FROM LIFE INTO DEATH: CLOCK WITHOUT HANDS

Clock Without Hands was published fifteen years after The Member of the Wedding. By the time the novel was officially released in September 1961, it had already been on the best-seller list for a month and was ranked sixth in the nation. It was possible because book-sellers were free to sell copies in advance. The novel remained in the list for the five months though reviews were mixed, far more divided than those of any of her previous books. Carson McCullers' illnesses, her husband's suicide, her mother's death, and her deep desperation following the failure of The Square Root of Wonderful must have contributed to the preoccupation with death which pervades this novel, on which she worked for ten years. The social and intellectual climate of the early sixties must also be considered in evaluating the critical response to the novel. The popularity that the novel gained indicates that between the time which the book elucidates (1953-54) and the year it was published (1961), racism had become fully recognized as a national and international problem.
In *Clock Without Hands* McCullers is concerned with the loneliness that results from a lack of rapport with the self. The search for self is the theme of this novel. Malone, the protagonist, reads Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death* in the hospital. The sentence that he memorizes is: "The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed."¹

*Clock Without Hands* has four main characters: J.T. Malone, a forty-year-old pharmacist; his friend, Judge Clane, a militant white superman-cist, aged eighty five; the Judge's grandson, Jester; and a blue-eyed Negro youth named Sherman Pew. When the novel opens, Malone has been told by his physician that he has leukemia, and fifteen months later, as the book closes, he dies at the age of forty-two. Though he knows he must die, he does not know when, and is thus like a man watching a clock without hands.

or, to be more precise, lives his life according to a clock without hands. When he is discharged from the hospital,

He was unable to think about the months ahead or to imagine death. Afterwards he was surrounded by a zone of loneliness, although his daily life was not much changed. He did not tell his wife about his trouble because of the intimacy that tragedy must have restored; the passions of marriage had long since winnowed to the pre-occupation of parenthood .... Malone could not understand the change that had taken place in his wife. He had married a girl in a chiffon dress who had once fainted when a mouse ran over her shoe —— and mysteriously she had become a grey-haired housewife with a business of her own and even some Coca-Cola stock. He lived now in a curious vacuum surrounded by the concerns of family life —— the talk of high school proms, Tommy's violin recital, and a seven-tiered wedding cake —— and the daily activities swirled around him as dead leaves ring the centre of a whirlpool, leaving him curiously untouched. (12-13)
The above passage shows the loss of identity that Malone experiences. Loss of identity results in loneliness, and when one is lonely, time passes very slowly. That is why Malone, while waiting for his death, complains of a "zone of loneliness." That he is going to die makes him restless, absent-minded, and confused:

In spite of the weakness of his disease, Malone was restless. Often he would walk aimlessly around the streets of the town—down through the shambling, crowded slums around the cotton mill, or through the Negro sections, or the middle class streets of houses set in careful lawns. On these walks he had the bewildered look of an absent-minded person who seeks something but has already forgotten the thing that is lost. Often, without cause, he would reach out and touch some random object; he would veer from his route to touch a lamp post or place his hands against a brick wall. Then he would stand transfixed and abstracted. Again he would examine a green-leaved elm tree with morbid attention as he picked a
flake of sooty bark. The lamp post, the wall, the tree would exist when he was dead and the thought was loathsome to Malone. There was a further confusion — he was unable to acknowledge the reality of approaching death, and the conflict led to a sense of ubiquitous unreality. Sometimes, and dimly, Malone felt he blundered among a world of incongruities in which there was no order or conceivable design. (13-14)

Malone has allowed his life to be managed for him by others, and, in a flash self-knowledge born out of the realization of his approaching death, he sees that he has never really lived:

The pharmacy was the first store open in Milan and the last to close. Standing faithfully, listening to complaints, prescribing medicine, making cokes and sundaes, compounding prescriptions ... no more, no more! Why had he done it so long? Like a plodding old mule going round and round a sorghum mill. And going home every night. And sleeping in bed with his wife whom he had long since ceased to love. Why? Because there
was no fitting place to be except the pharmacy? Because there was no other fitting place to sleep except in bed beside his wife? Working at the pharmacy, sleeping with his wife, no more! His drab livingness spread out before him .... (102-103)

The question that bothers Malone is, if he has never really lived, how can he die? Therefore he decides to acquire an identity in the few months available so that his life will have some meaning.

Judge Clane is an inept politician. He also seems to live according to a clock without hands as he tries to ignore the course of history and the passage of time. He is happy to be called a reactionary who turns back the clock a hundred years. Dishonesty seems to be his habit. He never pays his income tax. He reads the Kinsey Report behind the dust jacket of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* though he himself was responsible for the banning of the book from the public library. He is full of self deception. He sees only what he wishes to see and hears only what he wishes to hear. After suffering a stroke,
He would not admit it was a true stroke — spoke of 'a light case of polio', 'little seizure', etc. When he was up and around, he declared he used the walking stick because he liked it and that the 'little attack' had probably benefited him as his mind had grown keener because of contemplation and 'new studies'. (53)

He was blind even to the fact that his wife, Miss. Missy, was dying of cancer:

When it was apparent that his wife was failing, he didn't want to know and tried to deceive both her and himself .... When it was obvious that his wife was in pain, the Judge would tiptoe softly to the refrigerator, eat without tasting what he ate, thinking only that his wife had been very sick and was just recovering from a serious operation. So he steadied himself to his secret everyday grief and would not let himself understand. (49)

He tries to monopolize his two companions — his orphaned grandson, Jester Clane, and his employee, Sherman Pew. Both of them are eighteen years old.
Jester Clane has lived with his grandfather since birth. Sherman Pew is a blue-eyed Negro. He administers Judge Clane's insulin shots. The Judge's wife died shortly after the violent death of their son Johnny who shot himself on Christmas day. Soon after his suicide, Jhonny's wife also died in childbirth. Jester's name is an ironic one for a child born into a family where so much grief prevailed.

At about the same time, the people of the town discovered a blue-eyed black foundling in a church pew. They came to the conclusion that the baby must be the son of Sherman Jones, a black man executed for the murder of a white man. The mulatto baby was named Sherman Pew. When Pew reads Dickens to the Judge, he sobs aloud "over orphans, chimney sweeps, step-fathers, and all such horrors" (119), but he himself shows no concern for the difficulties of people in real life — Jester, Sherman Pew, and Verily, who has served him for fifteen years. It is such behaviour that makes his name, Fox Clane, most appropriate for him.

Jester and Sherman are closely linked because Johnny Clane, son of Judge Clane, loved the
mothers of both, because he unsuccessfully defended Sherman's father, and because Judge Clane pronounced the latter's death sentence. It took eighteen years for the two men to understand the extent of Judge Clane's misuse of power and his cruelty even to the members of his own family who disagree with him. He was angry with his own son who did not follow his advice concerning local juries: "Talk on their own level and for God's sake don't try to lift them above it" (166). The Judge and his son didn't see eye-to-eye on the race problem. During the trial of Sherman Jones, a Negro, charged with the murder of Ossie Little, a white, Johnny Clane tried to convince the all-white jury that the killing was in self-defence, which was true. But the trial presided over by the Judge proved a mockery of justice and the Negro was hanged. Shocked by his failure, by the injustice done to the Negro, and his father's role in it, by the death of his client, and by the accusation of the woman he loved, Johnny Clane shot himself. He confessed to his father a few days before his suicide that Mrs. Little (wife of Ossie Little, the white man who was murdered), whom he had hopelessly loved, had called him to her bedside as she
lay dying after giving birth to the son of her black lover, and had found fault with him because his defence of Sherman Jones failed to save him.

Even eighteen years after the pronouncement of death sentence the judge thinks that he was right in taking that decision. While pronouncing judgement on blacks for crimes against whites, he depends more on his concern for white supremacy than on the evidence presented. He seems to take pride in his passion for his region and his race. He tells Jester, "White is white and black is black — and never the two shall meet if I can prevent it" (39-40).

For him "Passion is more important than justice" (40). He says, "All my life I have been concerned with questions of justice. And after your father's death I realized that justice itself is a chimera, a delusion. Justice is not a flat yardstick, applied in equal measure to an equal situation. After your father's death I realized there was a quality more important than justice" (40). As Oliver Evans puts it,

Taken all in all, old Judge Clane,
with his turnip greens and his classical allusions, is, with the
exception of Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams, Mrs McCuller's most thoroughly realized character to date. Only superficially is he a caricature, and he manages to be ludicrous, pathetic, and contemptible all at the same time. The glimpses we have of him shuffling about in the kitchen preparing his solitary breakfast, or hiding his grandson's photograph when he is displeased about something, or even relieving himself in the bathroom ... are unforgettable, little masterpieces of realism, and the moment one finds himself admitting this he almost wishes it were not so. For Judge Clane, though he dominates the book, is relevant in only a mechanical way to the central allegory. One is grateful for having met him, but the design of the novel requires that he play a relatively minor part. The protagonist ought to be Malone; it is he, not Judge Clane, who is Everyman, Everyman sentenced to die and watching a clock without hands.  

Like Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, Jester and Sherman yearn to identify themselves with  

something bigger than themselves. Jester does not love his grandfather whose ideas he dislikes. Sherman, who longs for a mother, invents a fantasy that she is Marian Anderson. As Oliver Evans says, the paradox that selfhood can only be attained by identification with something outside the self occurs both in *The Member of the Wedding* and *Clock Without Hands*. The following passages, the first from *The Member of the Wedding* and second from *Clock Without Hands*, prove this point:

> Frankie stood looking into the sky. For when the old question came to her — the who she was and what she would be in the world, and why she was standing there that minute — when the old question came to her, she did not feel hurt and unanswered. At last she knew who she was and understood where she was going .... And finally, after the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid. (43)

> Who am I? What am I? Where am I going? Those questions, the ghosts that haunt the adolescent heart, were finally answered for Jester ....

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gone were the dreams of saving Sherman from a mob and losing his own life while Sherman looked on, broken with grief. Gone also were the dreams of saving Marilyn Monroe from an avalanche in Switzerland and riding through a hero's ticker tape parade in New York. His dreams were nearly always in foreign countries. Never in Milan, never in Georgia, but always in Switzerland or Bali or someplace. But now his dreams had strangely shifted. Night after night he dreamed of his father. And having found his father he was able to find himself. He was his father's son and he was going to be a lawyer. Once the bewilderment of too many choices was cleared away, Jester felt happy and free. (177)

Sherman Pew's endeavours to attain higher social status result in death and violence. He doesn't heed Jester's warning that there is a racist plot against him and moves into an all-white neighbourhood. While he is playing the piano, Sammy Lank, a poor labourer, throws a bomb and blows him to pieces. Jester wants to avenge his friend's death. He takes Sammy Lank for a ride in his plane
so that he will get an opportunity to shoot him when they are above the clouds. But at the last moment Jester realizes that his vengeful passion derives from the bitter feelings which make a mob engage in lynchings. He also realizes that his zeal to avenge his friend's death is no different from his grandfather's bigotry. During the plane ride Sammy Lank narrates the story of his pointless and frustrating life. Jester is overwhelmed by the recognition that Sammy is, no less than Sherman Pew or perhaps himself, a victim of circumstance, which has made of him in a clown and a man without hope. Jester finds his anger spent, and circles back to earth without killing the naive and childlike man.

In Malone's progress towards death, the novelist dramatizes the theme that though death is inevitable and universal, the process of dying is a uniquely individual experience. Men and women regard a dying man as abnormal, forgetting the fact that they also will die one day. As already mentioned, Malone finds himself "surrounded by a zone of loneliness" (12). His friends refuse to consider him as representing the universal forces they must also
succumb to. Instead of showing curiosity and sympathy, they begin to be hostile to him. But sometimes it so happens that when a person dies he draws more attention than he did when he was alive. Instead of suffering isolation, such a person attains a visibility to others. For example, Grown Boy acquires importance not because he is a handicapped child but because of the violence that surrounds his end.

Though Malone feels wronged by life, he realizes that he has, without his own knowledge, died as a person possessing imagination, sensitivity, and individuality. He is dying in body but has already died in spirit. "He wondered how he could die since he had not yet lived" (132). He does not know when his self has slipped away. He cannot recall when his love for his wife, his pleasure in his work, his strong sexuality, and his pride in his family lessened. By November, he recognizes the "weariness and vacuity" (138) of his spirit and relates it to the sound of the woodpecker pecking a hollow pole and to "the brassy clamour of the city clock, uncadenced and flat" (138). Suffering does not result in his becoming virtuous, gentle and patient. On other hand, he
becomes irritable, petty, and jealous of persons in good health. But by the time he dies in May 1954, he has mellowed. He is no longer disturbed that the moment he dies his body will become a corpse, and he is not anxious about heaven and hell. He takes interest only in his immediate comfort.

The climax of *Clock Without Hands* occurs when the various characters find their separate identities. The novel's interest lies in the moral progression of all the characters except the Judge, in whose case there is no progression, only deterioration. Jester's inherent liberalism is strengthened by the knowledge that racial injustice was partly responsible for the tragedy of his father's life. He resolves to become a lawyer himself and take up the battle where his father left off. His life thus achieves moral direction. Sherman is not so fortunate. He finds his identity in martyrdom. As for Malone, his opportunity comes when, at a drawing of lots to determine who shall bomb Sherman's house, the responsibility falls on him but he refuses it. Shortly after this he dies with the consolation of having made a moral choice and thus of having lived at last, however briefly:
... his livingness was leaving him, and in dying, living assumed order and a simplicity that Malone had never known before. Nothing mattered to him.... slowly, gently, without struggle or fear, life was removed from J.T. Malone. His livingness was gone. (208)

To conclude, in Clock Without Hands McCullers portrays the individual's struggles with fear, anger, loneliness, and grief.