

The Fight against Racial Discrimination: Sherman Pew in Carson McCullers's *Clock Without Hands*

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Carson McCullers (1917–67) seems to put her own sorrow of loneliness into the black characters in her novels. She regards her black characters as her fellow sympathizers because blacks know the pain of discrimination caused by whites. The sufferings of blacks and of McCullers are not the same kind, but both derive from being marginalized. She represents black characters in her novels as the embodiment of her sympathies with blacks.

Clock Without Hands (1961) is McCullers's last novel. It took her about ten years to complete. During this time, she experienced many personal sorrows: her husband's suicide, her mother's death, her own ill health, and so on. This was a very hard period for her both physically and mentally.

The main characters of this novel are J. T. Malone, a forty-year-old pharmacist who is sick with leukemia, Fox Clane, who is an eighty-five-year-old judge and former congressman, John Jester Clane, who is Fox's seventeen-year-old grandson, and Sherman Pew, a blue-eyed black orphan. The novel is set in 1953 to 1954. The main themes of this novel can be considered to be death and violence. McCullers mainly represents death in Malone and violence in Fox Clane and Sherman Pew. The author seems to draw Malone as a reflection on her own approaching death; Sherman Pew and old Judge Clane embody her anxieties about racial discrimination in the American South.

However, some critics state that *Clock Without Hands* is a failure. For example, Irving Howe claims that there is no "inner conviction" or "imaginative energy" in this novel (55). Dorothy Parker denounces this novel as out of date and ignorant of the world (60). Certainly, as Margaret B. McDowell also suggests, "The most common weaknesses mentioned were a lack of controlled organization, a carelessness in style, or a dependance on flat or stereotypical characterization" (97); *Clock Without Hands* may not be a unified story. But

the representation of each character is attractive. The young black named Sherman Pew is especially impressive.

In this paper, I will analyze the character of Sherman Pew, referring to the historical background of this novel and the condition of McCullers's mind as she wrote it, to investigate McCullers's opinion about the treatment of blacks in America.

1. Sherman Pew's Mixed Blood

Sherman Pew is a young black with blue eyes. He is an orphan. His blue eyes and black skin indicate that he was born of both white and black parentage. He was left on a pew in a church when he was a baby. Now he is a jack-of-all trades and also works as a secretary for Judge Clane. He likes music and sings well. He thinks that his mother is a black singer, Marian Anderson. However, when he discovers this to be a mistake, he is shocked. Therefore, he is afflicted by questions about who he is and what he is. What does his mixed blood mean?

Sherman hates his mixed blood:

. . . Sherman had seldom thought about his father. Sherman thought only that he was a white man, he imagined that the unknown white father had raped his mother. . . he hated his father, hated even to think about him. His father was a crazy white man who had raped his mother and left the evidence of bastardy in Sherman's blue and alien eyes. (146)

Thus, he rejects his white blood. His mixed blood reminds him only of a white man's oppression of a black woman. He thinks that he is a child born of whites' predominance over blacks. Through Sherman Pew McCullers expresses her knowledge of the American South and whites' domination over blacks including the use of rape.

How were blacks responding to segregation at this time? Charles E. Silberman states in *Crisis in Black and White* (1964):

To be a Negro in the United States . . . is to be angry — if not all the time, then most of the time. More than that, to be a Negro is to suspect, and even to hate, white men. ("Maybe freedom lies in hating," Ralph

Ellison speculates in *Invisible Man*.) . . . Negro anger is not new; it has always been there. What *is* new is simply the Negro's willingness to express it, and his ability to command white attention when he does. (58)

Blacks maintained their distrust of whites. However, as Silberman mentions, McCullers's Sherman is a new black who can express his anger. He persistently affirms his attachment to his race in the conversation with Jester Clane. He says, "You would refer to my race as coloured or even Negro, while the proper name is Nigerian or Abyssinian" (74). This shows Sherman's proper pride in his own race and his protest against white domination. Sherman can be regarded as a progressive black. McCullers indicates blacks' anger in Sherman's pride.

Although Sherman's blood is mixed white and black, his identity only derives from his black blood. Virginia Spencer Carr states that "like Benedict Mady Copeland [in *The heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)] . . . Sherman does not 'fit in' with his race, yet vibrates with every injustice his people have suffered" (*Understanding* 120). Therefore, he feels anger toward whites. His feeling seems to be similar to that of the protagonist of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). This novel begins with the following statement:

I AM AN invisible man. No, . . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind. . . .

Nor is may invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (3)

The narrating "I" is a black man. Allen Guttman states that ". . . the forms and stuff of his invisibility . . . are part and parcel of the experience of Negroes in the United States, created from their defeats and humiliations . . ." (30); the narrator alludes to the absurdity of blacks' condition in America. Ellison shows an example of a black man who goes completely unnoticed by American society.

The "I" of *Invisible Man* narrates the story philosophically. But its philo-

sophical narration includes black anger. Sherman Pew also alludes to his indignation against whites in the conversation with Jester. He tells Jester that he once fell in love with a white French girl. But this is a lie. He is making fun of Jester. There is no serious or sincere relationship in their conversation because Sherman is black and Jester is white. Ellison's principal use of irony is in the narrator's cool tone which belies the degree of his anger; it is McCullers's ironic point that the friendly conversation between Sherman and Jester, does not actually imply any real relationship. Even if they apparently get along well together, there is only antipathy for whites in Sherman's consciousness.

Is it only the anger and antipathy of blacks that McCullers wants to depict through Sherman Pew's mixed blood? No, not only this. She had created black characters before Sherman Pew, and used them to express hope as well as resentment. Dr. Copeland in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a substitutive fighter against racial discrimination for McCullers, and Berenice in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) can be regarded as a sympathetic supporter for McCullers. And then, lastly, she indicates her hope for racial integration in Sherman's mixed blood. That is to say, McCullers includes not only negative meanings but also positive meanings in Sherman's mixed blood.

McCullers's hope for racial integration is represented by the secret of Sherman's birth. The fact is that Sherman was not born by a white man's rape of a black woman. He was born of a black man and a white woman, who actually loved each other. The story of Sherman Pew's parents is narrated by Judge Clane to Jester. He is the only man that knows the facts about Sherman Jones and Mrs. Ossie Little, who are Sherman Pew's real parents. According to Judge Clane's confession, a black man, Sherman Jones, killed Mrs. Little's husband in self-defence. But in the trial, Mr. Little's brother, Rice Little, testified that Jones had raped Mrs. Little, causing her husband to try to kill Jones. On the contrary, Mrs. Little testified that her husband had tried to kill Jones and died in their struggle for the gun. Sherman Jones's lawyer was Judge Clane's son and Jester's father, Johnny. He found that he was falling in love with Mrs. Little during Jones's trial. However, he failed to have Jones acquitted. As a result, he was cursed and accused by Mrs. Little:

She cursed and accused Johnny, maintaining that if he had conducted

the case as a cut-and-dried matter of self-defence Sherman Jones would be a free man now She said that Sherman Jones was the cleanest, most decent man she had ever known and that she loved him. She showed Johnny the new born baby, dark-skinned and with her own blue eyes. (174–5)

Johnny was so shocked that he committed suicide. The new-born baby was left on a pew by Rice Little after Mrs. Little died. This is the secret of Sherman Pew's birth.

There is a happy fusion of races in the episode of Sherman's birth. McCullers regards his mixed blood as a symbol of harmony between whites and blacks. The black man, Sherman Jones, loved and was loved by a white woman, Mrs. Ossie Little. Race was not a barrier to their love. Hence, Sherman's mixed blood conveys McCullers's hope for racial equality. McCullers here fulfills Berenice's dream world, in which "all human beings would be light brown colour with blue eyes and black hair" (*Member* 114–5). Sherman is a symbol of the coexistence of different races. This is the more positive interpretation of Sherman's blood.

In summary, it can be observed that Sherman's mixed blood represents two things. One is blacks' hate and anger toward whites. McCullers shows the high degree of black anger and hate for whites in America in Sherman's resolutely black identity. Although McDowell observes, "The fact that Sherman is a blue-eyed mulatto may be a symbolic indication of his confusion in his search for racial and personal identity" (103), his white identity symbolized by his blue eyes is only an object of hate for him because his identity depends on his black blood. But the other significance of his mixed blood is McCullers's hope for racial integration. Sherman was born from the love between a black man and a white woman. He is not cursed from birth, as he hears, being born of inter-racial rape. On the contrary, he is the fruit of love between different races. McCullers alludes to a world where there is no racial difference. This must be her ideal world.

2. Sherman Pew's Courage

Sherman's misunderstanding of his birth makes him desperate. His misun-

derstanding results from the record of the trial and conviction of a black man about twenty years earlier. The black man was Sherman Jones. According to the record, he was accused of rape and murder. Finally, he was sentenced to death. Therefore, Sherman Pew thinks that he is the child conceived by Jones's rape of the white woman, Mrs. Little. However, the record of Jones's conviction does not represent the truth; the fact is that Sherman Pew was born of a loving relationship between Jones and Mrs. Little. But Sherman Pew never discovers the truth. By finding the record of his father's conviction, Sherman Pew becomes prey to an identity crisis. He feels that his black blood is cursed. His various bold actions, such as drinking water from the white fountain, renting his house in the residential area for whites and so on, can be regarded as the result of his self-abandonment.

However, McCullers does not make Sherman merely desperate. She also gives him a strong positive faith:

First, he drank water at the white fountain in the courthouse square. . . . He went to the white men's room at the bus station. . . . He sat on a back pew at the Baptist Church. . . . He sat down in Whelan's drugstore. A clerk said, "Get away, nigger, and never come back!" . . . But terrified as he was, he was more disturbed by the fact that nobody seemed to notice him except the clerk at Whelan's. Harassed and suffering, *I've got to do something, do something, do something* beat like a drum in his head. (186)

Thus, he tries to protest against white rule. These small acts of resistance indicate the beginning of the proof of his identity. He becomes a fighter against racial discrimination. McCullers alludes to her wish for the progress of blacks' status by Sherman Pew's acts of defiance.

Sherman's actions grow more fearless step by step. For example, he tries to kill Judge Clane by making him drink water instead of insulin for three days. He kills Jester's dog and hangs it on a tree. At last, he rents a house in the residential area for whites. These increasingly drastic acts show the beginnings of change in American society. Richard M. Cook states that "Sherman . . . is part of the changing South, and though he and his race stand to profit from its changes in the long run, he is in no mood to wait" (112). As Cook mentions, Sherman goes further, sooner than most southern blacks. The period

1953 to 1954 was before the peak of the civil rights movement. In spite of this, Sherman tries to struggle against white authority. McCullers indicates her protest against whites' treatment of blacks in America by making Sherman Pew a radical black.

What was the situation of blacks at that time? Dorothy Parker states in "*Clock Without Hands* belongs in Yesterday's Tower of Ivory" (1961):

Through an out-of-town agency, he arranges, not mentioning his color, to rent a house in a white people's zone of his own city; he fills it with elaborate furniture, including a grand piano, bought on credit. And here I find I am in trouble, for it is hard for me to believe that credit for such luxuries as grand pianos would be extended to a Negro lad in a small town in the Deep South. (60)

Parker seems to be unconvinced about the plausibility of Sherman's story here. Moreover, Parker implies that Sherman intentionally omits to mention his skin color when he rents the house from the Atlanta agency. But the details are as follows:

He was writing an Atlanta agency in order to rent a house in Milan in the white man's section. . . .

Meanwhile, Sherman had got a reply from the agency and sent a money order for the rent. His race was not questioned. (189)

It is not Sherman who conceals, but the agency which omits to question Sherman's race. McCullers indicates here a symptom of the change away from discriminatory society toward equal society by the agency's equal treatment of Sherman.

Furthermore, Parker states that a black man would not be able to buy a grand piano and furniture on credit. Is that so? The times have already begun to change by now. A black maid, Verily, who has worked in Judge Clane's house for fifteen years, concerned about her old age pension, leaves Judge Clane's house to gain better pay and better working conditions. She says to Judge Clane, "There is a lady will figure out the govment papers, pay me forty dollars a week, and give me Saturday and Sunday free" (179). Thus, the status of blacks can be seen to be rising gradually. Verily is also one of the symbols of

a changing society. Therefore, it is just possible that Sherman might buy a piano and furniture on credit. (In fact, what Sherman actually buys is a baby grand piano.) McCullers does not clearly state the amount of money involved in Sherman's moving house. Nor does she make clear who sells the piano and furniture to Sherman on credit, and whether s/he is white or black. It seems that Parker does not properly understand McCullers's aims in this episode. She aims to indicate blacks' aspiration to be equal with whites and the gradual change of American society. It seems in fact to be McCullers's optimistic hope for progress which troubles the skeptical Parker.

Whitney M. Young, Jr. writes:

It was in 1949 that the Congress passed a housing act declaring that the general welfare of the nation required the realization as soon as feasible of the goal that every American and every American family should live in decent, safe, and sanitary housing within a suitable living environment. (154)

This housing act naturally included black people, so blacks were in theory equal with whites in housing. Therefore, legally, the white man's section and the black ghetto quickly became meaningless. This housing act indicates the justness of Sherman's bold action. His action is not only self-abandoned but also right from a social justice point of view. Sherman's attempt to live in a white neighborhood certainly comes a little earlier than the height of the civil rights movement. This expresses McCullers's moral support and encouragement of the fight against racial discrimination.

Oliver Evans argues:

Sherman Pew is the least successful in the long gallery of Mrs. McCullers's grotesques, and here we have a similar difficulty, for he is at once too *outré* to be credible on realistic terms and not sufficiently so to be a genuine grotesque. . . . (180)

As Evans suggests, Sherman Pew may be a reckless character. But his story shows the cruelty of life for blacks at this time. In Sherman Pew's eccentric bravery, McCullers indicates the difficulty of the gradual rise of black rights and black identity.

In summary, Sherman's bold actions, his resistance to the white rules, mean that Sherman takes the initiative in the civil rights movement. McCullers shows her hopes for an equal world by Sherman's forced entry into the white people's community. Moreover, Sherman's plan to hold a housewarming party at his new house suggests his expectation of being friends with the white race. McCullers dares to construct this reckless character because she wants to express the difficulty of breaking down the walls of racial discrimination.

3. The Significance of Sherman Pew's Death

Although McCullers indicates the progress of black status in Sherman's bold actions, his courage leads him to a violent death. Sherman's death has symbolic meaning. It is McCullers's implicit criticism on the deep-rooted racial discrimination in the American South. Sherman's murder by a white racist man symbolizes the American malady of racial discrimination.

There are many deaths in *Clock Without Hands*, as McDowell observes:

In this book a number of individuals die before they can discover meaning in their lives and solace in human relationships. The dullness, barrenness and limitations of their experience make living for such people inconsequential and their dying is equally pointless. (106)

As McDowell mentions, with the exception of J. T. Malone, all the characters who die in this novel are young. Their deaths are absurd and untimely. Moreover, McDowell states that "her illness, her husband's suicide, her mother's death, and her deep depression following the failure on Broadway of *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958) must have contributed to the preoccupation with death which pervades this book" (96); that is, McCullers expresses the sorrow and agony of her private life in the representation of many deaths.

Virginia Spencer Carr gives a view of the significance for McCullers of writing *Clock Without Hands*:

To be sure, Jester Clane, Malone, the old judge, Jester's black friend Sherman Pew, and the rest of her southern menagerie in the book evolved with unspeakable labor, single-mindedness, and genius through love, illness, pain, despair, and finally, "livingness" once again. *Clock Without Hands* was completed at great personal expense, but it also was Carson's

salvation. Had she not finished it — as many had feared — friends felt that the psychic impasse might have killed her. (*The Lonely Hunter* 487)

As Carr suggests, writing *Clock Without Hands* for McCullers was equivalent to fighting for her life. Therefore, the many deaths have great significance. The death of the radical black Sherman Pew is especially important because he is the symbol of progress in race relations. Then what is the significance of Sherman Pew's death?

Sherman's death is brought about by a white racist bomb. The racist is a poor white named Sammy Lank. He is a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Judge Clane is also a racist and Klan member. Although Sherman was in favor with Judge Clane, his reckless attempt to live in the white man's section reminded Judge Clane of his old racist ways:

In the old days the Judge had been a Ku Kluxer and he missed it when the Klan was suppressed and he could not go to those white-sheeted meetings at Pine Mountain and fill himself with a secret and invisible power. (190)

That is, Judge Clane's kindness to Sherman is superficial. His essential quality is that of a white supremacist. His words about poor whites indicate his racist policy:

. . . you [J. T. Malone] and I have our property and our positions and our self-respect. But what does Sammy Lank have except those slews of children of his? Sammy Lank and poor whites like that have nothing but the colour of their skin. Having no property, no means, nobody to look down on — that is the clue to the whole thing. It is a sad commentary on human nature but every man has to have somebody to look down on. So the Sammy Lanks of this world only have the Nigra to look down on. (190–1)

Judge Clane's argument is deeply prejudiced, but it is certain that there were many whites who had similar ideas at that time.

Wyn Craig Wade describes the Klan's activities in the first half of the 1950s

in *The Fiery Cross* (1987):

The nation itself had grown weary of Klan violence, however. A number of Southern states enacted their own laws against the Klan. After much agitation, pro and con, antimask laws were finally adopted in Alabama, Florida, and Georgia. In 1953, North Carolina passed a law making it illegal for members of “a secret society” to engage in activities “hindering or aiding the success or any candidate for public office.” Between 1952 and 1954, it looked as if the Klan were withering away. Incidents of Klan activity virtually disappeared from the newspapers. All this changed after May 17, 1954 — what many Southern whites would call “Black Monday.” On that day, in a landmark decision that reversed seventy years of its own thinking, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that “the philosophy that all men are created equal” is “the American creed” and that henceforth it is unlawful to maintain schools segregated by race. (297)

David M. Chalmers also mentions that the school integration of 1954 helped to enlarge the activity of the Klan:

It was the Supreme Court decision against public school segregation on May 17, 1954, that gave the Invisible Empire a new impetus and environment for action. In a South marked by growing hysteria, the Klans burst into activity. (343)

Thus, the activity of the Klan had only superficially calmed down by May 17, 1954, and it was rekindled by the court decision. This fact is reflected in the activity of the whites around Sherman. Just as the 1954 decision on public school integration caused renewed Klan violence against blacks, Sherman’s moving into the white man’s section gives a new impetus to Judge Clane and other white racists. As a result, Sherman becomes a victim of white racists. McCullers represents the deep-rooted racial discrimination around 1954 by Sherman’s bravery and violent death.

In summary, McCullers needed about ten years to complete this novel. During these ten years, the situation of American blacks began to change; for example, the school integration, the appearance of black leaders, the beginning of the civil rights movement, and so on. In other words, blacks woke up

to their dignity and pride. Sherman's bold action symbolizes this black awakening. On the other hand, many white racists repaid blacks with violence. The activity of the Ku Klux Klan is only the most notorious example. McCullers criticizes the conservatism of the American South by the white people's rejection of Sherman. Therefore, Sherman's murder by a white racist includes McCullers's irony toward white arrogance. Sherman's death is the death of justice. McCullers expresses the vehemence of racial discrimination by Sherman's violent death.

McCullers emphasizes that all human beings should be equal regardless of racial difference through the character of Sherman Pew, just as she did through Dr. Copeland and Berenice. She indicates her hope for racial integration with Sherman's blue eyes and the benign secret of his birth. The love between his black father and white mother can be regarded as the fusion of different races. It is no exaggeration to say that Sherman's mixed blood is the symbol of McCullers's desire for the disappearance of racial difference.

Sherman's brave opposition against bigotry is evidence of the change in American society. McCullers seems to affirm the progress of black status in the civil rights movement. Therefore, she dares to make Sherman live in the white man's section at the risk of his life. In spite of his courage, he is killed by a white racist. This symbolizes the death of social justice. McCullers condemns the reality of racial discrimination in the American South in Sherman's violent death.

She expresses her hope for racial equality by Sherman's mixed blood and his courage; but on the other hand, her despair of the conservative American South is voiced in his murder by a white racist.

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