

# [Fixation on imagination: an investigation into the necessity of personal deceptio...](https://assignbuster.com/fixation-on-imagination-an-investigation-into-the-necessity-of-personal-deception-in-clock-without-hands/)

Many people, especially Southerners, willingly deceive themselves when referring to race relations or the way we remember the past by voicing their opinions in the form of “ It was not that bad during segregation” or “ The Civil War was fought over state’s rights.” In her novel Clock Without Hands, Carson McCullers explores themes typically found in Southern literature such as family, tradition, and race relations through the interactions of Judge Clane, Jester Clane, Sherman Pew, and J. T. Malone while also exposing the toxicity that comes with denying reality. Though born in Georgia, McCullers herself, due to severe depression and homosexuality, had an unusual relationship with the social norms of the South. She expresses this personal disparity through the traits of some of the characters in the novel. However, she also delves with surprising clarity into the often purposefully obscured realm of imagination. This layer of depth adds insight not only to the characters’ personalities but also to their relationships to the social environment of the 1950’s South. In presenting characters’ idealized scenarios for the past, present, and future in contrast with the reality of their world in Milan, Georgia, McCullers demonstrates the necessity of personal deception which develops through imagining an alternate reality, planning based on said imagination, changing relationships because of it, and eventually accepting the imagined world as the real one. Through the four main characters, the author traces the path of this process of deception from its inception to its consequences to demonstrate the futility of refusing to accept reality.

J. T. Malone, possibly the most relatable character of the novel because of his sadly all too familiar prognosis, escapes into his imagination to distract from the pressing and forced recognition of his own mortality as well as the regret he feels for living a passive life. However, he only demonstrates the first portion of the process of deception because, in the end, he acknowledges his reality. Initially, reprieve from thoughts of both death and regret come to him in the form of “ daydreaming…that in the autumn he was going to a northern country…. alone without Mrs. Malone” (130). The word “ alone” holds significance regarding imagination because only the person doing the imagining can truly immerse himself in his imagined world. One can explain that world to someone else, but the other person will never truly understand the picture one wants to paint. McCullers use of this word highlights the idea that Malone’s future life is purely imaginary because he must encounter it alone. Per human nature, no one enjoys ruminating on his or her own impending death, so while the futility of Malone’s avoidance of this looming event is recognizable to readers, it is also understandable in that we know we will have to address it in our own lives eventually. Malone also uses this imagined getaway to provide self-restitution for a life he feels he has not lived to the fullest. In fantasizing about finally living out his ideal life, Malone diverts his thoughts from his present situation. McCullers’ relation to the dying pharmacist also comes from her personal life. A sickly, depressed woman, the author likely had thoughts about death comparable to Malone’s at some point and may have used similar coping methods considering writing involves significant amounts of imagination. In the end though, McCullers uses J. T. Malone’s acceptance of his own death to highlight that no matter what someone may imagine to the point of deception, reality will follow its course.

Judge Clane, whose imagination functions as a beacon of hope and validation for him in the progressing reality that rapidly frustrates him, exemplifies a further progression into deception than J. T. because he attempts to make plans based on his own imagination. In response to the sentiment that the Federal Government should “ redress [the] historical and monumental wrong” of ending slavery and granting blacks rights, the Judge decidedly states that if he wins the next election, he will “ have a bill introduced…that will redeem all Confederate monies” (37). As an extremely prejudiced old man raised in a society that glorified and supported people like him, the Judge truly cannot grapple with the possibility that his culture could shift away from the established set of norms. He eagerly crafts and develops an idea that he allows himself to believe can “ turn back the clock for a hundred years” (161). McCullers easily could have opted for the wording “ turn back time,” but instead writes “ clock” which evokes the title of the novel. On a clock without hands, one literally cannot turn back time. The author mocks Judge Clane’s deceptive conviction that he can accomplish the impossible through her word choice and both Jester and Sherman’s immediate discrediting of the idea. By portraying the Judge as a character with an imagination bordering on laughable delusion, the author defames others who seek his same goals. In the end of the novel, when Judge Clane attempts to give a speech on his disagreement with Brown v. Board, he instead recites the Gettysburg Address and experiences a “ shock of recognition [that makes] him crumble” (241). Though the Judge plans and acts based on his ideal imagined scenario, he ultimately recognizes the reality of the world he inhabits much to his dismay. McCullers uses Judge Clane to illustrate that the world will attempt to jolt someone back into reality when his imagination becomes too out of line.

Jester Clane’s imagination arguably disappoints and saddens the most in that it disguises itself as the simplest and most innocent of the four characters when in truth it speaks most to the cruel role of personal deception in perpetuating the institution of racism in Southern culture. Jester alters his relationships based on his imagining of himself as different from the typical Southern white young man when realistically, his picture of himself holds no weight. Throughout the novel, Jester makes a significant effort to befriend Sherman. However, Sherman, despite his inner desires to have a close confidant, rebuffs him consistently, even to the point of asking Jester “ What makes you think you’re a friend?” (142). This question serves two purposes for McCullers. First, it signifies that the relationship represents a complete reversal of the norms of their society. However, it also slyly hints that Jester’s assumption of the validity of their friendship might need reevaluation. The author eventually reveals Jester’s vision of he and Sherman as true comrades as falsified and futile when he muses that “ his odyssey of friendship, love, and revenge was now finished” (234). McCullers could have described Jester and Sherman’s relationship as a “ journey” or a “ trial.” Instead, she opts for “ odyssey,” which as the origin of the word might suggest, denotes a more fantastical and fairytale-like peregrination than a realistic one. Sammy Lank murders Sherman, Jester’s proposed “ best friend,” the day prior and Jester accepts and brushes off the fact that Lank thinks he is proud of him for killing Sherman; Jester has almost no qualms letting his relationship with Sherman go a single day after his death. Throughout the novel, Jester imagines himself as a progressive young man that desires equality, but in the end, he releases Sherman’s presence in his life as easily as he drops the pistol out of the plane (233). He only wants Sherman as a friend for the novelty of it so that he could smoothly imagine himself as the social justice advocate he wants to be. In the reality of Jester’s privileged and peaceful life, Sherman occupies an insignificant and immemorable place that only serves as a means to an end of a vision of racial justice and not an end in himself as a human. Jester delves deep into his imagination in that he creates a relationship on his assumption of its validity, but when the world tests him after Sherman dies, he relinquishes it easily to the acceptance of reality.

Among the four main characters, Sherman undeniably possesses the most vivid and intricate imagination which he utilizes to cope with the ambiguity of his position in society and the repercussions of this vagueness. However, this full emersion in imagination in due course brings demise for Sherman because he wholly deceives himself into accepting his imagined world as reality. Throughout his life, Sherman has crafted storylines to explain his peculiar lack of parentage, and this habit reaches its culmination when Jester suggests that the famous singer Marian Anderson may be Sherman’s mystery mother (78). Sherman consumes himself with the investigation into and fantasizing of the possibility of this woman as his mother. In his 1950’s southern environment, the concept of the “ nuclear family” dominated everyday life; if one did not belong to such a unit, others viewed one as lacking and peculiar. Sherman exists on almost the exact opposite end of the familial spectrum in his lack of parents and the known but unspoken miscegenation of those parental figures. In her own life, McCullers positioned herself, perhaps purposefully, outside of the “ nuclear family” archetype as well. As a divorced woman and unconsummated lesbian, the author could emphasize with and reflect on her perception in society through Sherman. Sherman so willingly wants to fill in the gaps of his existence that he tries to merge imagination with reality. As evidenced when “ he [takes] down his records…sung by Marian Anderson and [stomps] on them” after he receives confirmation that she could not be his mother (144), Sherman identifies so much with his own imagined scenarios that allow him to conform to societal standards that he deceives himself into treating them as reality.

Uncovering his true lineage and the identity of the person responsible for his lack of a mother and father provokes Sherman to step out of the realm of imagination and test his perceived place in society. He first defies race expectations in small ways, but when these actions do not produce the commotion he envisions such as multiple people noticing him, he moves into a house in a white neighborhood (218). When Sherman knowingly makes this conscious and planned decision, one could assume that he makes the choice aware of potential repercussions. However, when confronted by Jester with the news that townsmen will bomb his home, Sherman exclaims that “ it’s not going to happen! I have invited guests with RSVP invitations to a housewarming party” (227). He cannot cope with the harsh and violent reality of the situation he has placed himself in and thus must slip back into the deceptive notion of an alternate reality. Through Sherman’s imagination, McCullers forces the recognition that the racist sentiment of the South was so pervasive that sometimes the only way for a colored person to dispel its damaging effects was to imagine the social environment differently. In the end though, this culmination of the process of deception results in Sherman’s death and serves as a warning of the futility of relying on imagination to transport one from reality.

Using personal deception to bridge the gap between the worlds that the characters want to live in and the reality of Milan, Georgia in the 1950’s almost never brings any positive consequences for the characters. Clock Without Hands’ masterful incorporation of imagination in forms varying from mostly harmless distraction to full immersion in a false reality advances the refutation of the possibility that someone can fight against or move beyond the regular progress of time . McCullers uses the concept of the dissonance between imagination and reality to highlight the notions that the pervasive racism of the time came with serious emotional effects for blacks and that one cannot simply opt out of this reality. Through the use of Judge Clane and J. T. Malone, she also emphasizes the almost laughable tragedy of refusing to recognize a future reality. Though McCullers needed a vivid imagination to succeed as a writer, in this novel she warns us that trying to force the merger of one’s own imagined world and the real world can create many more problems than it can solve.