

Jester Clane's Vision of an Ideal Southern Society in *Clock Without Hands*: Musical Descriptions of *Tristan und Isolde*

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1 Introduction

Southern writer Carson McCullers published her final novel, *Clock Without Hands* in 1961. It took her ten years to complete the work, as she was paralyzed on the left side of the body and typed solely with her right hand (Carr 481). At the time of its composition, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum across the American South, and the novel was written amid these social upheavals. Set in the small rural town of Milan, Georgia, the work depicts Southern society through a diverse cast of characters: Judge Fox Clane, a white supremacist longing for the return of the antebellum years; J. T. Malone, a white pharmacist suffering from leukemia and confronting his impending death; Jester Clane, Judge Clane's grandson who searches for the meaning of life; and Sherman Pew, an orphan of mixed Black and white parentage.

Although the novel represented McCullers's first sustained work of full-length fiction in fifteen years and drew considerable attention—more than forty critical reviews and essays appeared within a year of publication—the critical reception was largely unfavorable (McDowell 96). Margaret McDowell interpreted the work, like much of McCullers' earlier fiction, as centered on the theme of loneliness (15), whereas Donald Emerson understood it as portraying moral isolation (15). Charlene Clark argued that

critics should not focus on the political backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement, but rather on the characters' journeys toward self-discovery (16). In contrast, Craig Slaven contended that the novel cannot be separated from its political context, suggesting that McCullers's limited understanding of the South's entrenched social and political stagnation contributed to the novel's unfavorable reception (252-63). Many critics also remarked on structural inconsistencies, claiming that the novel lacked the artistic unity of her early works (251).

It is true that McCullers left the South in her early twenties and spent most of her adult life in New York, thereby creating a sense of distance in her depiction of Southern society. This essay interprets the perceived "limited understanding of the South" not as a weakness but as a deliberate aesthetic strategy. Specifically, I re-evaluate the novel as an attempt to reconstruct an ideal vision of the South through a symbolic musical structure. Focusing on the recurring references to Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (premiered 1865), I undertake a musicological examination of these episodes. This essay argues that *Jester* functions as McCullers's vehicle for envisioning a Southern society inclusive of Black people, poor whites, and sexual minorities.

Music plays an important role throughout McCullers's works, a fact that stems from her early aspiration to become a concert pianist.¹ Musical references in her fiction such as composers, terminology, theories, and structures function not merely as ornamentation but as symbolic devices that carry thematic significance.² Thus, this essay

explores how *Clock Without Hands* uses *Tristan* to articulate Jester's ideal of an inclusive Southern society.

1 Three Appearances of *Tristan und Isolde*

Richard Wagner's *Tristan* appears three times in the narrative and each instance functions both as an indicator of psychological development and as an allegorical critique of Southern racial hierarchy.³ These three musical moments form a leitmotif structure that corresponds step-by-step to Jester's ethical maturation and deepening social awareness.

Tristan first appears in the form of Sherman Pew's fantastical narrative. Sherman invents a story for Jester, claiming that he once aspired to sing the role of Tristan at the Metropolitan Opera House but was denied the opportunity due to racial discrimination.

I really wanted to sing Tristan at the Metropolitan Opera House but the role is not adaptable to me. In fact, most of the roles of the Metropolitan are severely limited for people of my race; in fact, the only role I can think of off-hand is the role of Othello who was a Negro Moor. (*Clock Without Hands* 71)⁴

Sherman bitterly complains that major opera houses cast only white singers, complaining the structural racism embedded in American musical institutions.

The second reference to *Tristan* appears in the scene where Jester plays the piano for Sherman, practicing the music on his behalf:

He began to play *Tristan*, his eyes half closed and his body swaying. He had already inscribed the score: For my dear friend Sherman Pew Ever faithfully, John Jester Clane. The music gave Jester goose pimples, it was so violent yet shimmering. (*CWH* 122)

Even though Jester recognizes Sherman's complaint about the Metropolitan Opera House as a fabrication, he practices the music with "his eyes half closed." Jester's inscription in the music score suggests his enthusiasm for memorizing the piece to accompany Sherman's imagined singing of *Tristan* on the piano with a thrill or excitement. Jester's deep engagement with the music itself —swaying, playing from memory, experiencing bodily reactions —signals both emotional identification with *Tristan* and a reinforced sense of unity with Sherman. Thus, music becomes a medium for expressing empathy across racial boundaries.

The final reference to *Tristan* appears in the scene where Jester enshrines the *Tristan* score in his late father John's trunk, after white supremacist Sammy Lank kills Sherman for moving into a white neighborhood: "Carefully, mechanically, he wrapped the *Tristan* score he had inscribed to Sherman and placed it in one of his father's trunks

up in the attic and locked it” (CWH 200). This moment precedes Jester’s plan to avenge Sherman by carrying out a murder-suicide with Lank. Jester’s action mirrors his father’s self-sacrificing defense of an unjustly convicted Black man, suggesting that he, too, perceives violent resistance as a potential moral obligation. Just as his late father John protested against the execution of an innocent Black man by sacrificing his own life, Jester likewise protested racial discrimination in the American South by seeking a revenge on Lank, a white supremacist who killed Sherman out of racial prejudice, and by ultimately committing a murder- suicide with him.

Throughout these three appearances, Wagner’s musical drama *Tristan* functions as a leitmotif not only to introduce musical references but also to indicate Jester’s transformation of consciousness. Sherman’s fabricated story exposes Jester’s sharp criticism of racial injustice; Jester’s performance expresses his empathy with the music *Tristan* and his sense of solidarity with Sherman; and the final enshrinement of the score symbolizes his turn toward radical resistance. McCullers does not present Jester’s conduct as merely an individual tragedy; rather, she protests the racial structure of the American South through the musical symbolism embedded in these three appearances.

2 Reading *Tristan* through the Concept of “Liebestod” (Love-Death)

In the previous section, the discussion has shown that the musical moments of Jester’s playing the *Tristan* score and enshrining it in his late father’s trunk function not

merely as narrative episodes but as symbolic devices. To clarify the symbolic role of *Tristan* in Jester's narrative, this section draws on Wagner's philosophical concept of "*Liebestod*" (Love-Death), a climactic ideal of transcendent love embodied in the second-act duet of his musical drama.

Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* is one of his masterpieces, a musical drama adapted from the medieval love myth of *Tristan und Isolde*. Tristan and Isolde mistakenly drink a love potion prepared by Isolde's mother and fall in love with each other. However, their love is socially forbidden love as adulterous, since Isolde is married to the Cornish king. Wagner conceptualized such forbidden love as the ultimate form of love, "*Liebestod*," because it can never be fulfilled within the bounds of social life. This idea is realized musically in the second-act duet, in which the singers portraying Tristan and Isolde bring their love to a musical climax. "*Liebestod*" represents "a form of metaphysical fulfillment that surpasses earthly suffering through death" (Sadie 456) and functions as a musical expression of deliverance beyond one's emotion. Thomas Mann, a German novelist and a fervent admirer of Wagner, similarly described it as "love consummated through death," a source of ecstasy and awe for the audience (45). Thus, Wagner's theme of "*Liebestod*" suggests that consummation of ultimate love does not terminate in physical death but endures eternally.

From this Wagner's perspective, Jester's practice of the *Tristan* score merits closer examination. When Jester experiences "goose pimples" while playing the piece, he

becomes highly emotional as though waves of his repressed feeling surge through him. Jester projects his suppressed emotions onto the music and reacts bodily to them, thereby sublimating his forbidden love for Sherman. From the 1950s through the 1960s, when McCullers wrote this story, homosexuality was socially condemned and rendered unspeakable in the American South. Jester's feelings thus correspond to Wagner's concept of "*Liebestod*," because, like the love of Tristan and Isolde, they are unfulfillable within life. They can be expressed through the symbolic medium of music.⁵ At the same time, the scene in which Sherman appears to acknowledge Jester's friendship by showing his appreciation suggests a small possibility of communication, despite his earlier frown at Jester's declaration of love.

Furthermore, Jester's act of storing the *Tristan* score in his late father's trunk likewise mirrors the logic of "*Liebestod*." Jester seeks symbolic consummation of his love in a realm beyond death. Even though Sherman rejects his romantic advances, Jester's love, expressed through the symbolic medium of music, can be interpreted as being eternally consummated beyond the agony of this world.

An examination of the three appearances of *Tristan* reveals that Jester protests against racial discrimination culminates in a willingness to sacrifice his life, a gesture that mirrors Wagner's concept of "*Liebestod*." However, Jester ultimately abandons his murder-suicide plot, a resolution that appears anticlimactic to the contemporary critics. Despite Jester's protest against racial discrimination, the climactic theme becomes blurred

(Hicks 15), and Jester's final decision confuses the novel's treatment of segregation (Rubin 509). Such anticlimactic ending becomes intelligible when read through the lens of Wagner's musical structure.

3 The "Tristan Chord" and Jester's Ethical Transformation

This section explores Jester's ethical shift through a musicological analysis of the structure of the "Tristan chord." This musical device enables us to understand Jester's determination to confront the reality of racial prejudice rather than seek revenge on Lank and sacrifice his own life.

As Jester flies with Sammy Lank, described as "ragtag and bobtail" (*CWH* 192), preparing to commit a murder-suicide, he begins to perceive the world differently. During their flight, Lank laments that his pursuit of fame and financial gain through fathering quintuplets has left him with fourteen children to support. Confronted with the consequences of Lank's thoughtless life, Jester comes to regard a murder-suicide with him meaningless (*CWH* 202). This recognition leads him to abandon his plan for revenge on Lank and realizes how differently things appear viewed from a distance while riding in the airplane.

Looking downward from an altitude of two thousand feet, the earth assumes order. . . The surrounding terrain seems designed by a law more just and

mathematical than the laws of property and bigotry. . . But this is an order foreign to the heart. . . Gliding downward, low over the town and countryside, the whole breaks up into multiplicity of impressions. . . the town itself becomes crazy and complex. (*CWH* 202)

While “from an altitude of two thousand feet, the earth assumes order,” he discovers that his judgment is mistaken as he descends. The excerpt above indicates Jester’s critique of the social order: The contrast between the distant and close perspectives reflects a gap in the hierarchical structure. McDowell likewise notes that the community which appears orderly when seen from high up in the sky, can be filled with injustice and discrimination as the plane approaches land (104). Jester comes to realize that Southern society contains not only privileged whites such as his grandfather Judge Clane, but also Blacks, and impoverished whites like Lank, who are disparaged as “ragtag and bobtail,” and sexual minorities such as himself. In reality, things are not mathematically placed, and ordered, and justice is not practiced among people. This recognition marks a turning point at which Jester commits himself to the realization of a society that excludes no dissonances.

The preceding textual analysis clarifies why Jester has abandoned his plan to commit a murder-suicide with Lank and what alternative ethical direction he begins to pursue. The discussion then turns to an analysis of Wagner’s *Tristan*, examining Jester’s moral shift from a musicological perspective, particularly through his recognition of

depth as perceived from a distant viewpoint. Wagner composed *Tristan* using his original harmonic innovation, the Tristan chord, characterized by chromaticism and unresolved dissonance. The Tristan chord functions as a leitmotif, a “short, recurring musical theme” that appears in operas and is associated with specific characters and the situations, thereby reinforcing the dramatic action. In *Tristan*, the Tristan chord recurs in connection with Tristan himself. Characterized by unresolved dissonance, the chord has been described by Robert Erickson as “ambiguous in tonality. . . beyond conventional harmonic logic” (75). Thomas Mann likewise called it unprecedented, disorienting and philosophically profound (48). Before Wagner, composers in the Western musical tradition, tended to restrict the use of dissonance in musical development owing to the psychological impact on listeners. Dissonance was often associated with unpleasantness and harshness. In tonal music, it served only as a temporary accent or embellishment (Ikeuchi 27-28). By using such dissonant effects, Wagner prolonged and emancipated dissonance, thereby opening the way toward modern atonality.

Classical music in the Western world from the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth century was defined as an art form characterized by formal structure and harmonic organization. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) described harmony in the classical music of his time as pleasing, consonant, and orderly, treating it as a sonic metaphor for a hierarchical and exclusionary social order in his philosophical work *The World as Will and Representation* (1819). There, he explains that classical music mainly

consists of consonance, with only a few dissonances, which functions merely as an embellishment within the harmonic structure and never disrupts the overall order. Melody and accompanying voices work together to create unity and integration, reflecting what he understood as the structured coherence of European white society. Schopenhauer argues that “music is persistent motion from the dissonance to the harmonious sound” (146-55), ultimately resolving into consonance and thereby objectifying the will of the society.⁶ He further contends that “The whole palette of sounds corresponds to the levels to the will’s objectification” (Lihus32-34). Thus, he suggests that melody and accompanying voices blend into a pleasing harmony, reflecting how white European composers conceptualize social order.

Tagiru Fujii reads Schopenhauer’s ideology of classical music as mirroring modern bourgeois society from both sociological and musicological perspectives. By applying the orderly structure of European society to Schopenhauer’s concept of harmony, Fujii argues that this ideology implies the exclusion of heterogeneous dissonances from society, ultimately leading to racial discrimination. Interpreting melody as representing the individual, harmony as representing society, and music as representing the world, Fujii explains that just as a melody, together with other voices, forms a harmony that sounds pleasing to listeners, individuals collectively construct society, and the society articulates a vision of the European world. Thus, Fujii interprets Schopenhauer’s ideology of classical music as suggesting that heterogeneous individuals disturb social order and that

this logic underlies racial discrimination (175-76).

By using Fujii's argument, applying Wagner's Tristan chord to society in the American South suggests that dissonance represents Black people, poor whites described as "ragtag and bobtail," and sexual minorities such as Jester. This interpretation implies that these dissonant or disparate individuals are perceived as disrupting the harmony of conventional white society within the exclusionary mindset of the American South. At the same time, it seeks to envision a new form of social harmony in which heterogeneous individuals can coexist. Jester's rejection of revenge and his decision to confront reality in the American South resonate with the philosophy embodied in Wagner's liberated "Tristan chord." Just as Wagner liberated dissonance, opening the possibility of new musical unity, Jester's rejection of revenge and affirmation of life gesture toward a society that incorporates rather than excludes, its dissonant elements.

4 Proust's Reception of *Tristan* in *La Prisonnière*

McCullers's recurrent use of *Tristan* as symbolic theme is deeply indebted to Marcel Proust, whom she profoundly admired throughout her life. In a letter to her former husband Reeves, she wrote:

After the postman comes this afternoon, I'll read Proust. Today I was thinking of the immense debt I owe to Proust. It's not a matter of his "influencing my

style” or anything like that — It’s the rare good fortune of having always something to turn to, a great book that never tarnishes, never become[s] dull from familiarity. (*Illumination and Night Glare* 140) ⁷

In this section, the discussion examines Proust’s reception of *Tristan* as it appears in his novel *La Prisonnière* (*The Captive*) (1923), the fifth volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. It then clarifies how Proust’s reception of *Tristan* reflects upon Jester’s vision of an ideal South in *Clock Without Hands*.

In *La Prisonnière*, the narrator “I” hears a phrase from Vinteuil’s sonata and murmurs, “It is *Tristan*!” (155). He perceives that “it was a passage with which I was quite familiar, but sometimes our attention throws a different light upon things. . . and we remark in them what we have never seen before” (155). For Proust, who loved music and played the piano, music functioned as a language of the spirit, conveying meanings that elude verbal articulation (Masuo 40-41). In *La Prisonnière*, the narrator’s comparison between melody of Vinteuil’s sonata with *Tristan* marks a crucial symbolic moment, as it gestures toward a renewed vision of harmony founded upon diversity rather than exclusion. Through the narrator’s perspective, Proust characterizes *Tristan* as a work of “combining diverse individualities” (156). He praises the musical drama’s aesthetics for generating grand harmony out of the clash of “warring sounds” (156) and for embodying “a unity that was unaware of itself” (158). This ideology of “combining diverse

individualities,” as Proust calls it, evokes Wagner’s Tristan chord and resonates with Jester’s vision of unifying all forms of dissonance discussed in the previous section. For Proust, musical unity signifies not the exclusion of dissonant elements but their incorporation into a larger, more expansive harmony.

Proust’s idea is rooted in his own experience of antisemitism, particularly the Dreyfus Affair (1894), which appears throughout *Le côté de Guermantes* (*The Guermantes Way*) (1920-21), the third volume of *In Search of Lost Time* (194, 225-26, 239-44, 247-50). In the narrative, the narrator “I” refers to the false accusation of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, whose case reveals the racial discrimination embedded in French society at the time. In *La Prisonnière*, the narrator’s insistence on a unity that “did not prohibit variety” (158) signals a deliberate resistance to racial discrimination and prejudice. By envisioning harmony as the inclusion rather than the exclusion of difference, he challenges ideologies that define social cohesion through uniformity. A comparison between the narrator’s account and Jester’s narrative reveals their shared concern with those cast as social “dissonances”: Jews in Europe, and Blacks, poor whites, and sexual minorities in the American South. Just as Proust redefines *Tristan* as “combining diverse individualities,” McCullers likewise invokes *Tristan* to articulate Jester’s vision of the American South, affirming diverse individualities in *Clock Without Hands*. Thus, the common ground shared by Proust and McCullers in their symbolic use of *Tristan* reflects their belief in incorporating difference rather than excluding heterogeneity.

The narrator “I” argues that a melody whose mysterious sonority evokes the Tristan chord is inscribed “in the vast tonal mass” (156) of music. By lightly touching up “his work with a swift brush stroke” (158), without any deliberate intention of unifying its elements, the composer allows the melody to emerge as “the most sublime” (158). However, adding further brushstrokes might destroy the balance by introducing dissimilar strokes that generate conflict. Nonetheless, the narrator regards Wagner as a musical creator who finds joy and consolation in in the act of creation (158). What Proust suggests here is Wagner’s musical philosophy: the composer finds joy and comfort from preserving dissonances rather than removing them (158). Proust further asserts that aesthetics of a work does not consist in perfect order, but in a generative process that includes destruction and conflicts. This insight resonates with McCullers’s narrative, in which the deaths of Johnny and Sherman as well as Jester’s agony and frustration, function as dissonant “fragments” that ultimately gesture toward the possibility of social regeneration. Thus, Proust’s vision of unification without any deliberate intention, echoes McCullers’s narrative structure.

Conclusion

Focusing on Jester, this essay examined the three appearances of Wagner’s *Tristan* in *Clock Without Hands* and has offered a musicological reading of their symbolic function. Drawing on Schopenhauer’s concept and definition of classical harmony in his

time as well as Fujii's critique of its racial discrimination and prejudice, it has argued that the Tristan chord the music drama's revolutionary tonal structure, functions as a metaphor for a transformed Southern society. This perspective suggests that incorporating Blacks, poor whites, and sexual minorities, who have historically been treated as social "dissonances," into traditional Southern society would destroy exclusionary white supremacy and its hierarchical social order. In doing so, it would enable the realization of a different Southern society in which diversity is embraced.

The essay also explored McCullers's intellectual background by focusing on her engagement with Proust, whom she deeply admired. It then turned to Proust's interpretation of Wagner's *Tristan*, as narrated in his novel *La Prisonnière*. In this narrative, Proust praises the musical drama for producing grand harmony out of the clash of heterogeneous sounds, describing this harmony as a symbol of unity, that "combines diverse individualities." Just as Proust cherished this ideal of unity in the midst of an antisemitic society, McCullers employed it to articulate her opposition to discrimination based on race, social class and sexual orientation in the American South of her time. For her, *Tristan* was not merely a musical reference or ornament, but an assertion of unity that, as Proust argues, "did not prohibit variety."

As discussed, the essay concludes that McCullers employs musical symbolism to critique the exclusionary social order of the American South and to envision a more integrated society in her narrative.

Notes

1 McCullers refers to musical terminology, composers, titles, and theories in most of her works.

“Wunderkind” (1936) Ernest Bloch, Georg Friedrich Händel’s *the Harmonious*

Blacksmith, Ludwig van Beethoven’s *Piano Sonata No.12 Op. 26*.

***The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940)** Beethoven’s *Symphony No.3 in E-flat*

Major, Op. 55 and Mozart’s *Symphony*

***Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941)** Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Sonata*,

Johannes Brahms’s *G minor Quartet*, César Franck’s *A Major Sonata* and

Sergej Rachmaninoff’s *Waltz*

“Madam Zilenski and the King of Finland” (1941) Johan Sebastian Bach’s

fugues, Alessandro Scarlatti trills

***The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943)** Ballad, automated piano

***The Member of the Wedding* (1946)** jazz, blues, minuet, march, waltz, juke box

“The Sojourner” (1950) Bach’s *prelude and fugue* and a nameless piece of music

***The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958)** Sergej Rachmaninoff’s *Prelude in C-Sharp*

Minor, Georg Friedrich Handel’s “Dead March,” Wolfgang Amadeus

Mozart’s *Turkish March*

2 Janice Fuller, one of McCullers’s critics, writes “the influence of music manifests itself

in a number of ways in Carson McCullers's fiction" (55). McCullers's biographer, Virginia Spencer Carr, also writes, "Lula Carson Smith at thirteen knew without a doubt that she would be a concert pianist. . . She later attributed her excellent sense of form and structure to her study of music (26).

3 Hereafter, Richard Wagner's musical drama *Tristan und Isolde* will be referred to as *Tristan*.

4 Hereafter, Carson McCullers's *Clock Without Hands* will be referred to as *CWH*.

5 Homosexuality is regarded as a sin and punished by God in the Old Testament, *Genesis* 18-19 and *Leviticus* 22: 18. In the New Testament, *First Corinthians* 1:26-27, likewise homosexuality is also regarded as sinful and unacceptable within the Christian Community. In the American South, where a large population of Christian fundamentalists, homosexuality was widely regarded as sinful, and subject to severe persecution, even death. One of McCullers's scholars, Jenn Shapland, notes that sexual "deviance," or homosexual orientation, was regarded as "sinful behavior" (198) and the solution was to institutionalize those with homosexual orientation and subject them to medical or psychiatric treatment (198-99).

6 Definitions of consonance and dissonance are drawn from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

7 This is an excerpt from the letter dated January 24, 1945, which Carson McCullers wrote it to her former husband, Reeves McCullers, who was on the European battlefield.

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