

Ivan Ilych in the Jim Crow South: Carson McCullers and Leo Tolstoy

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Just stopping to think about death is not enough, we must live in the awareness of death. Living with this awareness makes life serious, significant, truly productive, and joyful. Keeping death in mind, we cannot help but work harder, knowing that death could interrupt the work we are doing. Because of death it is impossible not to work for what is necessary for all of life, that is, for God. When you work with this in mind life becomes a joy that does not contain the bogeyman—fear of death—which poisons the life of people who avoid an awareness of death. The fear of death is in inverse proportion to a good life. A saintly life reduces the fear of death to zero. (Tolstoy qtd. in Cote 21–22)

Life is a dream; death, an awakening. (Tolstoy qtd. in Cote 24)

Carson McCullers was an early and prodigious reader. When she talked or wrote about her major influences, she singled out the modernists (James, Proust, Joyce, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Lawrence, Faulkner) and the Russian realists, particularly Dostoevsky

and Tolstoy.¹ In her unfinished autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare* (1999), she describes Tolstoy as “the greatest novelist that ever lived,” noting that “[i]t is interesting to me to think of the seeds of his stories, ‘his illuminations’” (59). In her essay “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature,” McCullers avers that “[m]odern Southern writing seems rather to be most indebted to Russian literature, to the progeny of the Russian realists” (252). She also maintains that in their approach to life and suffering Southern writers are indebted to the Russians because they share a technique that she describes as “a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail” (252–53).

McCullers’s respect for great Russian writers generally and for Tolstoy in particular provides a useful background to an analysis of the many parallels and coincidences between her last novel, *Clock without Hands* (1961), and Tolstoy’s most famous story, “The Death of Ivan Ilych.” Irving Howe, in a review of McCullers’s novel, was the first to consider the possible influence of Tolstoy, terming *Clock without Hands* “a small-town American version of Tolstoy’s great story, ‘The Death of Ivan Ilych,’ which also portrays the last months of a man who had done no particular good or evil but had simply filled up his share of space and time” (5); five years later in an essay that celebrated the Russian translation of *Clock Without Hands* in 1966, Inna Levidova wrote that “[t]he Malone line of the novel is given with special interest, subtlety, wholeness. In his process of ‘spiritual assimilation’ of the idea of death and his late arrival at a reevaluation of the values of his interrupted life, one cannot but catch echoes of Tolstoi’s ‘The Death of

¹In her essay “The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing,” McCullers wrote: “When someone asks me who has influenced my work, I point to O’Neill, the Russians, Faulkner, Flaubert” (278). In another essay, “How I Began to Write,” she remembers the restless winter of her fifteenth year in Columbus, Georgia, when she wrote about New York, the city of her dreams: “That was the year of Dostoyevsky, Chekhov and Tolstoy—and there were the intimations of an unsuspected region equidistant from New York. Old Russia and our Georgia rooms, the marvellous solitary region of simple stories and the inward mind”

Ivan Ilych'—and of course Tolstoi and Dostoevsky played a great role in the formation of the writer's individuality" (95). Despite this early recognition by both American and Russian critics of McCullers's probable debt to Tolstoy, no McCullers scholar has since offered a detailed comparison between her novel and Tolstoy's story.

"The Death of Ivan Ilych" was the first major fictional work published by Tolstoy after his spiritual crisis and conversion in the late 1870s. The story is exemplary of Tolstoy's post-conversion philosophical preoccupations and his revised understanding of the function of art and the mission of the artist. For a considerable period after 1878, Tolstoy turned away from literature and devoted most of his energy to the study of the world's major religions, the study and translation of the Gospels, and his writings on religion and morality. In *A Confession* (1884), completed in 1882, Tolstoy acknowledges that the main factor of his spiritual crisis of the mid-1870s was his inability to find an acceptable meaning in his life, plagued as it was by an obsessive sense of the inevitability of death. He was strong in mind and body, was not yet fifty, and had a large estate, lovely children, and a loving wife, but, as he writes, "[i]n these circumstances I found myself at the point where I could no longer go on living and, since I feared death, I had to deceive myself in order to refrain from suicide" (*Confession* 31). He abandoned the established church and determined to develop a religious belief system of his own. The only article of faith that sustained him, though, was a belief in the existence of God: "In other words I returned to a belief in God, in moral perfection, and to that tradition which had given life a meaning. Only the difference now was that whereas before I had accepted all this unconsciously, I now knew that I could not live without it" (65–66). Later, the years 1885 and 1886 brought death into Tolstoy's house and serious illness to the author, who was irritable and on the brink of losing the faith that had helped him accept the ineluctable annihilating power of death during his crisis. Tolstoy's four-year-old son Alexei fell ill with croup on January 17, 1886, dying within thirty-six hours. A month earlier, in December 1885, Tolstoy had written in a letter never sent to his friend V. G. Charlkov, "I am living through what are perhaps the final hours of my life, and living badly—mournful and

irritated with those around me'” (qtd. in Jahn 21). These years also saw the creation of many of Tolstoy's most forthright stories as well as his treatise *On Life* (1888), a detailed exposition of his views on the positive potential of human life. “The Death of Ivan Ilych,” published during this period in 1886, reflects the author's conviction of having come to terms with the meaning of death as well as with his more hidden but still persistent anxiety over it (Jahn 21).

Similarly, McCullers spent almost ten years finishing *Clock without Hands*. She wrote it in the midst of so much adversity that, according to Oliver Evans, its completion “cannot be regarded as anything other than a moral triumph” (170). Tennessee Williams referred to it as an admirable product of the author's “nobility of spirit, and profound understanding of the lonely searching heart” (qtd. in Carr 110). In 1953 her husband, Reeves McCullers, committed suicide in Paris. The death of her mother in 1955 was another blow to McCullers, whose fragile health was deteriorating so rapidly that she had to dictate her manuscripts. Severely depressed by these personal traumas and later by the commercial failure of her play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958), she thought that she had lost her creative capacity, and in February 1958 she began psychiatric treatment with Mary Mercer, who became an intimate friend and helped McCullers regain faith in herself. Dedicated to Mercer, *Clock without Hands* reflects the author's preoccupation with mortality and death and manifests both her will to live and her faith in the potential of the human spirit.

Before *Clock without Hands*, McCullers's writing had never explored the individual predicament of preparing oneself for death. The center of the novel is occupied by J. T. Malone, a forty-year-old pharmacist in a small town in Georgia who at the novel's opening is diagnosed with leukemia and given between twelve and fifteen months to bring order and meaning to his life. The proximity of death triggers in Malone an existential crisis, which the author describes to her sister Margarita in a letter dated March 1953: “My idea is that the extreme moral suffering of impending death brings out a person's most extreme qualities; in the course of the book Malone is engaged in a struggle with his soul that is more important than his physical disease.”²

Like Ivan Ilych, Malone will go through successive phases of confusion, despair, frustration, and anxiety before finally arriving at a serene acceptance of death after having found his authentic self. Using Malone, McCullers illuminates the paradoxical relationship between death and life also present in "The Death of Ivan Ilych": an individual may unknowingly be dead while living and reach the most intense living at the hour of death. As his name indicates, Malone represents the modern individual who finds himself alone in the face of death and must discover his place in the world. Neither Malone nor Ivan is hero or villain, and they stand out precisely because of their mediocrity and ordinariness. Indeed, McCullers uses the word "ordinary" insistently in the first chapter to describe Malone. His imminent death is paradoxically the most dramatic event in a life in which he has systematically avoided the vital issues and dilemmas of existence. Likewise, one of the most famous passages in Russian literature occurs at the opening of the second chapter of "The Death of Ivan Ilych": "Ivan Ilych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible" (129).

Malone compares his past life to that of "a plodding old mule going round and round a sorghum mill" (102), a life which has been just as routine and unthinking as that of the animal going round and round in circles. Later in the novel, McCullers again identifies the protagonist with an unreflecting animal to describe his marriage to the daughter of the former owner of the pharmacy he had bought:

So he was saddled with a mortgage, and before he even realized it his own self, with a wife. Martha did not actually ask him to marry her, but she seemed to assume so much that Malone would have felt an irresponsible man if he had not spoken. (131)

Tolstoy also metaphorically compares Ivan Ilych to a draught animal. When Ivan goes to work every morning, Tolstoy notes that "the harness in which he worked had already been stretched to fit him and he

²McCullers's sister, Margarita G. Smith, then editor of *Mademoiselle*, published this letter as an introduction to McCullers's short story "The Pestle,"

donned it without a hitch” (139). Tolstoy’s protagonist entered into his relationship with his wife more because it was a suitable and acceptable match than because he really loved her: “the marriage gave him personal satisfaction, and at the same time it was considered the right thing to do by the most highly placed of his associates” (133). In the original Russian Tolstoy uses the word “*partiiia*,” or “good match,” to describe Ivan’s wife, but in the story the same word also “refers usually to a game of bridge and once to a virtuoso musical ‘part,’ suggesting that his marriage, too, is something that is played out more or less on the level of these activities” (Turner 49). Ivan’s relations with his wife, relatives, and friends have always been shallow. Like Malone, he has always erected “screens” to protect himself from everything that threatens his comfort and material well-being; he has always escaped from “the real thing” (164), from the unpleasantness and fullness of his personal life, and embraced the relative emptiness and artificiality of his official life.³ To a large extent this was all the result of uncritically letting his life run along a track laid down by the system. Ivan is like an animal that blindly follows the leaders of the herd, and “from early youth he was by nature attracted to people of high station as a fly is drawn to the light, assimilating their ways and views of life and establishing friendly relations with them” (130).

The celebrated opening of *Clock without Hands*—“Death is always the same, but each man dies in his own way”—points to the task confronting both Malone and Ivan Ilych: to stop thinking of death as

³The image of the screens with which Ivan Ilych wants to conceal the thought of death appears obsessively in chapter six: “To save himself from this condition Ivan Ilych looked for consolations—new screens—and they were found and for a while seemed to save him, but then they immediately fell to pieces or rather became transparent, as if *It* penetrated them and nothing could veil *It*” (150–51). Tolstoy may have taken the image of the screen from Pascal. In *My Religion* (1865) he writes: “But, as Pascal says, we cannot endure to think about this theme [of the personal life of man], and so we carry always before us a screen to conceal the abyss of death, toward which we are constantly moving” (134). Similarly in *Clock without Hands*, when confronted by the terrible news of his diagnosis, Malone resorts to evasive talk, but “[s]uddenly the screen of words collapsed and, unprotected before his fate, Malone wept” (11).

something abstract and universal which does not concern any single person because it happens to everyone, and to act as a unique individual who responsibly bears the burden of death and honors it with a personal imprint. Both protagonists start with denial and use the defense mechanism of thinking of death in generalized terms: "In the depth of his heart [Ivan Ilych] knew he was dying, but not only was he unaccustomed to the thought, he simply did not and could not grasp it." He remembers that a syllogism from his logic textbook, "'Caius is a man, men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal,' had always seemed to him correct as applied to Caius, but it certainly didn't apply to himself" (149). Similarly, Malone finds comfort in Judge Clane, who deprecates doctors and speaks of a probable "mistaken diagnosis" (19). Near the end of the novel, Malone still "could not think directly of his own death because it was unreal to him" (182). Both Malone and Ivan Ilych experience an excruciating isolation during their confrontation with approaching death. Malone "was surrounded by a zone of loneliness" (12), and Ivan Ilych "had to live thus all alone on the brink of an abyss, with no one who understood him or pitied him" (146), because others want to go on with their unpainful lives and refuse to see them as reminders of the eventual mortality of every individual. Their loneliness is destructive but also redemptive because it forces an intense search for self that brings about in each the understanding that his life has been inauthentic, a consciousness of real existence.

A passage from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* (1849) confirms for Malone that in the course of his life he has been progressively and unknowingly losing his self: "He read the lines again and then again: *The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed*" (130).⁴ Both Malone and Ivan have lived their lives deploying defenses against conscious selfhood and true self-awareness. His chance encounter with the Kierkegaard passage makes Malone realize that "he had not lost an arm, or a leg, or any particular five dol-

⁴According to Alastair Hannay, "Kierkegaard detects in contemporary life-styles, in the kinds of goals people set for themselves, in their ideals of fulfilment, a fundamental fear of conscious selfhood. He calls it 'despair'. And this, although it is also identified later as 'sin', is the most general designation

lars, but little by little he had lost his own self” (131). The paradox is that he would never have thought about such a significant loss had he not been approaching death, so that in fact “dying had quickened his livingness” (131). Now, with more free time, he thinks “of all the life he [has] spent un-lived” and wonders “how he could die since he [has] not yet lived” (132). Tolstoy’s protagonist also acknowledges his responsibility for his superficial life: “It occurred to him that what had appeared perfectly impossible before, namely that he had not spent his life as he should have done, might be true after all” (164). For both Malone and Ivan spiritual illness is more dramatic than physical disease, and their respective lives have been forms of death. Malone is horrified to know “that, not only was he going to die, but some part of him had died also without his having realized” (45–46). Thus, both works illustrate the same paradox: illness brings the protagonists into life as much as it leads them out of it. Illness becomes, then, the conflict between a false life of pleasant shallowness and an authentic life in which pain and illness are real and personal, but, potentially, so too are happiness and well-being.

Significantly, each of these works, both emphasizing personal responsibility and soul-searching, implicitly denounces the ineffectiveness of institutions. Malone looks for comfort first in the reactionary rhetoric of the former congressman and judge Fox Clane and later in sermons he hears at the Baptist Church. One Sunday, Malone listens to a sermon “about the salvation that draws the bead on death,” but after the long exposition “death remained a mystery, and after the first elation he felt a little cheated when he left the church” (15). When Malone goes to the minister’s house to find some enlightenment about death, an embarrassed Dr. Watson can only offer him a Coke and a few platitudes that are less satisfying than the darkness outside in which Malone takes refuge. When the preacher answers Malone’s

of the ‘sickness unto death’” (4). McCullers became acquainted with Kierkegaard, a precursor of European existentialism, through W. H. Auden, who gave her many of Kierkegaard’s works when the two writers lived in Feb-

question about the nature of eternal life by pronouncing that “it is the extension of earthly life, but more intensified,” a disappointed Malone “thought of the drabness of his life and wondered how it could be more intensified” (137). Malone’s church is more bent on pursuing power and money than on awakening the spiritual being and catering to the existential needs of its members. Although McCullers did not hold a consistent stance regarding the existence of God, her attitudes and her concern for the oppressed and the downtrodden accorded with the social ethics of Christianity. As Virginia Carr observes, “McCullers never stopped thinking of herself as a Christian, no matter what she thought of the organized church and orthodox dogma, or how much she satirized it in her fiction” (115). Tolstoy’s stance against organized religion was even stronger than McCullers’s. He based his Christian anarchism on the conviction that organized religion perverted the spiritual life and prevented people from making personal moral choices. He believed that individuals should learn to trust their own reasoning and conscience and that everyone has within themselves a sound moral sense that can easily be contaminated by conventional religious education. What is most important is to understand the meaning of life and to find in God the true teachings of Christ stripped bare of centuries of irrelevant church dogma. As George J. Gutsche remarks, in Tolstoy’s story “the Church’s aid to Ivan is ineffective, and its role in the story remains insignificant” (88).

Malone does not find salvation in the empty words of the preacher nor in the lifeless rituals of the Church but, rather, inside himself when he makes an ethical choice that saves his soul. *Clock without Hands* is a novel in which socio-historical context is most important. McCullers wants to indicate that individuals will either save or condemn themselves depending on their ethical choices in relation to others. The action opens in March 1953, when the Supreme Court is debating the constitutionality of the practice of “separate-but-equal” in the South. Malone dies on May 17, 1954, the day the Supreme Court made public its ruling in the *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case. The troubled relations between blacks and whites in the novel play a crucial role in the configuration of the individual identities of the main char-

acters. Malone definitely finds himself when he draws a marked slip of paper designating him to bomb the house of a black youth who rented an apartment in the white section. Refusing to do so, he says, “Gentlemen, I am too near death to sin, to murder. . . . I don’t want to endanger my soul” (195). When he loses the approval of his peers, for the first time in his life he decides not to accommodate himself to the expectations of others. His acute consciousness of mortality allows him to see an ethical dimension others cannot perceive. No more ruled by society but by his conscience, Malone has become a unique individual rather than an abstract average and now can perceive in others the ordinariness from which he has distanced himself: “Those gathered in the drugstore were all ordinary people, so ordinary that he usually didn’t think of them one way or the other. But tonight he was seeing the weaknesses of these ordinary people, their little uglinesses” (192–93). His moral strength has always been latent yet unnoticed, as are so many of the miracles of life. His blind passage through life is brilliantly expressed by the episode of the vegetable garden in chapter six. On returning home after a morning at his pharmacy, he *sees* for the first time the garden that he had traversed that very morning, without noticing it:

He went through the back-yard gate and then, though he was tired, he recognized the miracle. The vegetable garden, which he had sown so carelessly and forgotten in that long season of fear, had grown up. There were the purple cabbages, little frills of carrots, the green, green turnip greens and tomatoes. He stood looking at the garden. (104)

By rejecting the social conventions that he has always blindly accepted and by asserting his responsibility against the impositions of the masses, Malone acquires traits of an existentialist hero—on asserting his freedom he discards his “ordinary existence” in favor of his “authentic existence.” Like Malone, Ivan also feels divorced from society at a crucial point in his life. “The Death of Ivan Ilych” has been read by many as “a revelation of the manner in which society or ‘the

social' acts as a hindrance to the discovery of the truths every person requires as an individual." Tolstoy's story traces "the individual's inevitable separation from the social as the 'truth' perceived by the dying protagonist becomes even more opaque to those surrounding him" (Jahn 11). As nonconformists, both Malone and Ivan are alienated from their society, but those who conform are alienated from themselves.

Both McCullers and Tolstoy stress the idea of transcending death through acceptance and compassion. In the final chapter of *Clock Without Hands*, Malone is a new man whose disposition is exactly opposite from what it was at the beginning of the novel. His being has reached new dimensions, human existence has acquired an unprecedented beauty and dignity, and he is ready to die in peace and harmony with himself and the universe:

He no longer confused the end of life with the beginning of a new season. . . . Yes, the earth had revolved its seasons and spring had come again. But there was no longer a revulsion against nature, against things. . . . He looked at nature now and it was part of himself. He was no longer a man watching a clock without hands. He was not alone, he did not rebel, he did not suffer. He did not even think of death these days. He was not a man dying—nobody died, everybody died. (203-04)

Malone's situation mirrors Ivan's. Ivan sheds his fear of death precisely when it arrives and transcends it through reconciliation:

"And death . . . where is it?"

He looked for his former accustomed fear of death and did not find it. "Where is it? What death?" There was no fear because there was no death.

In place of death there was light. (167)

Both Malone and Ivan reach the plenitude of life precisely at the moment of death. Accepting the reality of death illuminates the reality of life. With his new knowledge of life, Ivan is no longer overpowered by

death, which is now a meaningless concept for him: “‘Death is finished,’ he said to himself. ‘It is no more!’” (167). Likewise, Malone stochastically accepts the passage of time which obsessed him during his anxious search for meaning when he would complain to his jeweler that his watch lost two minutes a week. He is no longer a clock without hands since he has adjusted to a new social order that steadily gains ground in the South. McCullers has placed Malone in a transitory position between the Old South represented by Judge Clane and the New South represented by the judge’s grandson Jester, who belongs to a new generation more responsive to human rights.⁵ Judge Clane is a prototypical white supremacist who cannot conceive of a future for the South in which “delicate little white girls must share their desks with coal black niggers in order to learn to read and write” (17). In his violent and self-destructive attempt to stop the hands of the clock that bring irrevocable change to the South, the Judge insists that, naturally, a black and a white man “‘are two different things’” and that “[w]hite is white and black is black—and never the two shall meet if I can prevent it’” (39–40). Clane’s defeat at the hands

⁵In *Clock without Hands* McCullers focuses, to a greater degree than in previous works, on the political and ideological factors of a South deeply divided between those who promote and those who resist change. All her life McCullers had a sharpened sensitivity to social reform. As Evans suggests, the house in which she was born was close enough to the cotton mills for her to “become aware of the poverty of the workers” from an early age (9). McCullers was always deeply distressed by the hopelessness of the mill workers in the South, and in her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), she expresses a strong proletarian sympathy and denounces the oppression of American capitalism. Another major concern and one of “certain hideous aspects of the South” she strongly opposed was the oppression of blacks. In her autobiography she tenderly remembers a fourteen-year-old black cook of the family who was refused a ride by a taxi driver who bawled, “I’m not driving no damn nigger.” She remembers those Depression days in which she was “exposed so much to the sight of humiliation and brutality, not physical brutality, but the brutal humiliation of human dignity, which is even worse” (*Illumination* 62, 54, 56). Tolstoy was also famous for his campaigns against the exploitation of

of progressive forces reflects the process by which the white South in the 1940s and '50s was beginning to see that its "unity" and homogeneity were not only threatened but also illusory. The cracks that had always existed could not be covered much longer by the plaster of myth and legend, just as the myth of absolute racial difference could no longer be sustained. Like Malone, the adolescent Jester has, after much soul searching, decided to become a lawyer to fight for racial equality in his native region, reflecting McCullers's agreement with those who feel that the solutions to the racial problem will have to come from the South itself, rather than from outside it.

In contrast to his initial perception of the world as incongruous and meaningless, life, now at its end, assumes for Malone an unprecedented simplicity and harmony: "A strange lightness had come upon his soul and he exalted" (204). Once he has found his soul, Malone seems to transcend the material world. McCullers defines the soul as "the individual's affinity for the universe—his search for God, and his search to understand his fellow man."⁶ Malone no longer resents the tenderness of his wife, which used to be an intolerable confirmation of mortal sickness, the humiliating pity of the living for the dying. Now, "[t]he love for his wife that had so receded returned to him. As Martha thought of little dainty things to tempt his appetite . . . Malone felt a nearer value of her love" (204). Malone has always followed Fox Clane with blind faith, but the ineffective reactionary talk of this demagogue who wants to turn back the clock of the South now inspires a tranquil compassion in the dying pharmacist.

Compassion is also central to "The Death of Ivan Ilych." The spontaneous loving care he receives from his servant Gerasim teaches Ivan an important lesson about its redemptive power. This peasant has an intuitive understanding of his master's agony and does not take part in the deception that prevails in the household. The only one who accepts Ivan's dying and his pain as part of his own life, Gerasim is rec-

⁶In an undated radio interview, in the collection of McCullers's unpublished materials at the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at

onciled to death as a fact of life and willingly performs the most disagreeable tasks of nursing, hoping that some day someone else will perform them for him. The compassion he learns from Gerasim saves Ivan, who begins to cry when his schoolboy son catches his hand and kisses it. When Ivan finally falls through to the bottom of the “black sack” and catches “sight of the light . . . it was revealed to him that though his life had not been what it should have been, it could still be rectified” (166). His intense suffering has made the “screens” fall and allowed him to see the truth of death as light and life as darkness. Immediately afterward, he extends pity to his wife and feels “sorry for her too” (166).

Tolstoy and McCullers suggest a direct relationship between the removal of deception about man’s finitude and the acknowledgment of the ligature that binds one to others. Easy death is identified in both works with the dissolution of individuality through pity and compassion for others. The consciousness of death is the basis of true brotherhood in contrast to the false brotherhood of group control and imitation of others, as is the case with the “fraternity of hate” that, as Malone perceives, makes the Klansmen act together to kill a black most of them do not even know (McCullers 193). The presence of others at the moment of death expresses the belief shared by Tolstoy and McCullers that morality is a question of compassionate actions and sincere feelings toward others. In his famous treatise *What Is Art?* (1898), Tolstoy promotes the value of the compassion he offers in “The Death of Ivan Ilych.” In the conclusion to the treatise, he asserts that

[t]he purpose of art in our time consists in transferring from the realm of reason to the realm of feeling the truth that people’s well-being lies in being united among themselves and in establishing, in place of the violence that now reigns, that Kingdom of God—that is, of love—which we all regard as the highest aim of human life (167).

Compassion and love place man in relation to the divine and thus counteract the insignificance of human life.⁷

Neither Tolstoy nor McCullers focuses on a conventional Christianity that promises something better than present-day life after death. Their emphasis is on the positive qualities of life, of which perhaps

the most positive is the potential to love. This potential exists in everyone, but many people never recognize it. Malone and Ivan do approach it just in time to meet death. Both McCullers and Tolstoy make the point that the real tragedy for the individual is not death but an ordinary life with no depth of meaning and without authentic human relationships. In fact, Malone and Ivan have lived a living death—they escape their moral rigor mortis only at the moment of death—while their respective deaths hint at a rebirth into a new life. Their lives show that most human clocks indeed have no hands, not only because they do not know when they are going to die, but also because they do not measure anything significant, anything other than ordinariness and attention to the material, anything that implies true commitment or affects positively the course of history.

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⁷A few days before his death, Tolstoy himself dictated to his daughter Aleksandra that "[t]he more a man loves the more real he becomes." In *On Life*, he contends that "the less a man loves the more he feels the torments of suffering, and the more there is of love, the less the torments" (qtd. in Halperin 338, 340 n. 8).

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