family Violence, Incest, and White-Trash Shame in Dorothy Allison's Bastard Out of Carolina” that Bone's masturbation fantasies are not, in fact, a grotesque action: “If in this replay of her stepfather's physical and sexual abuse, Bone attempts to gain active mastery over passive suffering, she also defies her stepfather through her autoerotic pleasures and thus achieves a secret sense of 'pride.' Even though her masochistic fantasies are 'terrible,' she still loves them.” (44) Essentially, because Bone's fantasies involve her gaining the upper hand and showing agency, her masturbation is a defensive act. Though she finds her fantasies shameful and keeps them a secret, Bouchon insists that this is part of Bone's healing process. Masturbating to violent fantasies is her way of externalizing her internalized shame; by using what she sees as a broken body for personal and empowering sexual pleasure, she takes back her agency and make her body whole again.

Despite their protagonists' grotesque bodies and their roles as outsiders within the setting of small southern towns, both McCullers and Allison offer some relief for Miss Amelia and Bone in the form of camaraderie with fellow outcasts. With the appearance of
Cousin Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* and Shannon Pearl in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, for a brief time, both Miss Amelia and Bone no longer feel isolated in their respective internal and external power struggles. These grotesque characters are significant not merely because their friendship elevates the protagonists above their ostracized status, but also because the new outcasts represent complicated facets of the authors' own outcasted lives. Miss Amelia's companion, Cousin Lymon, is the perfect embodiment of the southern gothic grotesque body with his hunchback, dwarfish stature, and ugly face. McCullers describes, “His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth” (4). Cousin Lymon's broken, abnormal body seems particularly symbolic when one considers the McCullers's physical state. In actuality, her androgyny was not the only grotesque aspect of her life. Surviving a few bouts of rheumatic fever during her adolescence left McCullers a sickly adult, and her condition only worsened with age, as she suffered several strokes, one of which temporarily paralyzed her left side and left her with limited mobility (Carr 2). It is clear that Cousin Lymon is not supposed to represent McCullers, but rather, perhaps could represent her preoccupation with the weaknesses of the body, and whether the weakness of the body can sometimes reflect a weakness of character. Carr elaborates on this subject, writing, “Frequently in [McCullers's] writings a misshapen body was but a sign of man's incapacity to expand, to give himself completely or to receive love” (2). Despite Cousin Lymon's 'misshapen body' and rather displeasing appearance, Miss Amelia forms a close bond with him that develops into romantic love. Whether Cousin Lymon returns her love is unclear to the reader and the town; in any case, to the townsfolk, the couple seems strange since they live together for six years and yet the relationship remains unconsummated. Still, Cousin Lymon eventually affirms Carr's assertion that he cannot give and receive love as
Miss Amelia does, when he betrays Miss Amelia in favor of Marvin Macy. This betrayal, however, serves as a bridge between McCullers's and Allison's novels; both authors make dramatic statements about how the friendship between grotesque characters can transform into betrayal.

Likewise, the friendship Bone creates with her grotesque counterpart offers temporary relief from her isolation, but leads to personal betrayal later in the novel. Equally as lonely and friendless as Bone, Shannon Pearl is the ugliest girl in town, and Bone finds herself drawn to her fellow outcast. Allison describes Shannon in the most disgusting terms possible, emphasizing the undesirable nature of her body, much like Bone's: “Six inches shorter than me, Shannon had the white skin, white hair and pale pink eyes of an albino, though her mama insisted Shannon was no such thing... Shannon was wholly monstrous, a lurching hunched creature shining with sweat and smug satisfaction” (Allison 155). Arguably, Shannon is even more of an outcast than Bone is; despite her 'white trash' upbringing and her abuse, no one ever describes Bone as 'monstrous.' Because of this, Bone takes pity on Shannon, and befriends her not only out of loneliness, but because it's the Christian thing to do. She is shocked to find, however, that Shannon is not as sweet as she seems – a revelation which expands both characters considerably. Allison writes, “I had the idea that because she was so ugly on the outside, it was only reasonable that Shannon would turn out to be saintlike when you got to know her... Shannon Pearl simply and completely hated everyone who had ever hurt her, and spent most of her time brooding on punishments either she or God would visit on them” (157-158). This bond with a fellow undesirable shows subtle growth in Bone's character. Although Bone has internalized her abuse and marginalization, she has not resorted to this black-hearted hatred that Shannon has against the ones who have hurt her. Bone's abuse has led to disgust with herself, not hatred for others; a
fact which becomes more apparent when Shannon betrays Bone and moves from serving as her friend to serving as her foil.

Despite the bonds that form between these grotesque characters, and the interpersonal revelations that happen along the way, each friendship eventually unravels and ends in betrayal. Although Bone has found a friend who shares her faith in God and her isolation as an ugly undesirable, Shannon harbors the same bias as those who ostracize Bone. She turns on Bone and insults her, saying, “Everybody knows you're all a bunch of drunks and thieves and bastards. Everybody knows you just come round so you can eat off my mama's table and beg scraps we don't want no more” (Allison 170). Shannon essentially echoes the words that Bone has heard her entire life, and reaffirms her worst fears about herself. This betrayal reminds Bone that she will never deserve anything except pity and scorn. For this familiar insult to come from a fellow grotesque character such as Shannon only deepens Bone’s role as an outsider. Hurt, Bone lashes out at Shannon and ends the friendship with the only close friend she has ever had in her childhood, leaving her a lonely grotesque girl yet again.

A similar betrayal occurs in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe during the penultimate fight between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy. Although Miss Amelia appears to have the upper hand over Marvin Macy, her supposed friend and grotesque companion Cousin Lymon also betrays her trust. McCullers writes, “Yet at the instant Miss Amelia grasped the throat of Marvin Macy the hunchback sprang forward and sailed through the air as though he had grown hawk wings. He landed on the broad strong back of Miss Amelia and clutched at her neck with his clawed little fingers” (51). The symbolic image indicates that as Cousin Lymon leaps onto Miss Amelia’s back, she becomes a hunchback herself, her body becoming even more abnormal. Cousin Lymon not only breaks up the fight and makes Marvin Macy the victor, but in the process, he throws all of his weight upon Miss Amelia as a burden, severing
their friendship and their supposed mutual respect in the process. His betrayal leaves her lying on the floor, defeated, surrounded by her worst enemy and the rest of the town – a stunning end for such a powerful woman.

These two character developments from *Bastard Out of Carolina* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* raise a crucial question: why would McCullers and Allison allow their protagonists' grotesque counterparts to turn on them? First, both authors use these crucial scenes to lead into larger statements about the grotesque roles these characters hold in the span of the stories; more importantly, the fictional betrayals reflect the personal betrayals McCullers and Allison suffered during their lives as grotesque women. Within the context of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bouchon analyzes Shannon's betrayal alongside her dramatic death scene, in which she becomes engulfed in flames at her family's barbecue:

“The fiery death of Shannon depicts the self-consuming nature of her chronic shame-rage. It also dramatizes the social death experienced by the socially stigmatized individual and the annihilating power of the other's contempt as it enacts the common desire of the shamed, abjected individual, who is treated as an object of contempt, to hide or disappear” (46).

Since Shannon's community symbolically destroys her self-image through their insults about her body being monstrous and abnormal, it is fitting for her body to literally disintegrate. According to others, with her albinism and ugly face, she is so far away from the standard of what a normal body should be that she can no longer function as a regular part of society, because she would never be good enough. Bone and Shannon are linked together in this struggle, and Allison herself writes that this desire to be better lies at the heart of the story: “I thought that if only I were a little better, a little smarter, a little meaner, a little faster, or
maybe even a better Christian, none of those terrible things would be happening. So I wrote as strong a story as I could about a young girl who is slowly being convinced that she is a monster, and who is not being saved by those she loves most” (54). Allison’s desire to better herself and to reconcile her grotesque, abused body translated into her characterization of both Shannon and Bone, with different outcomes. While both Shannon and Bone absorb the public outcries against their grotesque bodies, Bone never externalized the violence and insults she was subjected to by lashing out at others physically or verbally, as Shannon did. Bone’s pain is largely internalized, and yet she does not let it consume her, as Shannon’s symbolic, fiery hatred does. By the end of the novel, Bone rises above her shame from her grotesque past; she does not allow herself to disappear into self-hatred. In this way, Allison writes Bone as a triumphant figure, modeled from her own life: a grotesque woman who overcomes the forces who try to take away her power, and emerges transformed and whole, just as Allison did after her own traumatic childhood.

However, McCullers takes a decidedly more cynical approach to the obstacles facing her grotesque characters with her conclusion to *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, particularly with Cousin Lymon’s betrayal and abandonment of Miss Amelia. Critics have noticed a parallel between Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon and Marvin Macy’s relationship and a love triangle that occurred in McCullers’s own life. During McCullers’s second marriage with Reeves McCullers (whom she had previously divorced in 1941), the couple met a musician named David Diamond and both became entangled in an emotionally passionate and yet sexually chaste relationship with him. According to Carr’s research, McCullers did not want to share David with Reeves, for fear of losing both her husband and her closest male companion. This fear arises in her fiction, as Carr points out, “In her novella, Miss Amelia was abandoned by Cousin Lymon, the little dwarf she loved inordinately, and Marvin Macy, her husband, whom
she loathed, when the two men teamed up against her... [Carson] knew it might develop into a permanent relationship with them that excluded her” (171). Since McCullers was writing The Ballad of the Sad Cafe at the same time as this personal drama unfolded, it seems likely that McCullers sketched the Miss Amelia-Marvin Macy-Cousin Lymon triangle from her own life. Considering her grotesque physical form, with her androgyny and her partially disabled body, abandonment and loneliness could have been a deep-seated fear for McCullers.

Arguably, McCullers actualizes these fears of abandonment with the tragic conclusion of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, as Miss Amelia loses what matters most to her: her grotesque companion Cousin Lymon, her business, and her power. Unlike Allison's grotesque protagonist, there is no triumph for Miss Amelia. Just as McCullers lost both Reeves and David later in her life, and could not overcome the gender binary in her own life, neither can Miss Amelia. In the end, she shrinks from her former proud, aggressive body into a newly imagined, marginalized, and shamed body.

For both Miss Amelia and Bone, the oppressive societal structure of the South shaped their lives and unfairly defined their bodies, but their stories yielded vastly different conclusions. By exploring and breaking down traditional gender roles through Miss Amelia's androgyny in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, McCullers shows the ironclad nature of gender binaries and the inconsistency of gender perception in the South. Initially, McCullers offers Miss Amelia a sense of power that McCullers presumably may not have had in her own life, then abruptly takes it away from her, leaving her disempowered grotesque body to suffer alone. Dorothy Allison, on the other hand, places her autobiographical protagonist Bone in the same disempowered state that Allison herself grew up in, and forces her to fight for power. Despite her struggles to retain agency over her grotesque body, Bone, unlike Miss Amelia, emerges victorious. Though she lives most of her childhood as a silenced outsider,
by the end, her abuser Daddy Glen leaves for good, allowing Bone to finally heal from her trauma, just as Allison did. Comparing the ends of the two novels suggests that by not accepting defeat or internalizing societal norms, it is possible for southern women to relinquish their seemingly grotesque bodies and retain agency over their identities and their lives.


