The Ballad of the Sad Café
by Carson McCullers (1953)

This extract starts with the sentence: "Love reversed the character of Marvin Macy". Hence we immediately understand that the text is going to be about two characters, one of which is Marvin Macy. Apparently, he has managed to reform himself on different counts: he became "good" (l. 3), "learned good manners" (l. 6), "improved his character" (l. 8). What is said is that "No longer did he lie..." (l. 4), which actually means that he used to lie around on the floor of the front porch all Sunday, singing and playing his guitar. Furthermore, "He quit swearing..." (l. 7), which entails that he used to fight, to swear and to use holy names in vain. What is also suggested is that "He was good to his brother and foster mother" (l. 3), which leads us to believe that he must have been bad before. Besides, "He saved his wages and learned thrift" (l. 4), which makes it obvious that he used to be a spendthrift. Finally, the narrator writes, "He reached out towards God" (l. 4). So it is likely that he had never given any importance to religion. And if "He learned good manners" (l. 6), this is another indication that he must have been ill mannered.

The end of the first paragraph moves on to describing the way in which Marvin Macy proposed to Miss Amelia, the second main character. Apparently it took no less than "two years" (l. 7-8) for Marvin Macy to achieve his slow but deep transformation. The way he proposes may seem odd, but it may correspond to the customs of that place and that period. Anyway, if the courting habits we know do include bringing flowers or jewels, they do not include bringing food, especially tripe, which many people find repulsive. Even the fact that he brings a silver ring may seem strange, because in our culture an engagement ring is offered only when the two agree to be married, not at the time of proposal.

Miss Amelia is an even stranger character. We have no indication of her age - but the description evokes a spinster. She runs a store and a bar ("the store", l. 22; "some customer who had come into the store to buy a pint from her", l. 24-25). She is independent and authoritarian. She lives on her own, does nearly everything by herself, except cooking, and has well-established habits. Until Marvin declared himself, Amelia was not aware of his being in love with her. She is a nervous, bad-tempered, domineering person ("impatient, bored, exasperated", l. 19; "slammed the kitchen door and gave it an ugly kick", l. 37).

Clearly, the whole wedding is utterly odd. In the text the word "unholy" is used, evoking the words of the priest during the ceremony: "consented together in holy wedlock". Something that is unholy is evil, wicked or sinful. The sin suggested here (l. 35) is that Miss Amelia refused to have sex with her husband. Actually, before that, we are told about a "curious red glow on the pair before the altar" (l. 15-16). The red glow may have symbolized hell and given an indication that their wedding was not going to be a normal one, that it was cursed in some way. Moreover, the presence of the word "later" was a first indication given to the reader that the marriage was not going to be successful. This marriage was unexpected, as Amelia did not seem to be looking for a husband, but if it had been successful, the local people would not have been making speculations about why Amelia got married. It is only later, when they understood that the marriage was a failure that the villagers really wondered why Amelia had accepted to marry Marvin. "So far" usually indicates that a certain stage has been reached, and that things are going to change. If until then, all had gone "decently enough", we may have expected that from then on, the situation was going to get worse.

The expression "wears the breeches" must be taken in the literal as well as in the metaphorical / figurative sense. Indeed, Amelia wears breeches, and this betrays her masculine aspect, which is suggested throughout the text ("strode with great steps"; "her overalls"; "talked about some deal"; "stomped"; "had a smoke with her father's pipe", etc). But the expression also means that she is a very authoritarian person. Indeed she means to remain in control of everything, even though she has a husband now: (walked) "ahead of him", l. 21; "went about her ordinary business", l. 32; "at eleven o'clock, the bride took a lamp and went upstairs", l. 34. In opposition, Marvin is presented as weak and submissive ("meek and longing", l. 2-3; "a loose, foolish, blissful face", l. 33-34; "the groom followed close behind her", l. 34-35).

Throughout the text, the presence of the narrator is felt. For instance, the second paragraph starts with the word "And", which is uncommon in written style. Two sentences further on, we find the word "anyway", which also belongs to the oral style and is used to cut short a digression. The narrator knows a lot about the characters, but realizes that she is going further than she wished to; we are under the impression that she is literally talking to us. This induces a familiar relationship between the reader and the omniscient narrator, which leaves us wanting to know more about these two strange characters.