

## **2014 Professional Development Grant Report**

American Literature Association Annual Conference

Sam McGuire Worley, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

Department of English & World Languages

## B. Restatement of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

In May 2014, I presented a paper at the Annual American Literature Association Conference in Washington, D.C. The website for the American Literature Association is [americanliteratureassociation.com](http://americanliteratureassociation.com). A copy of my presentation is available upon request.

## C. Brief Review of Creative Work / Professional Enhancement Activity

My presentation asked if Carson McCullers' novel *Clock Without Hands* could profitably be read as a historical novel along the lines described by Georg Lukács and later theorists of the genre. For Lukács, the single most important theorist of the genre, the historical novel had at its core the elaboration of the relationship between the bourgeois subject and larger historical forces, the representation of subjects who are both producers of history and themselves historical products. McCullers' habit of building her fiction through the careful repetition of evocative, often interrelated, symbols and her sharp, unpredictable humor seem a far cry from the patient realism characteristic of the most famous examples of the genre. Nonetheless, one of *Clock's* main characters is preoccupied with history: the Judge obsesses over redeeming Confederate currency and he dies reading about the Brown decision--what he thinks is the death knell of the Southern way of life. But McCullers doesn't allow that part of the plot to control the book; instead, we have two other lines of equal importance. The first character introduced, Malone, is dying of leukemia and his grappling with mortality from diagnosis to death provides the outer structure of the book. The other plot line concerns the relationship between the Judge's grandson, Jester, and the Judge's mixed race servant, Sherman. The ingenious way McCullers handles these three plot lines while ultimately anchoring her last novel in a very specific historical moment constitutes her unique contribution to the historical novel.

*Clock Without Hands* uses the inevitability of human mortality as a figure for the inevitability of historical change; in doing so it is inverting the usual pattern by which individual lives are used by the historical novel to represent historical events. Moreover, through the sexually ambiguous figure of Jeter, flying in his plane above the historical morass below, McCullers even seems to be offering some sort of third way beyond the binary opposition of history and the bourgeois subject.

In short, this presentation will look at *Clock* as an intervention of sorts in the tradition of the historical novel.

## D. Summary of Outcomes / Experiences

My presentation opened up a wholly new line of inquiry for me. It was the beginning of my ongoing look at how changes within the civil rights movement triggered shifts within the work of several prominent white southern writers of the period. The encouraging

reception I received from the Carson McCullers Society led me to believe that this work was worth doing and that there was an audience for it.

#### E. Conclusions and Recommendations

As I suggest above, this conference presentation was extraordinarily fruitful for me. Moreover, the work it initiated together with the other provocative presentations I heard at the conference have enriched my own teaching here at Tech. In fact, not long after this, I taught a graduate seminar in the literature of the civil rights movement. I am grateful for the Professional Development Grant that allowed to advance my own work and education.