



Illness as Metaphor in *Clock Without Hands*

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Abstract

Carson McCullers' *Clock Without Hands* vividly portrays the racial dynamics of the American South in the 1960s through its central characters: Malone, Jester, Judge Clane, and the biracial Sherman. The ailments afflicting these characters—obesity, leukemia, stroke, and social marginalization—serve as powerful metaphors for the shifting societal structures in the postwar South. McCullers employs these symbolic illnesses to reflect the fragility and eventual collapse of the deeply entrenched racial hierarchies that once defined Southern identity. Obesity reflects greed and obsession with power, leukemia signifies the erosion of conservative ideals, and stroke represents the paralysis of outdated ideologies. Through the metaphor of disease, McCullers critiques the South's staunch conservatism and resistance to change, while revealing the decay of racism's ideological foundations. By intertwining personal suffering with broader social upheavals, she poignantly illustrates the South's failure to reconcile its rigid traditions with the demands of modernity, emphasizing the inevitable disintegration of its discriminatory structures.

Keywords

McCullers; *Clock Without Hands*; Illness as Metaphor

Introduction

Carson McCullers (1917-1967) is regarded as one of the most influential American writers of the 20th century. Her life was marked by persistent illness, which became an indispensable thematic element in her works. *Clock Without Hands* is a representative novel that she composed over a span of ten years under the influence of her own physical suffering. In this novel, the four main characters are consistent with McCullers' characteristic portrayal of individuals, each afflicted with a distinct physiological ailment. These representations of illness have attracted significant attention and research from scholars both domestically and internationally. For instance, Frank Brennan has conducted an in-depth analysis of *Clock Without Hands* through the lens of narrative medicine. Domestically, Lin Bin has explored the metaphorical significance of illness in this novel but has not comprehensively addressed all the types of diseases depicted. Therefore, building on prior academic studies, this paper aims to conduct a systematic analysis of *Clock Without Hands* from the perspective of illness as a metaphor, thereby deepening the understanding of this work.

According to linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, the dual characteristics of the sign—its materiality and signifying function—grant it the potential for extension (Liu & Tian, 2014). The process of meaning generation is thus inherently open, endowing the sign with the possibility of metaphorical function. In McCuller's novels, illness, as a recurring and significant theme, transcends the straightforward impact of the author's personal experience of disease on her texts. It evolves into a symbolic representation of her profound reflections on the racial politics of the American South. As Lin Bin observes, McCullers undergoes a notable shift in her creative perspective—from a "private perspective" centered on self, individual experiences, and emotional expression, to a "public perspective" that engages with broader historical and political issues of Southern society (Lin, 2009). This paper argues that in her

works, illness is no longer confined to a narrative function but is transformed into a “signifier,” a medium for conveying meaning (Zhang, 2023). The imagery of illness serves as a mirror, reflecting the complexities of social reality and articulating McCullers’ critical reflections on the racial issues of the South. The various illnesses endured by her characters symbolize the author’s severe critique of the entrenched racism in Southern society. These metaphors of illness reveal McCullers’ profound contemplation of specific historical contexts and social phenomena, as well as her artistic expression of these concerns.

1. Obesity: The Greedy Obsession with Power and Racism

In Carson McCullers’ *Clock Without Hands*, the retired Judge Clane is depicted as a character addicted to gluttony, whose insatiable enjoyment of food becomes a defining aspect of his portrayal. This extreme eating habit not only leads to his weight soaring to 300 pounds, severely impeding his daily life, but also transforms obesity into a significant physiological ailment. According to the Department of Medical Administration (2024), obesity is defined as a condition characterized by abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that negatively affects health. In the detailed descriptions within the novel, such as the scene where “he ate the whites of his eggs first—the least delicious part of the breakfast—then carefully mixed up the prepared and mayonnaised yolks and spread them delicately on his toast. He ate with careful relish, his maimed hand curling lovingly around the rationed food as though to defend it from some possible aggressor” (McCullers, 1961, p. 43). Clane’s craving for food reveals a near-instinctual hunger and predatory desire. His obesity is not merely a physical ailment but can be interpreted as an external manifestation of his yearning for power. This expanded physicality symbolizes his relentless and unfulfilled quest for control and dominance, reflecting a deeper internal imbalance and dissatisfaction. The interplay between his corporeal traits and psychological state underscores McCullers’ profound critique of human nature and the societal structures of power.

Clane’s gluttony is rendered by McCullers as a potent symbol. Ignoring medical advice and dismissing warnings from his own body, he numbs himself by reading *Dieting Without Despair* while indulging in the fleeting gratification that food provides. Yet, his extreme obesity has unmistakably progressed into a physiological disease, significantly impairing his daily life. As depicted in the novel: “After slipping down his trousers hastily, he balanced himself with his good hand and sat gingerly on the stool; then when he was sure of himself, his great buttocks relaxed and he settled” (McCullers, 1961, p. 74). McCullers employs “obesity” as a metaphor for Clane’s obsessive pursuit of power. His ravenous appetite for food mirrors his insatiable greed for power, both driven by an uncontrollable instinctual force. As Foucault posits, “The body is the primary locus of mediation between the individual and society, nature, and the world; it is the essential nexus connecting individual selfhood with societal structures, as well as with discourses of knowledge, operations of power, and social morality” (Gao, 2005, p. 274). Clane’s body is not merely a vessel for his physiological burdens but also an embodiment of his profound desire for power. His inflated physicality mirrors the escalating intensity of his yearning for dominance and control, which continues to grow unchecked following his retirement.

After his retirement, Clane did not relinquish his attachment to power; instead, he became increasingly obsessed with instilling racist ideology in those around him, attempting to perpetuate his influence through these efforts. As a former judge who once wielded authority over people’s lives, Clane saw himself as a staunch defender of the South’s racist traditions, unabashedly idealizing the restoration of a racially stratified social hierarchy. In his view, “A reactionary is a citizen who reacts when the age-long standards of the South are threatened. When States’ rights are trampled on by The Federal government, then the Southern patriot is duty-bound to react. Otherwise, the noble standards of the South will be betrayed” (McCullers, 1961, p. 23). Clane casts himself as the “faithful guardian” of the South’s traditional values, fantasizing about restoring the past order to reestablish both his own and the South’s authority.

Clane firmly believed that his political capital was sufficient to influence those in power who, like him, had grown weary of liberalism. He envisioned himself “awaiting the call to action” to reclaim authority. This nostalgia for the old racial order, however, is ultimately a manifestation of his personal greed and hunger for power. To Clane, slavery represented the foundation of the Southern economy, and the federal government’s emancipation policies had dismantled this economic structure, leading to the depletion of the South’s resources. His admiration for *Gone with the Wind* further illustrates his deep-seated endorsement of the romanticization of slavery, as he viewed the novel as an authentic depiction of the South’s “glory” during the era of enslavement. Yet Clane’s rhetoric of “making slaves happy” is little more than a moral façade, one he employs to obscure his profound desire to dominate others and maintain his privileged status.

2. The Judge's Stroke: The Decline and Failure of Racist Ideology

The judge's stroke is not merely a physical affliction but a powerful metaphor for a profound psychological collapse, symbolizing the decline and failure of his deeply ingrained racist ideology. In *Clock Without Hands*, Carson McCullers employs the metaphor of the judge's stroke to illustrate the obsessive fixation of racists on the old Southern order, while simultaneously revealing the inevitable decline and irreversibility of racist beliefs in modern society. As Susan Sontag points out in *Illness as Metaphor*, "Illness is often used as a metaphor to make accusations of social corruption or injustice more vivid and compelling" (Sontag, 2018, p. 65). The stroke, as a disease affecting the brain, not only disrupts the judge's physical functions but also serves as a representation of his ossified thinking and detachment from reality. Ultimately, it drives him toward the collapse and failure of his ideology. This nuanced use of illness as metaphor underscores the broader critique of the societal and moral decay inherent in the persistence of racist attitudes.

The novel opens with a depiction of the judge's affliction with a stroke: "He was an enormous man with a red face and a rough halo of yellow-white hair. He wore a rumpled linen white suit, a lavender shirt, and a tie adorned with a pearl stick pin and stained with a coffee spot. His left hand has been damaged by a stroke and he rested it cautiously on the counter edge" (McCullers, 1961, p. 10). This detailed description establishes not only the judge's physical deterioration but also sets the stage for the broader symbolic implications of his condition.

A stroke, as a cerebrovascular condition, typically results from vascular blockage or ischemia, leading to impaired brain function. In the case of the judge, the stroke not only caused physical paralysis on one side of his body but also served as a metaphor for the "blockage" in his mental faculties, rendering him incapable of perceiving reality with clarity and trapping him in a pathological mode of thinking. Under this pathological state, he became increasingly detached from the real world, succumbing to fantasies about the restoration of the "Old South" order. He began to envision an unrealistic revival of racial hierarchies, even entertaining schemes such as redeeming Confederate currency to reinstate the values of a bygone era. Immersed in his unattainable dreams, he clung obsessively to a world long extinct.

The judge himself ironically remarked, "I would probably never have thought of those ideas if it hadn't been for that stroke that paralysed me so that I was half dead in the City Hospital for close on to two months" (McCullers, 1961, p. 145). He even claimed that the stroke had been "beneficial," allowing him to conduct "new research" during his recovery, which he believed had sharpened his intellect. However, this so-called "new research" was nothing more than a regurgitation of outdated racist ideologies—a stagnant intellectual regression masquerading as progress. This delusional revival of racist thought underscores the depth of his detachment from reality and the entrenched nature of his ideological decay.

When the judge confidently prepared to deliver a speech advocating for his vision of a restoration, events did not unfold as he had anticipated. In that moment, he believed he was on the brink of reclaiming control and reviving the "glory of the South." However, as he stood at the podium, microphone in hand, it was not the carefully crafted racist manifesto he had envisioned that came to mind, but rather Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. This speech, with its advocacy of liberty and equality, had been a text he memorized during his time in law school and now surfaced unbidden at the crucial moment, disrupting his plans entirely. As Susan Sontag suggests, the metaphoric nature of illness often reveals the decay and failure of internal ideologies (Sontag, 2018). The judge's stroke, which had already undermined his physical strength, now extended its effects into his speech. As he delivered his address, he became increasingly aware that his words were at odds with the deeper truths within him. Yet, under the expectant gaze of the audience, he found himself unable to stop, his thoughts muddled and chaotic, seemingly under the lingering influence of his stroke. In that instant, his dream of restoration, like the paralysis of his left hand, lost its foundation and crumbled within his consciousness. Lincoln's declaration of freedom and equality pierced through the corrupted fabric of his ideology like a beam of light, dismantling his entrenched racist beliefs. The judge's unfulfilled vision of restoration collapsed entirely within the course of his own speech, disintegrating alongside the irreversible decline precipitated by his stroke.

3. Malone's Leukemia: The Shaking Foundations of Southern Conservatism

Malone, a devoted follower of the judge, is a staunch believer in Southern conservatism and white supremacy, viewing the purity and superiority of the white race as an unquestionable hallmark of excellence. This deeply ingrained racial ideology permeates his daily behavior and internal reactions. When he encounters Sherman, a young Black boy, his immediate response is to scrutinize Sherman's body through the lens of the "Other." From noting that his

“arms were too long” to observing that his “chest was too broad,” Malone interprets every feature as a deviation from the white norm, marking Sherman as an abnormal presence. This bodily scrutiny is not merely a reflection of white supremacist ideology but also underscores Malone’s unconscious use of the white body as the ultimate standard for measuring human physicality.

This ingrained prejudice and sense of racial superiority are further evident in Malone’s verbal insults toward Sherman. Upon their first encounter, Malone hurls vitriolic abuse, calling Sherman a “wicked nigger,” despite the fact that Sherman is a complete stranger. Such language is not born out of personal animosity but stems from Malone’s unwavering belief in the superiority of his own bloodline. By demeaning others, he reinforces his self-perception of purity and nobility, projecting his internalized racial hierarchy onto those he deems inferior.

When Malone is diagnosed with leukemia, the disease’s onset triggers a profound upheaval in his beliefs. Leukemia, commonly referred to as “blood cancer,” is a malignant proliferative disorder of the hematopoietic system, characterized primarily by “abnormal proliferation of white blood cells that infiltrate tissues throughout the body” (Sontag, 2018, p. 18). Unlike other illnesses that manifest through visible physical deformities, leukemia insidiously erodes vitality. This illness not only ravages Malone’s bloodstream but also casts a shadow over the foundation of his white supremacist ideology.

For Malone and the judge, “blood” symbolizes the purity, superiority, and inviolability of the white race—a notion imbued with an almost sacred nobility. Upon learning of Malone’s diagnosis, the judge reacts with disbelief, exclaiming, “A blood disease! Why, that’s ridiculous—you have some of the best blood in this State.” (McCullers, 1961, p. 12) In their worldview, white blood is meant to epitomize superiority and strength, an untainted essence impervious to “disease.” Yet, the pathological changes within Malone’s blood function as a symbolic fissure, quietly destabilizing their entrenched white supremacist beliefs. This disease, infiltrating what they hold most sacred, reveals the underlying fragility and latent decay in the ideology they so fervently revere.

Although Malone outwardly maintains his belief in the superiority of his white identity, the illness subtly undermines his reliance on this racial supremacy. The “erosion” caused by leukemia, spreading within his body, symbolizes an unconscious questioning of his deeply ingrained racial ideology. As his condition deteriorates, his fervent attachment to his white identity begins to wane, prompting him to reassess his beliefs.

When Sherman moves into their community, the white residents devise a plan to violently expel the Black boy. During the drawing of lots, Malone is selected to carry out the task of bombing Sherman’s house. However, by this moment, Malone is no longer the unquestioning racist he once was. The suffering inflicted by his illness has shaken his rigid adherence to white supremacy. He ultimately refuses to carry out the violent act, defying the judge’s orders and choosing to sever ties with his former self.

This awakening represents not only an act of resistance against racism but also the fulfillment of the metaphorical significance of leukemia. The disease compels Malone to confront the corrosive nature of the beliefs he once held so firmly. It reveals that his prior convictions were not a source of strength, but rather an insidious force that had silently corrupted his perspective.

In his final moments, Malone not only experiences physical decline but also gradually frees himself from the constraints of white supremacist ideology. He refers to Judge Clane as an unwelcome guest: “At first Malone hardly knew the old Judge was there. There was just his voice, his anger sweaty presence. Then the words, the sounds, ricocheted in his un-understanding ears: integration... Supreme Court. Concepts and thoughts washed in his mind, but feebly” (McCullers, 1961, p. 199).

The faint response these ideas elicit in Malone’s mind suggests that they no longer hold the resonance they once did. This diminished impact symbolizes his growing detachment from the tenets of racist ideology, reflecting a gradual awakening and liberation from the beliefs that had previously defined his identity.

4. Conclusion

In *Clock Without Hands*, Carson McCullers uses the ailments of characters such as Judge Clane, Malone, Jester, and Sherman to profoundly illustrate the decay and decline of the foundations of Southern racism in 1960s America. Clane’s obesity symbolizes his obsession with power and his fixation on the old racial hierarchy, while his stroke signifies the gradual failure of his racist convictions. Malone’s leukemia carries even deeper metaphorical significance, representing the destabilization of the Southern conservative system. Through these metaphors, McCullers critiques the South’s obstinate adherence to racial prejudice and its inevitable decline in the face of social transformation, highlighting the barriers racism poses to societal progress and the South’s inability to adapt to the realities of

a changing era. These illnesses are not merely physical afflictions but serve as metaphorical critiques of racial bias, signaling the South's inexorable descent into obsolescence in the context of a new social order.

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