

Prejudice and Enlightenment in the Novel *Clock Without Hands*

Yu Chen¹

¹ Xi'an Polytechnic University, Shaanxi, China

Correspondence: Yu Chen, Xi'an Polytechnic University, Shaanxi, China.

doi:10.56397/JRSSH.2025.02.04

Abstract

Clock Without Hands is the most impressive and final novel by American southern female writer Carson McCullers. The novel portrays three characters of different ages: Judge Clane, a respected former member of the House of Representatives in his eighties; Malone, a pharmacist diagnosed with leukemia and is also a loyal follower of the judge; Jester, the seventeen-year-old grandson of the judge who has high hopes; and Sherman, the old judge's private secretary, who was a Black man with blue eyes. Prejudice is a common phenomenon in cross-cultural communication. This paper analyzes the specific manifestations of prejudice in the book *Clock Without Hands* from the perspective of "prejudice", through three dimensions: disease, race and gender. Through analyzing the manifestation of prejudice in the novel, it will bring inspiration for the public to improve their intercultural communication skills.

Keywords: *Clock Without Hands*, cross-cultural communication, prejudice

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of the world economy and the trend of globalization, exchanges between countries around the world have become closer. The rapid transmission of information and frequent exchanges have brought countries, regions, and people from all over the world onto a common communication platform. Cross-cultural communication is an essential process for the exchange and interconnection of world cultures and serves as an important bridge in the process of globalization. However, in the process of cross-cultural communication, cultural misunderstandings and even prejudices often arise due to differences in national history, national traditions, religious beliefs, values,

customs, and the stage of social development.

In social life, everyone belongs to different groups. Prejudice refers to the unfounded attitudes of members within a group towards members outside the group, representing a psychological predisposition and perspective that does not conform to the facts. Prejudice is one of the main obstacles in cross-cultural communication, manifesting consciously or unconsciously in obvious or implicit ways during cultural exchange and dissemination. Therefore, we must face prejudice squarely and strive to overcome it in cross-cultural communication and exchanges. This article will analyze and understand the prejudice in cross-cultural communication psychology in more detail from the perspectives of illness, race,

and gender, drawing on Carson McCullers' last novel *Clock Without Hands*, in order to provide some referential ideas and inspiration for people to overcome prejudice in cross-cultural communication.

2. "Prejudice" in the Cross-Cultural Perspective

The term "prejudice" originates from Latin, meaning "a judgment based on a prior decision or previous experience." Prejudice is the negative sentiment towards members of a group based on erroneous and rigid generalizations. Prejudice can be directed towards an entire group or individuals from a particular group. Some people's prejudices against others are based on factors such as skin color, accent, dialect, certain religious and cultural customs, etc. In cross-cultural communication, prejudice is also a ubiquitous phenomenon.

Firstly, the core of prejudice lies in negative or hostile emotions and attitudes. Prejudice is both related to and distinct from stereotypes. Stereotypes are primarily a form of cognition, while prejudice is mainly an attitude. Stereotypes include both positive and negative impressions, whereas prejudices are almost exclusively negative and carry a strong emotional color.

Secondly, prejudice easily leads to discrimination. Prejudice is an attitude, while discrimination is a behavior. "我讨厌中国学生，因为他们是书呆子" is a prejudice, while "我们足球俱乐部里不要中国的书呆子" is discrimination. Discrimination includes racial discrimination, gender discrimination, age discrimination, regional discrimination, and so on.

Moreover, prejudice is also very stubborn. Since prejudice is generally formed gradually over a long period and people within the same group often share this prejudice towards other groups, once formed, it is difficult to change and can persist for a long time. For example, the prejudice that American whites hold towards Blacks as lazy and stupid has a long history and is very stubborn, with a considerable portion of whites still holding such views today. This article will specifically explore the psychological factor of prejudice using Carson McCullers' renowned novel *Clock Without Hands* as a model.

3. Synopsis of *Clock Without Hands*

Clock Without Hands is Carson McCullers' most impressive novel, depicting the condition of the

Southern United States, her hometown, through the slow fade of an ancient way of life via a dying pharmacist, a white judge and former senator, his rebellious grandson, and the living conditions of Black people.

In this thought-provoking and heartfelt novel, four men find themselves tightly bound together by their shared history. The pharmacist, Marlon, is a healthy and physically fit white man with a decent job, and the idea of "white supremacy" is deeply ingrained in his heart. He is also a loyal supporter of the old judge, Clane; Clane, an octogenarian judge, still dreams of revitalizing the Confederacy and restoring slavery despite his advanced age. The teenager, Jester, is the grandson of the old judge and a seventeen-year-old high school student. After Jester's father, the son of the old judge, died prematurely, Jester became the old judge's high hope for the future. The seventeen-year-old Jester is involuntarily attracted to Sherman, the old judge's personal secretary, who is a Black orphan with fantasies about his origins. He feels the sharp sting of racial inequality due to his unusual blue eyes, but when he discovers the truth about his parents' identities, all his fantasies are shattered. Carson McCullers explores the roots of prejudice and the double morality of the main white residents of the town through the perspectives of these characters. This article will also depart from prejudice and elaborate on its specific manifestations in different characters by category.

4. Manifestations of "Prejudice" in the Novel

Since the dawn of civilization, humans have lived in a material world full of norms. Davis mentions in his book *Enforcing Normalcy* that "we inhabit a world replete with norms, where everyone strives to conform or deliberately avoids that state (Davis, L. J, 1995)". The mainstream ideology of society constructs a discourse system resembling hegemony through the domination of discourse mechanisms. Under this normalized and hegemonic system, the mainstream culture of society categorizes, even denigrates and excludes, groups that do not conform to its value standards, in order to align them with the subjectivity of the discourse holders and thus serve the framework of normalized meaning constructed by society. This image of the "other" that is regulated and oppressed by social norms from the mainstream perspective is essentially a form of artificial prejudice of the mainstream against the

non-mainstream. Within the framework of this mainstream hegemonic ideology, this article analyzes the infiltration and discipline of the external environment presented in the novel in terms of disease, race, and gender. The novel presents many contradictory and opposing ideologies, which subtly influence the public's thinking patterns. What lies behind these patterns is actually a huge prejudice under the mechanism of normalization.

4.1 In Terms of Illness

After experiencing the Gilded Age, the United States in the early 20th century was in a state of rapid economic development. However, as the economy grew, the gap between the rich and the poor continued to widen, with calls for reform from the bottom rising one after another. The emergence of eugenics undoubtedly provided a good excuse for the elite class: one's talents are determined at birth. Therefore, the eugenics movement was extremely prevalent in Europe and America at that time. The eugenics movement attributed physical disabilities to genetic diseases, thereby constructing a binary opposition mechanism between health and illness, normalcy and abnormality, mainstream and non-mainstream.

The character of the old judge Clane in the novel is a typical representative of the old South of the United States. As someone who could "preserve" tradition when the traditions inherited for generations in the South were threatened (Carson McCullers, 2017), Clane had always been dedicated to restoring the noble traditions of the old South. However, before truly holding onto tradition, he first suffered from illness. Clane was already 85 years old, with natural aging of bodily functions and extremely unhealthy habits such as gluttony, obesity, alcoholism, decreasing vision, hearing impairment, diabetes, and paralysis due to a stroke. The onset of his illnesses was not untraceable.

When faced with his diabetes, the elderly Judge Clane said, "这病虽不传染, 但我总觉得健康若出了问题, 总会对我不利, 所以这事情还不能公开。不论别人承认与否, 我现在还处于政治生涯的巅峰时期" (60). As Davis mentioned, "Like other hegemonic practices, the effectiveness of normalcy hegemony lies in its invisibility (Davis, L. J, 1995)." The so-called "invisibility" lies in the fact that the normalized, universalized, and opposed ideology of health versus illness has

long been ingrained in people's thinking patterns, influencing and changing them unconsciously. The old judge's concealment of his illness was not merely a simple attempt to hide his physical defects but also a fear of and escape from the prejudice against him under the mainstream ideology of society, as well as his self-discipline under this form of prejudice.

4.2 In Terms of Race

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Britain and the United States, the period saw the prevalence of racial determinism and racist policies that advocated "white supremacy and all others inferior." Although the institution of Black slavery was abolished in the United States after the Civil War in 1865, granting Blacks personal freedom, they were still denied voting rights, and their political, economic, and social status remained inferior to that of whites. It was not until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s that racial segregation and discrimination were legally prohibited in the United States. Since then, the United States has entered the post-racist era, where white supremacy no longer manifests as direct oppression and discrimination as it did in the past, but rather exists more subtly in all corners of society, politics, economics, and culture, becoming an imperceptible presence. Thus, even though prejudice is "invisible," it remains deeply ingrained.

This racial prejudice of "white supremacy" frequently appears in the book *Clock Without Hands*. Ironically, "white supremacy" is not only extolled by white characters in the novel but is also internalized by Black characters, who have been domesticated by this imperceptible ideology. Whether it is the elderly Judge Clane, the pharmacist Malone dying of leukemia, the biracial Black secretary Sherman, or the inconspicuous Black maid Veloria, they all directly exhibit these racial biases.

The pharmacist Malone in the novel is a typical representative of this "white supremacy" ideology. At the beginning of the novel, when Malone first encounters Sherman, a stranger on the street, his inner disgust is extremely strong. "他不自觉地称这个男孩为‘邪恶的黑鬼’, 话语尖刻刺耳, 尽管这个男孩对他来说不过是路人, 而他通常在这种问题上心胸宽大" (10). Pharmacist Malone is not the only time he demonstrates his prejudice against Sherman's Black identity. Sherman, as the personal secretary of the old

judge, has a close relationship with him, which even makes Malone suspect that “这个高傲自大的蓝眼睛黑鬼是法官的亲生儿子” (141). These actions fully demonstrate Malone’s belief in white supremacy, as well as the unmasked disgust and prejudice towards Blacks from whites in high social circles, which is a stubborn prejudice that has gradually formed over time among whites towards Blacks and is difficult to change once formed.

Even though the old judge Clane favors Sherman, who is of mixed Black and white descent, and even makes him his personal secretary, this does not obscure Clane’s essential belief in white supremacy as a racist. The old judge is still filled with annoying “Pride and Prejudice.” Even in his old age, the old judge still wants to restore the Southern system and reinstitute slavery. He fears that “纤弱的白人小女孩就不得不和黑煤般的黑鬼共用一张书桌” (12), and that “一个庞大笨重的白人女孩和一个纤细的黑人小男孩共用一张课桌” (27) is purely an abnormal existence in his view. Even for him, “爱上黑人就跟爱上长颈鹿或者其他什么似的” (191). All of this indicates the old judge’s blatant ridicule, disgust, objectification, and prejudice towards Blacks.

As the personal secretary of the old judge, Sherman is also inevitably influenced by Clane’s “white supremacy” thoughts. His dual identity as a mixed-race individual makes it difficult for him to fully integrate into either the Black community or be accepted by white society. Sherman’s white ancestry creates a rift between him and other Blacks. Even though he has Black ancestry, he feels hostile towards the surrounding Black community because of his blue eyes. “‘随你怎么说总之我可不是像你这样的十足的黑鬼,’他对肤色非常黑的薇萝莉这样说道。‘瞧瞧我的眼睛。’” (183). In this dialogue, Sherman uses the discriminatory and biased term “nigra” to refer to the Black maid Veloria. Even though he and the maid are both Black, he feels superior because of his white ancestry and blue eyes. Essentially, this is Sherman’s negative and hostile attitude influenced by the widespread social concept of “white supremacy,” leading him to full of contempt and prejudice towards his own people.

4.3 In Terms of Gender

For a long time, the LGBTQ+ community has been marginalized and isolated in society. Even though the topic of homosexuality is no longer

unfamiliar and is very active on social media in today’s society, it still suffers from various prejudices and exclusions in mainstream culture in real life. The root of this phenomenon lies in the prejudices of mainstream culture towards the LGBTQ+ community. The reasons for these prejudices stem from the fact that the two groups belong to different social categories, with differing values, attitudes, and behaviors creating insurmountable barriers between them.

Echoing Sherman’s mixed-race identity, the novel introduces Jester, a high school student of the same age as Sherman, who is the highly anticipated heir of the old judge. Despite being only seventeen years old, Jester quietly harbors a “偷偷摸摸的、谁也不知道的” homosexual tendency that deviates from the norms of the time (47). When he first meets Sherman, he experiences a “强烈的情感” (49) and feels as if “仿佛是被嵌在那张黑脸上的蓝眼睛施了催眠术,他着迷了” (74). Jester is unconsciously drawn to Sherman, “他闭上眼睛,脑中浮现出一张黑皮肤,闪烁着蓝眼睛的面庞,他便能为男人之事了” (82). When confronted with his true feelings and mainstream discipline, Jester self-domesticates, thinking, “如果有一天,杰斯特发现自己竟然是个同性恋,像《金赛性学报告》(The Kinsey Report)描述的那样,他发誓自己定会自杀” (92). When Jester realizes his identity as a homosexual, his so-called self-discipline is merely a final struggle based on the mainstream sexual orientation choice in society. Although heterosexuality is the mainstream sexual orientation choice normalized by discourse groups, it must be clarified that heterosexuality is by no means the framework that governs all things. Under the discourse system, allowing only a single existence is essentially a form of prejudice.

5. Implications for Intercultural Communication

In the field of intercultural communication research, cultural empathy is an important concept and component. To effectively achieve cross-cultural communication, it becomes crucial to actively cultivate empathy abilities. Cultural empathy refers to the communicator’s conscious shift in cultural perspective, deliberately transcending the framework of their native culture during communication, breaking free from the constraints of their own culture, and placing themselves within another cultural model to genuinely feel, comprehend, and understand the behaviors and utterances of the

communicative partner within a different cultural background (Wang Yaqiong, 2015). Simply put, it means thinking from another person's perspective.

Through the analysis of prejudice phenomena in the book *Clock Without Hands* from the dimensions of disease, race, and gender, we can draw insights to avoid obstacles caused by subconscious biased attitudes in intercultural communication. In intercultural communication, one should strive to be attentive and mindful. When engaging in intercultural communication with people from different cultural groups, one should pay attention to listening to and understanding others' perspectives and behaviors. Secondly, one should accept and appreciate cultural differences. Maintaining an open and inclusive mindset is essential to accept and treat unfamiliar cultures with respect. Finally, one should communicate with empathy. In intercultural communication, one should learn to think from the other party's perspective, attempting to understand their emotions and thoughts. Mutual understanding, acceptance, and recognition facilitate smoother intercultural communication.

6. Conclusion

Different social backgrounds give rise to distinct social cultures, and the standardization of a monolithic social culture essentially reflects the prejudice of mainstream groups towards non-mainstream groups. Starting from the psychological factor of "prejudice" in intercultural communication, this paper takes McCullers' renowned novel *Clock Without Hands* as an example to explore the specific manifestations of this psychological factor in various characters. By analyzing the character traits and personalities of the novel's characters from the three dimensions of disease, gender, and race, this paper reveals different facets of prejudice among these characters. In the novel, the discourse community artificially divides and standardizes people using the so-called discourse system, i.e., mainstream and non-mainstream, to define those who do not conform to the standards, which is actually the misfortune of the discourse class and even all humanity (Ren Bing, 2022). As the times continue to evolve, opportunities for dialogue with the world are constantly increasing. This brings numerous insights, namely, in intercultural communication, people need to maintain an open and inclusive mindset, accept

differences among different groups and cultures, respect and understand diverse communicative behaviors, thereby avoiding unnecessary conflicts and obstacles and enabling effective intercultural communication (Cao Min, 2015).

References

- Cao Min. (2015). A brief analysis of the differences in the concept of time between China and the West and its implications for cross-cultural communication. *Time Education*, (18), 56-57.
- Carson McCullers, (2017). *Clock Without Hands*, Li Yi, Translation. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 26.
- Davis, L. J. (1995). *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. London: Verso, 23+170.
- Ren Bing. (2022). The Transcendence of normality: disabled Writing and Cultural Imagination in the *Clock Without Hands*. *Foreign Language Education*, (5), 107-112.
- Tian Ying. (2011). Encountering desires of the other in *Clock Without Hands*. *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, (2), 82-91.
- Wang Yaqiong. (2015). An Analysis of Cultural empathy in Intercultural Communication. *Ability and Wisdom*, (06), 288-289.

Notes

Carson McCullers: *Clock Without Hands*, Li Yi, Translation. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2017, in the following text, citations from this book will only be indicated by page numbers without further annotation.