

## “So Far as I and My People Are Concerned the South Is Fascist Now and Always Has Been”: Carson McCullers and the Racial Problem

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Carson McCullers was deeply aware of the guilt of southern whites with respect to the oppression of blacks, and her fiction presents an intricate web of different configurations of the racial problem in her native South. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* she paints a very sympathetic and complex portrait of an African American man, a Martin Luther King *avant la lettre*. He actively fights for the civil rights of his race, yet paradoxically his obsessive blackness draws him close to the whiteness that oppresses him. In *The Member of the Wedding* McCullers connects racial oppression with gender oppression in the context of the prejudice of the reactionary South of the 1940s, linking the failed desire for gender fluidity with a similarly failed desire for racial hybridity. In *Clock without Hands* she brings existentialist influences to bear on the attitudes of her white characters with respect to the violent racial relations at the outset of the civil rights movement, and explores the tragic consequences here, for both whites and blacks, of polarized conceptions of blackness and whiteness.

Keywords: Southern fiction; Carson McCullers; race; civil rights; existentialism

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## “So Far as I and My People Are Concerned the South Is Fascist Now and Always Has Been”: Carson McCullers y el problema racial

Carson McCullers tenía una aguda conciencia de la culpa de los sureños blancos en relación con la opresión de los afroamericanos, y su ficción presenta una compleja red de diferentes configuraciones del problema racial en el sur estadounidense. En *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* nos legó el retrato de un afroamericano, un Martin Luther King *avant la lettre* que lucha por los derechos civiles de los negros, aunque paradójicamente su negritud obsesiva lo aproxima a la blancura que le oprime. En *The Member of the Wedding* la autora conecta la opresión racial con la opresión de género en el contexto del Sur reaccionario en la década de 1940, y relaciona

el fracaso del deseo de fluidez sexual con el fracaso de la aspiración al hibridismo racial. En *Clock without Hands* vemos el influjo del existencialismo en las actitudes de personajes blancos en relación con las violentas relaciones raciales a principios del movimiento por los derechos civiles, y cómo McCullers explora las consecuencias trágicas de concepciones raciales extremas.

Palabras clave: narrativa sureña; Carson McCullers; raza; derechos civiles; existencialismo

Two of Carson McCullers' main themes are the frustrated need for self-expression and the isolation of the individual. In the outline for her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), she wrote that "[e]ach man must express himself in his own way—but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, short-sighted society" (McCullers [1938] 1975, 136). In an interview with Ralph McGill, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, soon after the publication of her successful first novel, she related the work to the troubled conscience of her native South:

All of us seek a time and a way to communicate something of the sense of loneliness and solitude that is in us—the human heart is a lonely hunter—but the search of us Southerners is more anguished. There is a special *guilt* in us, a seeking for something had—and lost. It is a consciousness of *guilt* not fully knowable, or communicable. Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and right and just—when all along we knew it wasn't. (McGill 1992, 217; my emphasis)

In his recent study *Civil Rights in the White Literary Imagination*, Jonathan Gray argues that the literature produced by the white writers Robert Penn Warren, Norman Mailer, Eudora Welty and William Styron during the civil rights movement "permitted the successful recuperation of the premise of white American innocence at precisely the moment when a reinvigorated emancipationist narrative—the civil rights narrative—challenged the basis of that innocence. These writers embraced this ideological innocence in part because each sought to maintain his or her own idiosyncratic idea of American exceptionalism" (Gray 2013, 6-7). Carson McCullers no doubt had a very different view and from the beginning of her writing career she emphasized southern white guilt and inscribed this very notion into southern exceptionalism. It is the guilt that the Lost Cause mythology had tried to abolish by re-writing history and obscuring racial slavery as the central cause of the Civil War.

Like so many other southern writers and intellectuals, McCullers, who lived most of her life away from the South, faced the complex intellectual problems arising from being a southerner deeply attached to her native region and at the same time being out of line with the dominant southern attitudes. She was persuaded that the two main barriers to self-expression for southerners were the monolithic conceptions of race and sexuality that made the South 'an artificial social system.' In her fiction she frequently deals with the twin original sins of the South: the subjection of blacks and the oppression of women. Rachel Adams corroborates that in her novels "McCullers thus engages in a project of social criticism that, at its most penetrating, reveals the links between sexual intolerance and racial bigotry" (1999, 553). McCullers' creation of unconventional female characters that do not fit the rigid mold of traditional southern femininity has been widely studied. But her fictional treatment of the racial problem that brought 'a special guilt' on white southerners has not received enough critical

attention, and one of the reasons for this is probably the negative critical response to *Clock without Hands* (1961), the novel in which the racial problem takes center stage.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout her life McCullers exhibited a heightened sensitivity to social reform. As Oliver Evans notes, the house in which she was born was close enough to the cotton mills for her to “become aware of the poverty of the workers” from an early age (1965, 9). She was always deeply distressed by the hopelessness of the cotton mill workers and in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* expresses a strongly proletarian sympathy and denounces the oppression of American capitalism. Another major concern, which she describes in her unfinished autobiography *Illumination and Night Glare* as one of “certain hideous aspects of the South” which she strongly opposed, was the oppression of blacks (McCullers 1999, 62). She tenderly remembers a fourteen-year-old black cook of the family who was refused a ride by a taxi driver, who bawled, “I’m not driving no damn nigger” (54). She remembers the Depression days, when she was “exposed so much to the sight of humiliation and brutality, not physical brutality, but the brutal humiliation of human dignity, which is even worse” (56).

The militant black novelist Richard Wright, in a review of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, praised McCullers for being the first southern white writer “to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race” (1940, 195), for allowing them to express themselves as complex human beings beneath the prevailing stereotypes. Wright was surely referring to Doctor Copeland, perhaps the most complex and sympathetic of all the black characters created by McCullers. The way he is presented to the reader emphasizes his exclusion and isolation: “Far from the main street, in one of the Negro sections of the town, Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland sat in his dark kitchen alone” (McCullers [1940] 1961, 65). It is the geography of exclusion, with the racialized marking of spaces, that best characterizes the segregated South, and this at a time when southern towns are stages for a kind of racial representation in which the racial order is marked by geography in a futile attempt to separate all of life into whiteness and blackness. Copeland’s race isolates him in the 1930s South and introduces in McCullers’ fiction the discrimination of blacks as an important variation on the theme of the isolation and exclusion that afflict all humans in her work.

McCullers did not make Copeland into a stereotype of the victimized African American. His isolation is not due exclusively to a racialized social order but has many of its roots in his own personality. He alienates himself to a large degree because of his obsessive dedication to a single idea, one that he calls “the strong true purpose” (121): the reconquest of the dignity that has been taken from his race. The desert in which this self-appointed Messiah prepares himself is the North, where he spent a youth of difficulty and sacrifice, “and after ten years of struggle he was a doctor and he knew

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<sup>1</sup> The first books about Carson McCullers were short general studies focusing on timeless themes such as isolation, love and identity, at a time when American literature was still largely taught as being untouched by race (Evans 1965, Cook 1975). In the 1980s, feminist critics drew attention to McCullers’ complex treatment of femininity and what it means to grow up female in the South (White 1985, Westling 1985). More recently, Gleeson-White (2003) has brought Bakhtin’s theories of the grotesque to bear on the study of gender, and Gary Richards (2005) has explored representations of same-sex desire in Carson McCullers.

his mission and he came South again" (128). But this atheistic Messiah cannot find any disciples, not even in his own immediate family, in that the heaven of freedom that he preaches for the black race must be achieved not through prayer or conformity, but through pride, fierce struggle and the assertion of one's dignity. The town's fellow African Americans admire the doctor, who tends to their material and health needs, but are not interested in his creed aimed at urgent social change.

Carson McCullers was one of the first white writers in the late 1930s and early 1940s to relate the South's racial practices and politics to European fascism. Thus she has Doctor Copeland complain that "so far as I and my people are concerned the South is Fascist now and always has been," in that southern blacks, like the Jews in Germany, are deprived "of their legal, economic, and cultural life" (262-263).<sup>2</sup> As Martin Luther King Jr. would do two decades later, Copeland confronts the wall of resistance of the accommodationists, who prefer slow progress. The black pharmacist Marshall Nicolls is one of these gradualists, and argues that "by gradual means a better condition will come about" (257). In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," King rejected the argument of the moderates that the natural flow of time would solve all problems, and expressed a different sense of time through his famous assertion that "[w]e must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right" (King [1963] 2009, 187).

More interested in the moral issues inherent in the human relationships of individual characters than in explicit political statements, McCullers problematizes and explores, with the many-mindedness that literature allows, the individual dilemmas and the shortcomings of the ardor of her most important black character. The main problem with Copeland resides in the fact that his purported concern for the members of his race is tarnished by the egocentric monologism of one who sees everything through the prism of an individual obsession. He insists on imposing his atheism and his asceticism on his children and decides what each of them is going to be in life from his "feeling of real true purpose for them" (McCullers [1940] 1961, 74). The very names that he chooses for them (Hamilton, Karl Marx, William and Portia) are all related to ideals of economic and spiritual freedom, a freedom that he himself undermines by imposing on them pre-defined identities, treating them as a means to advance his cause, and turning them into mirrors that reflect his "strong true purpose." Instead of educating through persuasion and in this way fomenting freedom, he in fact mangles the personalities of his children. As Portia says, "[a] person can't pick up they children and just squeeze them to which-a-way they wants them to be" (73).

His monologic conception of blackness clearly alienates Copeland from his family, and his obsession with what he calls "real truths" makes him one of the lonely grotesques

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<sup>2</sup> McCullers' friend and fellow Georgian Lillian Smith also denounced the pernicious effects of the dictatorship of what she called "Southern Tradition" and exposed the totalitarian ideology of segregation which spreads like a cancer, irreparably fracturing and diminishing the lives of both blacks and whites. When the United States entered World War II, Lillian Smith unmasked the hypocrisy of a culture that put so much energy into keeping blacks down while sending them to fight racial hatred in foreign countries, and she refused to support her country's involvement in the war, a decision which she later considered ill-advised (Loveland 1986, 246).

that Sherwood Anderson describes in *Winesburg, Ohio*, where “the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood” (McCullers [1940] 1961, 72; Anderson [1919] 1976, 24). Copeland stays silent at a family reunion because “[i]f he could not speak the whole long truth no other word would come to him” (McCullers [1940] 1961, 133). He is thus reminiscent of the moral fanatics of Nathaniel Hawthorne who sacrifice heart for head in an attempt to build a perfect society. He tries to impose his austerity on his children, and makes his daughter Portia wear black dresses and white collars and cuffs, whereas “[f]or the boys there was black wool for trousers and fine white linen for shirts” (74). He forbids them to wear the “bright-coloured, flimsy clothes” (74) that they prefer and which point to the expressive freedom of African dress. He thus becomes paradoxically complicit in his society’s absolute division into whiteness and darkness when he forbids “fanciness” or “gaudy calendars” and insists that “everything in the house must be plain and dark” (74-75).

It is Portia who openly questions her father’s totalitarian insistence on black racial purity, a rigid asceticism and an obsessive submission to abstractions which are, ultimately, the opposite of life-affirming. He wants to be “pure Negro,” but his daughter favors the word “coloured” which people use, and she reminds him that she and her brother Willie “aren’t all the way coloured. Our Mama was real light and both of us have a good deal of white folks’ blood in us. And Highboy—he Indian. . . . None of us is pure coloured and the word [Negro] you all the time using have a way of hurting peoples’ feelings” (72). More in line with the openness of racial hybridity than with pure blackness, Portia is indeed on the side of feeling, which she defends in a most significant exchange with her father: “Hamilton or Buddy or Willie or me—none of us ever cares to talk like you. Us talk like our own Mama and her peoples and their peoples before them. You think out everything in your brain. While us rather talk from something in our hearts that has been there for a long time” (72-73). Most significant here is that Portia’s speech also carries echoes of Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose complex mind always resisted dichotomies and for whom the lack of balance between the head and the heart led inevitably to tragedy. Hawthorne was no defender of slavery but he, like his friend and kindred spirit Herman Melville, saw the abolitionists of his day as impetuous dreamers and expressed doubts as to the limits of moral absolutism in the abolitionist imagination. In his polemical lecture “The Abolitionist Imagination,” Andrew Delbanco broadens the meaning of abolition, which he describes as “a persistent impulse in American life” (2012, 3), an attitude characterized by unreasonable impatience and implacability. In Delbanco’s view, abolitionism may be regarded not as a passing episode but as “an energy that has been at work in our culture since the beginning” and he advocates an interpretation of abolitionism “not only as a historically specific movement but as an ahistorical category of human will and sentiment—of what we might even dare to call human nature” (23). As a general movement, abolitionism would include implacable defenders of racial integration in the pre-civil rights South like McCullers’ Doctor Copeland, those necessary though frequently despised dreamers

who find it impossible to wait for a gradual process of social improvement.<sup>3</sup> Abolition, racial integration or any other cause will always attract the immediatists who demand a radical break from the past in the face of the reservations of the gradualists who prefer incremental reform. And the literary imagination will permanently shun dichotomous thinking in answer to the claims of what Delbanco terms “articulate ambivalence” and expose the complex ways in which the highest idealism may corrode and corrupt (2012, 36), showing how the inflexible dedication to abstract ideas may hide the impulse to dominate, which is what alienates Doctor Copeland from his wife and children, who shun his tyranny.<sup>4</sup>

Not even his own children accept the excessive formality of names like William (Willie) or Karl Marx (Buddy), and Portia expresses herself through the black dialect which is natural and spontaneous for her, in contrast to the hypercorrectness of her father’s English, even more formal than that of the whites. If for him the identity of the black race resides in its oppression and the struggle against this, for Portia the main point is a tradition of family ties and openness to life and enjoyment. According to the author, “Portia is the embodiment of the maternal instincts” (McCullers [1938] 1975, 149), and for this simple woman, untroubled by logic or excessive worry about the future, the ideal language is that of love, in sharp contrast to the cold rationality of her father, who is more capable of loving his abstract principles and the masses than the individual human beings around him. The painful paradox is that his inflexible rationality, his rejection of black “exoticism” and his atheism make him a white man in the eyes of Portia. As McKay Jenkins points out, when Portia says that her father’s soul is white, “whiteness, to her, is alienated, godless, paralyzing in its reliance on rationality, sobriety, and industry” (1999, 168). In a sense the “colorless” asceticism that Copeland imposes makes him acquiescent to traditional white codes of conduct.

Excessively narrow and intense, Copeland has some of the rigid inhumanity of Melville’s Ahab. Copeland’s uncompromising zeal and his fanatic defense of the dignity of his race indirectly lead to the mutilation of his own son Willie, in a case of what William Gass calls “the high brutality of good intentions” (1978, 177). In chapter thirteen of part two, Copeland and the Marxist campaigner Jake Blount engage in a brutal verbal exchange because each of them clings to an essentializing narrative, of race and class respectively. The situation of Copeland has all the pathos of a man entirely devoted to the “strong true purpose” of liberating the oppressed. He is right and well-intentioned but ends up being defeated by his own obsessive monologism that disconnects him from his family and race. He is thus a spiritual brother of Julian in

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<sup>3</sup> In 1964 James McPherson concluded that “the civil rights movement of today has a greater chance of permanent success than did its counterpart in the 1860’s [sic]. But whatever success the contemporary movement finally does achieve will be built partly on the foundations laid down more than a century ago by the abolitionists. . . . The victories of Martin Luther King and his followers are, in a very real sense, victories of the abolitionist crusade” (McPherson 1964, 431-432).

<sup>4</sup> A good example of this problematic issue is Henry James’ *The Bostonians* (1886), in which the obsessive idea of freeing women from social slavery becomes the means to enslave and dominate.



Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1965) and Dee/Wangero in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" (1973), but in McCullers we do not find the strong satirical intent of O'Connor and Walker, who chose to berate their would-be reformers. McCullers treats Copeland always with sympathy and compassion and makes him a complex character—he is deficient in some respects but our post-civil rights modern sensibility cannot but admire the fighter who refuses to accept the status quo and does his utmost to reclaim the dignity of his race.

McCullers prophetically made Copeland a Martin Luther King *avant la lettre*, with his faith "in the struggle of my people for their human rights" and his plan "to lead more than one thousand Negroes in this country on a march. A march to Washington" in August of 1939 ([1940] 1961, 265-266). He may be insensitive, dogmatic and egotistical to a certain degree, but he offers a strategy for African Americans to resist an oppressive society that is in most ways more valid than the meekness defended by Portia. In spite of their imbalances and mistakes, people like Copeland are the ones who change the world, a world that at some junctures needs non-conformists more than preservers. Society needs the simple faith, the openness to life, and love of Portia, but it also needs Copeland's rebellious spirit, one that will not accept an oppressive status quo. As Darryl Pinckney says in his refutation of Delbanco, "[n]othing gets started without the rebels. They are the ones who light the way for others through the illumination of their transcendent feelings" (2012, 132).

Portia's devotion to tradition and to family heritage is important, but even more so is Copeland's refusal to give in to unjust impositions. He is, after all, a fictional version of so many determined champions of justice who pursue a righteous cause in often relentless ways and bring renewal to a culture that has a tendency for moral complacency. As Eric Foner contends, "[w]hat is possible would not have been achieved if, in this world, people had not repeatedly reached for the impossible" (2010, quoted in Delbanco 2012, 22). The black and white activists who fought for civil rights in the 1950s and 60s made racial integration possible by building on the work of the abolitionists who, in the previous century, had made possible the freedom of blacks that had once been unthinkable.

In *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) McCullers connects racial oppression to gender oppression in the context of the prejudice of the reactionary South of the 1940s. She opposed the insistence of southern culture on racial purity and the oppression of African Americans as adamantly as she did its demands for rigid sexual definitions and the oppression of any deviant form of sexuality. She was persuaded that just as blackness and whiteness co-exist within individuals of each race, so too can femininity and masculinity be found equally within men and women. Her autobiographical and unfeminine young girls Mick Kelly (in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*) and Frankie Addams (in *The Member of the Wedding*) challenge the prevailing norms and point towards new energies and possibilities for a culture that has always insisted on the stuntedness and



submissiveness of the belle and the lady. *The Member of the Wedding* is the novel in which the author most explicitly explores the parallel between society's stereotypical conceptions of gender and the oppression of blacks, thus becoming part of a southern tradition that started with E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (1888) and would continue with Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987). They are all fictions by white women who make use of the sexual ambivalence of the tomboy not only to denounce their region's obsession with the repression of unconventional sexual conduct but also to subvert dominant notions of white racial purity and superiority. Wearing masculine clothes and adopting traditionally male codes of conduct, these white tomboys blur the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and their physical features or other closeness to people of the oppressed race serve to question the South's rigid racial divisions.

Frankie has been growing too tall for a girl and her bodily excess makes her afraid of becoming a freak like those she sees at the fair. Pressured by the role that a female is expected to play in her culture, she feels ambivalence toward a restrictive role, one which curtails her freedom and restrains her individuality. She wants to be neither a sexual other nor a traditional female. In the summer of her twelfth year she feels "like an unjoined person" excluded from having any real connection with the larger world (McCullers [1946] 1962, 7), and is anguished by her failure to fit in, confused by the social pressure to use her body in such a way as to display appropriate levels of femininity and thus to optimize her appeal to boys. Keith Byerman assesses her situation thus: "She desires a 'we of me' that would transcend all restrictive boundaries, including race, nationality, and gender" (2008, 25).

Frankie's unwillingness to enter the restrictive world of southern womanhood is manifested through the dream of androgyny, frequent in female protagonists when they are no longer allowed a tomboy's freedom to transgress gender boundaries and to display "male" attitudes. When Frankie plays at being creators with her black nanny Berenice and her cousin John Henry she projects a world in which "people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted" (McCullers [1946] 1962, 116), a society which would acknowledge and allow the vacillation between one sex and the other that McCullers believes takes place, to different degrees, in every human being. But Berenice insists that "the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved" (116).

If Frankie dreams of an avenue of escape from fixed sexual definitions and subscribes to the utopian politics of gender fluidity, for the African American Berenice the ideal world would be a society with racial hybridity, free from the oppressive polarity white/black. In the world she would create "there would be no separate coloured people" and "all human beings would be light brown colour with blue eyes and black hair. There would be no coloured people and no white people to make the coloured people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives" (114-115). The ideal would be to stop thinking in terms of those mutually exclusive categories—male/female, white/black—into which society

insists on placing individuals. In line with Berenice's wish to escape the oppressive boundaries of race, McCullers sometimes indicates the crossing of boundaries through testimonies of hybridity in actual bodies. While Frankie is a girl with the roughness and the trappings of a boy (she wears shorts and sports a crew cut), in Berenice we have a woman who is "very black" but "her left eye was bright blue glass" and "her right eye was dark and sad" (9), as if she wanted to signal her desire to transcend the white/black polarity. Thus the tomboy's blending of male and female is reflected in the blending of black and white, which we also see in Berenice's mother, Big Mama, who "was an old coloured woman" but "on the left side of her face and neck the skin was the colour of tallow, so that part of her face was almost white and the rest copper-coloured" (148). With what Patricia Yaeger describes as her "compulsion to create bodies that are half white and half black" (2008, 125), with so many body features in permanent flux and turning into one another, McCullers destabilizes all those barriers that fix and separate. Early in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* she includes a scene which exposes the absurdity of categorizing individuals according to monolithic notions of racial identity. When Jake Blount brings the black doctor Benedict Copeland into the New York Café, he is confronted by white customers: "Don't you know you can't bring no nigger in a place where white men drink?" Blount answers defiantly, "I'm part nigger myself," and later, "I'm part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those. . . . And I'm Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American" (McCullers [1940] 1961, 24). McCullers uses here the metaphorical power of miscegenation to subvert the all-powerful myth of white racial purity, suggesting that hybridity is actually stronger because of the connection and kinship with different people from all over the world.

The fusion of black and white borders on the surreal in a scene where Frankie and Berenice are depicted in a strange composite image in the kitchen: "She could feel Berenice's soft big ninnas against her back, and her soft wide stomach, her wide solid legs. She had been breathing very fast, but after a minute her breath slowed down so that she breathed in time with Berenice; the two of them were close together as one body, and Berenice's stiffened hands were clasped around F. Jasmine's chest" (McCullers [1946] 1962, 140-141). The suggested hybridity is both feared and desired, and possible only momentarily in some contexts, such as with white children and black servants in the kitchen. The scene suggests the fusion of two bodies, one black and one white, into one, and at the same time it exposes the exclusion of blacks from the southern social body. It takes place in the kitchen of a middle-class white family and Berenice has the 'stiffened hands' of the overworked African American woman caught by her racial origin and forced to care for white children. The closeness between black and white here is only momentary, as well as deceptive, as shown by the many times when Frankie flaunts her superiority and treats Berenice with disrespect. In spite of the high level of intimacy between black domestics and white children and the centrality of the former in the white people's lives, such relationships were always unequal due to the drastic separation imposed by the politics and economics of race. In *Telling*

*Memories* (1988), Susan Tucker quotes the words of Linda Brown, a black woman who demythologizes the issue of whites' closeness to black domestics:

Course, when you've worked for the same people for twenty-four years, there are people who say you are part of the family. Well, you're *not* part of the family. As long as you work, you have access to the house, the food, the secrets, the stormy life, the fun life. And sometimes you also experience the same things that these people you are working for experience. But so far as you're a part of the family, I can't see that, because you're different than they are. (Tucker [1988] 2002, 258)

The mirror for Frankie and her difficulties in adjusting to society's gender conventions is actually Berenice's half-brother Honey Brown, bound by society and, like Frankie, incomplete. Trapped in the claustrophobic close quarters of racial oppression and poverty, he echoes the situation of Frankie trapped in the stagnant, small town that imposes a paralyzing femininity. Honey, like Frankie, puts up a futile struggle against conformity and defies sexual and racial categories. In appearance and aspirations he is culturally androgynous, again like the tomboyish Frankie. He is sexually ambivalent and "light-skinned" and "could talk like a white school-teacher" (McCullers [1946] 1962, 155, 48); he has musical talents and aspires to learn French but the social pressures deny him fulfillment. Berenice says that "they done drawn completely extra bounds around all coloured people. . . . Sometimes a boy like Honey feel like he just can't breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself" (141). Feeling confined by the limitations that forbid tomboyishness and female ambition, Frankie explicitly identifies herself with Honey in her struggle against conformity: "Sometimes I feel like I want to break something too" (142). But society will not tolerate non-conformists within categories of race or gender, and at the end of the novel Honey is put in jail and Frankie has renounced most of her dreams and lost most of her ambitions and originality. The dream of transcendence and androgyny has been crushed by a dichotomous culture that persists in its blindness to the fact that black and white have always been as inextricably linked as male and female; that, as McKay Jenkins notes, "[w]hite is defined by the existence of black, not just *opposite* it but *within* it as well, and vice versa" (1999, 191).

Carson McCullers had her first contact with existentialist philosophy in 1941 when W. H. Auden gave her many books by Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism.<sup>5</sup> During her visit to France in November of 1946 she met Jean Paul Sartre, who in his book *What Is Literature?* (1947) rejected the late nineteenth-century ideal of "art for art's sake" in favor of a literature of *engagement*, conceived of as a form of action for which responsibility must be taken, a responsibility that carries over into the content and not just the form (Flynn

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<sup>5</sup> McCullers and Auden were at the time both living in February House, a well-known colony of artists in Brooklyn. Auden urged McCullers to read and embrace the teachings of Kierkegaard (Carr 1990, 109).

2006, 13).<sup>6</sup> *Clock without Hands* (1961) constitutes McCullers' most explicit engagement with social conditions in her native region, and in order to show how the individual finds or loses her/himself depending on her/his ethical stand in relation to others, in her last novel she makes the socio-historical context much more relevant than in any of her previous works. The temporal span is significant in this novel, which opens with the protagonist J. T. Malone being diagnosed with leukemia in March of 1953 and closes with his death on May 17, 1954, coinciding with the famous Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* that declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. It is a crucial juncture for the American South, as is the imminence of death for the protagonist. In this turbulent South characterized by drastic change, the individual is confronted with frequent and excruciating dilemmas, with both Malone and the South tottering between salvation and condemnation, depending on the decisions they make.

Malone initially seeks comfort in the reactionary rhetoric of former Congressman and Judge Fox Clane, a mid-twentieth-century representative of the myth of the Lost Cause who admires *Gone with the Wind* and defends "the noble standards of the South" (McCullers [1961] 1965, 29). He is the prototypical white supremacist who cannot imagine a South "with no colour line" and will oppose a future in which "delicate little white girls must share their desks with coal black niggers in order to learn to read and write" (29, 17). He repeatedly connects the obsession with racial purity to the mythical purity of the southern woman and laments the fact that his dead, progressive son had lacked "the passion of the southerner who defends his womankind against the black and alien invader" (161). Commenting on the southern rape narrative, Jay Watson says that "this fantasy of a social emergency—the so-called rape narrative or complex—was an anxious response on the part of the white male imagination to the prospect of significant social change in the South: to African Americans seeking economic opportunity, political enfranchisement, and social recognition in the wake of emancipation; to women seeking to widen their sphere of influence beyond the domestic realm" (Watson 2012, 4). In his self-destructive attempt to stop the hands of the clock that will inevitably bring irrevocable change to the South, the Judge insists that, naturally, a black and a white man "are two different things" and that "white is white and black is black and never the two shall meet if I can prevent it" (McCullers [1961] 1965, 39-40). Unlike the other characters in the book, who evolve psychologically to varying degrees, Fox Clane becomes a flat character unable to develop, and his clock has no hands in the sense that he resists change and persists in his self-deception as to the structural injustices in his society. With his retrospective orientation, Clane is a perfect exemplar of what Piotr Sztompka calls the "authoritarian" personality, characterized by "compliance to patterns of life dictated by tradition and authorities" (1993, 240).

The novel's famous opening, "Death is always the same, but each man dies in his own way" (7), sets the task demanded of Malone: he has to stop being part of the herd, a man who dilutes death into an event that happens to everyone. He instead becomes the

<sup>6</sup> In *What is Literature* (1947) Sartre wrote: "Though literature is one thing and morality another, at the heart of the aesthetic imperative we discern the moral imperative" (quoted in Flynn 2006, 13).

existentialist man for whom time is of the essence as he has to personalize the impersonal time suggested by the novel's title and bring it under the control of his free will and responsibility. Malone will not realize until near the end that Judge Clane is not the right moral guide, nor is the Baptist minister who preaches about death, although this "remained a mystery" which made Malone feel "cheated" (15). He has to navigate the uncharted waters of a world where traditions no longer hold and individual existence is as uncertain as watching a clock without hands. He finds salvation, not in the empty words of the preacher or in the lifeless rituals of the church, but within himself when he makes the difficult ethical choice that liberates him from the herd.<sup>7</sup> When he draws a marked slip of paper, indicating that he should bomb the house of Sherman Pew, the black youth who rented an apartment in the white section, Malone refuses to follow the herd, saying, "Gentlemen, I am too near death to sin, to murder. . . . I don't want to endanger my soul" (195). He is acutely conscious of mortality which, according to existentialism, puts him in a privileged situation to acquire authenticity, allows him to see an ethical dimension others cannot perceive, and affords him a higher mode of consciousness which permits openness to a creative exercise of responsibility. His blind passage through a life of ordinariness and conformity has so far prevented him from tapping a moral strength that has always been latent but unnoticed. By rejecting the social conventions that he has always accepted and by asserting his responsibility against the impositions of the mass, Malone acquires traits of the existentialist hero who becomes true to himself and achieves a difficult individuality in a mass society.

*Clock without Hands* pairs two seventeen-year-old boys, Jester Clane, the Judge's grandson, and the African American Sherman Pew, who consistently rejects Jester's attempts at friendship. The search for self is acute in these two and runs parallel to that of J. T. Malone. In Jester, as in the female adolescent Frankie, we find the coexistence of sexual ambivalence and the attraction towards the racial other. He has been anxiously reading the *Kinsey Report* and "[h]e was afraid, so terribly afraid that he was not normal and the fear corkscrewed within him" (84). In line with other adolescents of Carson McCullers' creation, as with the author herself, we are told that "secretly Jester thought that sex was a fake" (84). At the end, Jester, like Malone, will stop caring about being like other people and will find himself when he adopts a set of values that set him apart from the racist society and make him another existentialist hero.

To come to terms with himself, Jester also has to take a stand regarding the culture of race. The break with his grandfather Clane is "a form of death" but indispensable in achieving renewal (34). Breaking with the spiritually dead grandfather allows Jester to connect with the progressive values of his dead father. The murder of his black friend triggers a crucial new phase in Jester's life. Initially, he invites Sammy Lank, the poor white man who killed Pew, for a ride in his small plane, with the

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<sup>7</sup> A major theme of existentialism is the degree to which individuals live under the "dictatorship" of what Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and Friedrich Nietzsche respectively call "the public," "mass-existence" and "the herd" (Cooper 2012, 41).

intention of killing him. However, in listening to Lank's tragicomic, white-trash story, a man whose only social recognition came after fathering triplets and assassinating an African American, makes Jester reconsider. He has become aware of the complexity of human beings and their social relations, and the initial desire for violence gives way to compassion and understanding, to the recognition of life as the only real value. In her essay "The Flowering Dream" (1959) the author relates southern Gothic, "in which the grotesque is paralleled with the sublime," to Russian realism, remarking the fact that both traditions emphasize "the cheapness of human life," and adding that the South is more complicated, due to the racial problem, than Russian society: "To many a poor Southerner, the only pride that he has is the fact that he is white, and when one's self-pride is so pitifully debased, how can one learn to love?" (McCullers [1959] 1975, 286). *Clock without Hands* is one of those narratives which, as Sharon Monteith says, "reveal much about fear as instrumental in the ideological complex that was massive resistance" (2013, 170). No doubt Sammy Lank, when he murdered Sherman Pew, was convinced that he was carrying out the will of a society threatened by change.

The trip in fact culminates in an epiphany which brings a radical shift in perspective to Jester's life. The aerial view of the earth is unreal, making everything down below appear uniform and symmetrical: "The earth from a great distance is perfect and whole" (McCullers [1961] 1965, 202). From an abstract perspective you cannot see the complexity, the mystery or the tragedy of human life: "But down below the earth is round. The earth is finite. From this height you do not see man and the details of his humiliation" (202). The distant theoretical approach must be substituted by that of the heart, more warm and chaotic. The further you descend, the more imperfections you see, and "the town itself becomes crazy and complex. You see the secret corners of all the sad back yards" (202). Seen from above, individuals do not seem especially human; they are uniform, insignificant, even grotesque: "From the air men are shrunken and they have an automatic look, like wound-up dolls. They seem to move mechanically among haphazard miseries" (202). To save these lives from crippling mechanization and to provide respect for individuality, it is necessary to dig roots in the southern soil and connect with humanity: "The whole earth from a great distance means less than one long look into a pair of human eyes. Even the eyes of the enemy" (202). This is what the well-intentioned Copeland failed to see: that to comprehend humans you have to live in close personal contact with them and avoid relying exclusively on abstractions. To comprehend and to help the South to change, it is necessary to get rid of polarized class and racial prejudices. McCullers could here be suggesting that salvation for the South is not going to come so much from those who theorize from the North as from those who, like Jester, stay in the South and make an effort to understand the mentality of its individuals, both black and white.<sup>8</sup> The truth springs

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Haddox maintains that *Clock without Hands* is one of those white civil rights novels, like Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931) or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), that endorse "a liberal gradualism that supports civil rights for African Americans but rejects violence and clings to the notion that the white South, presented as an organic 'community,' must painstakingly work out its own salvation without interference from the outside" (Haddox 2004, 563).



from sincere contact with individuals, and true understanding originates not in abstract thinking that appropriates and manipulates but from engagement with the human reality. In "The Flowering Dream" McCullers describes her own disposition as a writer in similar terms to the stand taken by Jester: "Above all, love is the main generator of all good writing. Love, passion, compassion are all welded together" ([1959] 1975, 287).

The clock of Jester's life now has hands, in that he has adjusted his life's aims to accommodate the new social realities of the South in which he has found his destiny and where he plans to become a lawyer and follow his dead father's footsteps in the fight for social and racial justice. In treating his African American friend Sherman Pew as an equal, Jester signals a considerable moral advancement in the attitudes of southern whites, and his character embodies great hopes for a better future for the region. The excessively abstract zeal that in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* alienated Copeland from those he wanted to save gives way here to this more realistic embracing of concrete reality and of the human individual. Jester's morality, concerned with social injustice and tyranny, acquires a wider scope than that of Malone, who only at the end of his life reconciles himself with his mortality and with those closest to him, and saves his soul by resisting social pressure.

The African American Sherman Pew is the most frustrated and forlorn of all the adolescents created by McCullers, and he exhibits several similarities to Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932). Both were abandoned as babies, at Christmas time, and their names allude to the circumstances of their respective abandonments. As Sherman tells Jester, "I was left in a church pew and therefore I was named Pew in that somewhat Negroid and literal manner" (McCullers [1961] 1965, 63). Both Christmas and Sherman were raised by adoptive parents and have been abused by their fathers. For each of them, the central problem is the definition of their personal identity. Christmas accepts the validity of the rumor that he has black blood, and Sherman Pew has proof of white blood in his blue eyes and mulatto skin. Not quite belonging to either one race or the other, their respective searches for identity, in a society that does not accept racial ambivalence, are agonizing. Both Christmas and Pew become enmeshed in this absolutist pattern and the obsessive search for their social identity in terms of this Manichean division makes them prone to self-destruction, as violence becomes for them the only means of attracting the attention of a society which denies them individuality.<sup>9</sup>

Sherman Pew conducts his life according to the same absolute black/white polarities which drive Judge Clane, and he obsessively conceives of himself as the victim of evil whites. In order to deny any connection to the white race, he makes himself believe that his father was an evil white man who raped his lost and longed for black mother, a sort of reverse mirror of the automatic expectation of whites that led to the lynching of so many African American males accused of raping white women. In his need to conform to his self-inflicted role of victim of the whites, he initially rejects the love and friendship that Jester

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<sup>9</sup> Edmund Volpe says about Faulkner's tragic mulatto: "Joe Christmas's life-long anguish is that he must but cannot identify himself as Negro or white. He cannot accept race as incidental to his individuality, to his humanity. He must know what he can never know, and his life is a process of self-crucifixion" (1964, 161).



Clane offers him, this rejection serving as evidence of the pernicious effects of absolute racial concepts on interpersonal relationships. On discovering that his father was not a white rapist but in fact a black man who had an affair with a married white woman who loved him, the fantasy he has created for himself is shattered. If the discovery of his origins leads Jester in the direction towards greater freedom and justice, in the case of Sherman the direction is toward the prison of the past, and death: "He wanted to die like the Negro man [his father] had died" (184). Tragically disappointed when his stereotyped expectations are contradicted and frustrated, in that the facts of his origins do not coincide with his fantasy, Sherman keeps breaking the law to call attention to himself. Renting an apartment in the white section of the town is the ultimate act of rejection of a society that does not notice him, and thus does he attract not only attention but also violence and ultimately death. He thereby renders himself an indirect victim of the life-denying absolutism that makes its victims seek death as a kind of desired boon. Like Joe Christmas, Sherman becomes another self-crucifier.

Killed by a fire bomb, Sherman's identity is at last that of the black victim martyred by the white society that persists in segregating blackness. His obsession with advancing the hands of the clock of history has proved as destructive as Judge Clane's obsession to move them back. McCullers opposed not only the radical separation of whiteness and blackness but also the Manichean division of individuals into innocent victims and ruthless victimizers. Making Sherman into a flawless martyr would have satisfied some white liberals, those in love with melodrama, as well as those blacks prone to self-pity. However, it would also have detracted from the novel's artistic quality. The portrayal of Sherman proves that McCullers is an exception to Floyd Watkins' accusation that much southern fiction written between 1954 and 1968 is simplistic because it "idealizes the Negro and condemns the white" (Watkins 1970, 3). McCullers wrote fiction that presents a complex commentary on reality and escapes easy simplifications, and she shows that a solution to the racial problem is as desperately needed by blacks as by whites. Nevertheless, we do lament the fact that in this last novel she was not able to imagine the possibility of blacks becoming the agents of their own liberation from the shackles of segregation, as if the solution would have to come not from militant blacks but from liberal-minded whites, those with a progressive orientation like that of Jester Clane. In the case of Doctor Copeland she successfully depicted a very active African American character resolutely from his own perspective, but in *Clock without Hands* the black character is very much a tool for white characters like Malone and Jester to test their ethics and struggle for moral satisfaction. McCullers thus leaves herself open to Toni Morrison's complaint about "the strategic use of black characters to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters" (Morrison [1992] 1993, 52-53).

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