

BLOOM'S  
MODERN  
CRITICAL  
VIEWS

NEW EDITION

# TRUMAN CAPOTE

Edited and with an Introduction by  
HAROLD BLOOM



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*Bloom's Modern Critical Views*

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TRUMAN CAPOTE

*New Edition*

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*Edited and with an introduction by*

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

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 BLOOM'S  
LITERARY CRITICISM  
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## **Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Truman Capote, New Edition**

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## *Editor's Note*

My uneasy introduction briefly meditates on the survival possibilities of Capote's work. The high lacquer of his style in early books perhaps redeems them, while *In Cold Blood*, still fiercely relevant, probably depends on the fate of the miscalled "nonfiction" or journalistic novel.

William L. Nance examines Capote's early short stories (1943–48) and finds them to be studies for the protagonist of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), while the late journalist Alfred Kazin explores *In Cold Blood* (1965) as a prelude to Norman Mailer's adventures in the factual non-novel.

Faulkner is compared with his disciples, Capote and the late writer of popular fiction William Styron, by J. Douglas Perry, Jr., who sees "gothic" as the binding agent between a strong master and (I would say) two weaker followers, as contrasted to, say, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor.

Capote's story "Children on Their Birthdays" is judged as effective "black humor" by Lee Zacharias, after which the journalistic John Hersey deplores the blendings of fiction and journalism by Capote, Mailer, and Tom Wolfe.

*Handcarved Coffins*, a late return to factual fiction by a worn-out Capote, is sympathetically examined by Jack Hicks, while both Ann M. Algeo and Trenton Hickman revisit the grim power of *In Cold Blood*.

Marshall Bruce Gentry courageously takes Capote into the company of Flannery O'Connor, who dwarfs poor Capote, after which Thomas Fahy risks the same consequences by juxtaposing Capote with Carson McCullers.

In this volume's final essay, Nick Nuttall bids an elegiac farewell to *In Cold Blood*.



HAROLD BLOOM

*Introduction*

So many eminent authors have resented all intimations they ever were influenced by a forerunner that Truman Capote's obsessive denials in this matter are remarkable only for their intensity.

In a later preface for a reprinting of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (first published in 1948), Capote denied the palpable influence upon the book of William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers. They counted for little to him, Capote asserted, as compared to Henry James, Mark Twain, Poe, Willa Cather, and Hawthorne. Behind this odd grouping, one discerns Capote's quest to be self-generated: Poe and Cather made a difference to his art, but James, Twain, and Hawthorne all were very remote.

I read *Other Voices, Other Rooms* soon after it appeared, borrowing the novel from the current shelf at the Cornell University Library. I have just reread it for the first time since then, after more than a half-century. I remembered it surprisingly well, since it had seemed to me derivative, but the distinction of the prose was evident enough then and remains lacquered enough now to preserve it in the mind. The closing paragraph can represent the high gloss of the style:

His mind was absolutely clear. He was like a camera waiting for its subject to enter focus. The wall yellowed in the meticulous setting of the October sun, and the windows were rippling mirrors of cold, seasonal color. Beyond one, someone was watching him. All of him was dumb except his eyes. They knew. And it was Randolph's

window. Gradually the blinding sunset drained from the glass, darkened, and it was as if snow were falling there, flakes shaping snow-eyes, hair: a face trembled like a white beautiful moth, smiled. She beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where, as though he'd forgotten something, he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind.

The Capote-like protagonist, still just a boy, enters the sexual realm with the transvestite Randolph and looks back at the self left behind. This is not a study of the nostalgias or a lament for lost innocence. It is style for style's sake.

So rococo are *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* that they remain something more than period pieces, though their preciousity makes it virtually impossible for me to venture prophecies as to their survival value. Try reading Capote side by side with Ronald Firbank, author of such sublime hilarities as *Valmouth*, *The Flower Beneath the Foot*, and *The Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*. Compared to Firbank's blazing outrageousness, early Capote fades away into pastel shades.

But there is another Truman Capote, who wrote *In Cold Blood*, still the most effective of "nonfiction novels." I reread *In Cold Blood* rarely and reluctantly, because it is both depressing and rhetorically very effective. The depression, as rereading makes clear, is caused by Capote's covert imaginative identification with the murderers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. Perry Smith is Capote's *daemon* or other self, and it is no surprise to learn that Capote cultivated the murderers, wept for them at the scaffold, and paid for their burials. Whether the cold, artful book deserves canonical status, I am uncertain, but it is likely enough to survive. It reflects its America, which is still our own.

WILLIAM L. NANCE

*The Dark Stories*

The early fiction of Truman Capote is dominated by fear. It descends into a subconscious ruled by the darker archetypes, a childhood haunted by bogeymen, a world of blurred realities whose inhabitants are trapped in unendurable isolation. The stories set in this dark world include “A Tree of Night” (1943), “Miriam” (1944), “The Headless Hawk” (1946), “Shut a Final Door” (1947), and “Master Misery” (1948) (S).<sup>1</sup> Deep below the surface they are really one story, and they have one protagonist. This story will be continued, and its hero will achieve a peculiar liberation in Capote’s first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). The fear and sense of captivity that overshadow these stories result from the individual’s inability to accept and respond properly to reality. On the social level this means inability to love other persons. More essentially, it means refusal to accept mysterious and frightening elements within the self, for the persons encountered by the protagonist are most properly viewed as projections of inner personae. One indication of the climate of the protagonist’s inner world is the fact that nearly all of these persons are grotesques.

The stories are fundamentally psychic in orientation. In at least two cases—“Miriam” and “Shut a Final Door”—the line between realism and fantasy is definitely crossed: things happen that are literally impossible. Usually, however, the settings seem realistic; we are kept in a world that

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From *The Worlds of Truman Capote*, pp. 16–39, 240. © 1970 by William L. Nance.

is conceivably real, though strange, and the effects are wrought through manipulations of the protagonist's consciousness. The characteristic style of the early work is intensely poetic, and the meaning of the stories rests heavily on intricate patterns of symbolism. The most prominent stylistic and symbolic motif in the fiction up to and including *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is that of descent into a state of intensified and distorted consciousness. This happens in each story, the differences being mostly in what might be termed focal length. Sometimes the setting remains normal and the character simply becomes sleepy or drunk, or has a dream. At other times the entire setting takes on dreamlike characteristics, often through weather imagery such as darkness or snow. In the most extreme cases the reader is pulled completely into the illusion by means of apparitions or mysterious voices presented as real. This scale of reader involvement is one of several ways of looking at the stories and not, incidentally, a simple measure of their total effectiveness: Capote handles his various effects always with considerable skill.

Perhaps the most obvious thing to be noted about Capote's early work is its highly personal quality. The stories take place in an inner world almost entirely devoid of social or political concern. Because of this subjective orientation, even the treatment of human relations has about it an air of isolation, of constriction. With this qualification in mind, one may go on to observe that love and the failure of love are of central concern in Capote's fiction. The meaning of love, as it emerges in the early work, would seem to be uncritical acceptance. In each story the protagonist is given an opportunity to accept someone and something strange and disturbing, to push back the frontier of darkness both in the surrounding world and in the soul. Not until Joel works his way through *Other Voices, Other Rooms* does one of them manage to do so. Their characteristic kind of failure appears in simplest form in the tendency to dismiss any challenging new presence as "crazy." Capote's impulse, from "A Tree of Night" to *In Cold Blood*, is to accept and understand the "abnormal" person; it has been, indeed, one of the main purposes of his writing to safeguard the unique individual's freedom from such slighting classifications as "abnormal."

"A Tree of Night," the earliest story included in Capote's *Selected Writings*, sets the pattern of the self-protective hero who lives in fear because of a refusal to accept. Compared to some of the stories which follow, this one is relatively simple. The style is unobtrusive, the symbolic structure modest. Events stay within the bounds of credibility, and yet the reader is chillingly exposed to the grotesque both in the external world and in the semiconscious mind of the young heroine.

Nineteen-year-old Kay, returning to college from her uncle's funeral, is forced to sit in a train compartment opposite two other passengers: a

gin-reeking dwarfish woman with a huge head, and a corpselike man. The woman persuades her to drink some gin and goes to get paper cups. Kay is left alone with the man, unable to take her eyes off him, repelled but fascinated, especially by his eyes “like a pair of clouded milky-blue marbles, thickly lashed and oddly beautiful” (S 6).

The movement of this story is Kay’s descent into a half-world of subconscious childhood fears. Already begun when she entered the compartment, it accelerates as she waits drowsily for the woman’s return. When the man unexpectedly strokes her cheek, she leans forward in confusion and gazes into his eyes. “Suddenly, from some spring of compassion, she felt for him a keen sense of pity; but also, and this she could not suppress, an overpowering disgust, an absolute loathing: something about him, an elusive quality she could not quite put a finger on, reminded her of—of what?” (S 7). When Kay tries to escape, the woman seizes her wrist and shows her a worn handbill describing her companion as “Lazarus, the Man Who Is Buried Alive.” She explains that they do a traveling show featuring a mock burial.

The man begins playing obscenely with a peach-seed love charm, insisting that she buy it, and Kay finally runs from the compartment. When she steps out onto the black, freezing observation platform the immediate danger of sleep is removed but her mind begins to slip back toward a ghost-ridden childhood. The area, though new to her, is “strangely familiar.” Unable to light a cigarette, she angrily tosses it away and begins “to whimper softly, like an irritable child” (S 14). She longs to go inside and sleep but knows that she is afraid to do so. Suddenly, compulsively, she kneels down and touches the red lantern that hangs in a corner, the one source of warmth and light. A “subtle zero sensation” warns her that the man is behind her, and she finally gathers courage to look up. Seeing his harmless face in the red light, she knows that what she fears is not him but

a memory, a childish memory of terrors that once, long ago, had hovered over her like haunted limbs on a tree of night. Aunts, cooks, strangers—each eager to spin a tale or teach a rhyme of spooks and death, omens, spirits, demons. And always there had been the unfailing threat of the wizard man: stay close to the house, child, else a wizard man’ll snatch and eat you alive! He lived everywhere, the wizard man, and everywhere was danger. At night, in bed, hear him tapping at the window? Listen! (S 14–15)

Danger is still everywhere for Kay. Holding onto the railing and “inching upward,” she returns from childhood and the deepest part of her mind only to accompany the man back into a coach “numb with sleep.” She wants to cry out and waken the other passengers, but the fear of death is too strong: “What if

they were not really *asleep*?” (S 15) Tears of frustration in her eyes, she agrees to buy the love charm, “if that’s all—just all you want” (S 15). There is no answer, and Kay surrenders to sleep, watching the man’s pale face “change form and recede before her like a moon-shaped rock sliding downward under a surface of water” (S 15–16). She is dimly aware when the woman steals her purse and pulls her raincoat “like a shroud above her head” (S 16).

Kay’s immersion in the subconscious has not been cathartic. The wizard man she buried alive there as a child has finally come forth like Lazarus, but only to haunt her in an even more insistent shape. She has not eluded him any more than she will elude death. In fact, death seems already on her, short-circuiting her life, as the raincoat-shroud is pulled above her head. But Kay’s failure is not simply her mortality. She is like a child living fearfully in the dark because, shutting her eyes against ghosts, she has shut out love and life.

Capote’s next story, “Miriam,” though its materials are different, follows a pattern essentially the same as that of “A Tree of Night.” Like Kay, Mrs. H. T. Miller hides repressed fears beneath a fastidious exterior, the penetration of which provides the main action of the story. A sixty-one-year-old widow, she lives alone and unobtrusively in a modest but immaculate New York apartment. Her life is neither broad nor deep. Her interests are few, and she has almost no friends. Her activities are “seldom spontaneous” (S 17). Snow is falling lightly as she goes out for a movie one night, leaving a light burning because “she found nothing more disturbing than a sensation of darkness” (S 17). She moves along “oblivious as a mole burrowing a blind path,” but outside the theater she is agitated by the sight of a little girl with long, silver-white hair. Miriam’s intrusion into Mrs. Miller’s life begins gently, with a request that she buy her ticket, since children are not admitted alone. On closer examination Mrs. Miller is struck by the girl’s large eyes, “hazel, steady, lacking any childlike quality whatsoever” (S 19). As they talk, it emerges that Mrs. Miller’s name, until now hidden beneath her late husband’s initials, is also Miriam. Disturbed by the girl’s coolly self-contained manner, she leaves her and goes in alone.

A week of snow follows, progressively shutting Mrs. Miller off from her familiar world. She loses count of the days. One evening, comfortably settled in bed with hot-water bottle and newspaper, her face masked with cold cream, she is roused by the persistent buzz of the doorbell. She notes that the clock says eleven, though she “was always asleep by ten.” Indifferent to the lateness of the hour, Miriam gently forces her way into the apartment. Indifferent also to the season, she wears a white silk dress. The older woman, by now thoroughly frightened, tries to disarm this apparition by recourse to familiar categories: “Your mother must be insane to let a child like you wander around at all hours of the night—and in such ridiculous clothes. She must

be out of her mind" (S 21). Miriam continues to study Mrs. Miller, "forcing their eyes to meet" (S 22). In the jewel box she finds a cameo brooch that was a gift from Mr. Miller and insists on having it. Suddenly Mrs. Miller is stunned by the realization that she is, in this "hushed snow-city," alone and helpless. The cameo, now on the girl's breast, emphasizes the identity of the two Miriams, "the blond profile like a trick reflection of its wearer" (S 23).

Miriam leaves and Mrs. Miller spends the next day in bed. When the next morning dawns with unseasonable brilliance, the bad dream seems to be over. Mrs. Miller straightens the apartment and then goes out shopping, this time spontaneously, having "no idea what she wanted or needed" (S 25). Then, "as if by prearranged plan," she finds herself buying glazed cherries, almond cakes—everything for which Miriam has expressed a desire. Meanwhile the weather suddenly turns colder, clouds cover the sun "like blurred lenses" (S 26), and snow begins to fall. When, later that day, Miriam returns with the intention of staying, Mrs. Miller at first yields with "a curious passivity" (S 27), then begs her to go away, dissolves in tears, and finally runs out the door.

For the next few minutes the story seems to return to the everyday world. Mrs. Miller pounds frantically on the door of the apartment below, is courteously received by a young couple, and incoherently tells them about a little girl who won't go away, and who is about to do "something terrible" (S 28). The man investigates but finds no one, and his wife, "as if delivering a verdict," concludes, "Well, for cryinoutloud . . ." (S 29). Mrs. Miller climbs slowly back to her apartment and finds it as it was before Miriam entered, but also as empty and lifeless "as a funeral parlor" (S 29).

Having lost her bearings now completely, Mrs. Miller is sinking again, this time deeper than ever. "The room was losing shape; it was dark and getting darker and there was nothing to be done about it; she could not lift her hand to light a lamp" (S 29–30). Then, sitting passively, she begins once more to feel that it has all been only a bad dream. "Suddenly, closing her eyes, she felt an upward surge, like a diver emerging from some deeper, greener depth" (S 30). Feeling her mind waiting as though for a "revelation," she begins to reason that Miriam was just an illusion, and that nothing really matters anyway. For all she has lost to Miriam is "her identity," but now she is confident she has again found herself, Mrs. H. T. Miller (S 30). Comforting herself with these thoughts, she becomes aware of the harsh sound of a bureau drawer opening and closing, then the murmur of a silk dress "moving nearer and swelling in intensity till the walls trembled with the vibration and the room was caving under a wave of whispers" (S 30). She opens her eyes to the dull, direct stare of Miriam.

In a 1957 interview for the *Paris Review*, Capote, asked what he thought of his early stories, expressed qualified admiration for *Other Voices*,

*Other Rooms* and added, "I like *The Grass Harp*, too, and several of my short stories, though not 'Miriam,' which is a good stunt but nothing more. No, I prefer 'Children on Their Birthdays' and 'Shut a Final Door,' and oh, some others, especially a story not too many people seemed to care for, 'Master Misery.'"<sup>2</sup>

Capote's judgment on "Miriam," though it tends to ignore the story's close thematic kinship with his others, seems reasonably just. Comparison with "A Tree of Night" can highlight some of the story's limitations. Both have the same underlying theme: subjection to fear because of a failure of acceptance. But while in the earlier story a few simple and believable events are made to evoke bottomless psychological depths, in "Miriam" the machinery becomes an end in itself. The story's haunting effect, which is undeniable, comes from skillful ghost-story manipulation of a too-solid embodiment of the subconscious as alter ego. Miriam reminds one of Poe's William Wilson and Dr. Jekyll's Mr. Hyde. Today's reader wants more subtlety than that.

In the two stories so far examined, the emphasis has fallen more heavily on failure to accept oneself than on failure to love other persons. Kay would not be expected to enter into a much closer relationship with her two traveling companions, and Mrs. Miller's visitor is less a person to be loved than a haunt and a symbol. Capote's next two stories, "The Headless Hawk" and "Shut a Final Door," deal more emphatically with love, and in this way represent at least a partial broadening of scope. Nevertheless there is an essential similarity among all these stories, perhaps most evident in the way they end. Like Kay and Mrs. Miller, Vincent and Walter wind up more conscious than ever that they are trapped.

"The Headless Hawk" begins with an epigraph that could as fittingly be applied to any of the early stories. It is from The Book of Job (24:13, 16-17):

They are of those that rebel against the light; they know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof. In the dark they dig through houses, which they had marked for themselves in the daytime: they know not the light. For the morning is to them as the shadow of death: if one know them, they are in the terrors of the shadow of death. (S 31)

The story records Vincent's affair with the enigmatic girl, "D.J." Like Mrs. Miller's encounter with Miriam, it is a descent into a dreamlike world of uncertainty, a nonliberating confrontation with subconscious fears. For Vincent this is not the first such experience but the culmination of a long series of failures at love. Corresponding to the extent of his experience is a degree of self-awareness far beyond that of Kay or Mrs. Miller. Vincent knows, as he proceeds through the affair, what its outcome will be. So, in

a sense, does the reader, for the story employs a frame chronology in which the central action appears as a flashback. The opening section finds Vincent already nervously resigned to being constantly shadowed by an unnamed, elfin girl; then comes the story of their meeting and eventual breakup, and the brief closing section simply reaffirms the finality of the first part.

As the story opens, Vincent Waters is already down at the “deeper, greener depth” (S 30) from which Mrs. Miller mistakenly thought she was emerging just before Miriam’s final appearance. As he closes the art gallery of which he is manager and starts home on a humid afternoon, he feels as though he moves “below the sea. Buses, cruising crosstown through Fifty-seventh Street, seemed like green-bellied fish, and faces loomed and rocked like wave-riding masks” (S 31). He sees the girl, ghostlike in a green transparent raincoat, and she follows him through the streets. Her eyes have a shocked look, “as though, having at one time witnessed a terrible incident, they’d locked wide open” (S 33). Vincent has been oppressed lately by a sense of unreality; voices these days seem to come to him “through layers of wool” (S 32). Entering his basement apartment, he looks back to see the girl standing listlessly on the sidewalk. The rain, threatening all day, still holds back.

Part Two begins abruptly with their first meeting. On an idle winter morning at the gallery she quietly appears before him dressed “like a freak” in masculine odds and ends. She wants to sell a painting, and her few remarks hint that she painted it in an asylum. The institution was apparently presided over by a Mr. Destronelli, whom she mentions as if expecting Vincent to recognize the name. He shakes his head and, making a capsule survey of his life, wonders why eccentricity has such appeal for him. “It was the feeling he’d had as a child toward carnival freaks. And it was true that about those whom he’d loved there was always a little something wrong, broken. Strange, though, that this quality, having stimulated an attraction, should, in his case, regularly end it by destroying it” (S 36). Vincent overcomes “an intense longing to touch her head, finger the boyish hair” (S 36), as she unwraps the picture and places it before him.

A headless figure in a monklike robe reclined complacently on top a tacky vaudeville trunk; in one hand she held a fuming blue candle, in the other a miniature gold cage, and her severed head lay bleeding at her feet: it was the girl’s, this head, but here her hair was long, very long, and a snowball kitten with crystal spitfire eyes playfully pawed, as it would a spool of yarn, the sprawling ends. The wings of a hawk, headless, scarlet-breasted, copper-clawed, curtained the background like a nightfall sky. (S 36–37)

The picture is crudely done, but to Vincent it seems to reveal “a secret concerning himself” (S 37). He decides to buy it, but before he can write a check the phone rings and the girl vanishes, leaving only the address “D.J.—Y.W.C.A.”

Vincent hangs the painting above his mantel and on sleepless nights talks to the hawk, telling it about his life, which he feels has been “without direction, and quite headless” (S 38), a long series of good beginnings and bad endings both in art and in love. He is, he feels, “a victim, born to be murdered, either by himself or another” (S 38). February and March pass but he is unable to find the girl. He becomes more and more disturbed, and friends notice the change in him. On an April evening, wandering the streets slightly drunk, he finds her. At his approach she is terrified, but soon her head relaxes on his chest “like a child’s” (S 41) and she agrees to go home with him.

Vincent has lighted his room with candles, and it appears to waver in their “delirious light” (S 41). He himself feels a “drugged drunk sensation” (S 42). On this occasion the girl seems to him more attractive, less abnormal. Unusually relaxed, she talks about her childhood, then about Mr. Destronelli—“Everybody knows him” (S 42). As Vincent embraces her he glances at a mirror where “uncertain light rippled their reflections” (S 43). He asks what “Mr. Whoozits” looks like, then notices that for the first time she is staring at the painting, studying a particular object, but “whether hawk or head he could not say” (S 43). Pressing closer to him, she replies, “Well, he looks like you, like me, like most anybody” (S 43). This rather intricate scene brings together several strands in the story. The initiation of their affair, it takes place in a setting of multiple distortion (Vincent’s mind, the candlelit room, the mirror’s wavering reflection). The girl sinks into her childhood and emerges with Mr. Destronelli, whom she identifies with both herself and Vincent, staring up at the painting as she speaks so that her words could as easily apply to the figures there, both hawk and human being. Vincent is entering not only into physical union with the girl but into a blurred identification with her, the hawk, and Destronelli. At the same time the latter two remain apart, hovering threateningly over the scene.

Next morning Vincent discovers that the girl has no sense of time and is preoccupied with a mysterious “he” who she thinks brought her here. Vincent declares his love, then remembers numerous others he has loved, female and male, all eccentric and all betrayed by him. But he tells her that there was only one, now dead, and “to his own ears this had a truthful ring” (S 45).

The affair continues for a month and ends on D.J.’s eighteenth birthday. Vincent has kept her a private experience, not mentioning her to any of his friends. He has given her money for clothes, but the things she has spent it on are, like the name D.J., more masculine than feminine. She

prepares for the birthday party “with the messy skill of a six-year-old playing grownup” (S 46). Their celebration consists of dinner at the automat followed by a movie. Both are aware that they are nearing the end, and the impulse to separate comes from the girl as well as from Vincent. As they go to bed, she thanks him for the violets he has given her and adds, “It’s a shame they have to die” (S 48).

Meanwhile Vincent has slipped into a dream that seems to compress his life, past and future, into a stagnant present. In an endless hall lit by chandeliers he sees a degenerate old man in a rocking chair. “Vincent recognizes Vincent. Go away, screams Vincent, the young and handsome, but Vincent, the old and horrid, creeps forward on all fours, and climbs spiderlike onto his back” (S 48). Thus laden, he is ashamed to find himself in a throng of elegantly dressed couples, all silent and motionless. Then he recognizes that many of them are similarly burdened, “saddled with malevolent semblances of themselves, outward embodiments of inner decay” (S 48). The host appears, bearing a massive headless hawk on his arm, and orders the guests to dance. Vincent’s old lovers one after another glide into his arms, and he hears “a cracked, cruel imitation” (S 49) of his voice speak hypocritically to each. Then D.J. appears, bearing on her back a beautiful child.

“I am heavier than I look,” says the child, and a terrible voice retorts, “But I am heaviest of all.” The instant their hands meet he begins to feel the weight upon him diminish; the old Vincent is fading. His feet lift off the floor, he floats upward from her embrace. . . .

The host releases his hawk, sends it soaring. Vincent thinks, no matter, it is a blind thing, and the wicked are safe among the blind. But the hawk wheels above him, swoops down, claws foremost; at last he knows there is to be no freedom. (S 49)

Beneath the Gothic stage props, the meaning of this dream is reasonably clear. In it, as in the story as a whole, Vincent is burdened with guilt and the expectation of death. With at least a potential sympathy the scope broadens to include others, many of them similarly burdened. The host, no doubt Vincent’s image of Mr. Destronelli, carries the headless hawk, the two functioning as a unit like falcon and falconer. The waltz symbolizes the lack of direction in Vincent’s life, always circling and changing partners, never progressing. But his affair with D.J. has given him a clearer understanding of himself. Previously he thought it “strange” that the defects in his lovers, after attracting him, destroyed the attraction. Now he blames his own want of love and is overwhelmed by his “wickedness.” Presumably it is her complete innocence that drove the lesson home, for she bears on her back a child, the

opposite of Vincent's degenerate old man. He has hoped that contact with her would free him, but soon learns that his fate is darker and more inescapable than he thought. For such as Vincent and the girl (and no other kind of person has yet appeared in Capote's fiction) there is no love and no freedom. The hawk that pursues her will get him, too.

The defeat Vincent has dreamed must still be painfully acted out. When he wakes at dawn and reaches out for the "mother-comfort" of the girl's presence, the bed is empty. He finds her in the yard, and as he approaches she whispers, "I saw him. He's here" (S 50). Desperate to free himself of his dreamed guilt, Vincent finds a pretext ready. He knocks her hand away and almost slaps her. "Him! Him! Him! What's the matter with you?—" he tried too late to prevent the word—"crazy?" There, the acknowledgment of something he'd known, but had not allowed his conscious mind to crystallize. And he thought: Why should this make a difference? A man cannot be held to account for those he loves" (S 50). It sounds like Mrs. Miller's self-deluded hope that she is rising from the depths and that "like everything else," her meeting with Miriam was "of no importance" (S 30). Vincent, however, has been here before and knows better.

Later in the day Vincent returns from the gallery, violently ill, to learn from the superintendent's wife that D.J. has attacked the gas man with her scissors, calling him "an Eytalian name" (S 52). Hiding until D.J. goes out, he begins to pack her things. His fever increasing, he falls to the bed and into a surrealistic nightmare in which a butterfly appears and, to his horror, perches like a ribbon bow above the severed head in the painting. He finds the scissors and stabs them at the insect. It escapes and the blades dig into the canvas "like a ravening steel mouth, scraps of picture flaking the floor like cuttings of stiff hair" (S 54). Sitting in terror he recalls things D.J. has told him. In her fantasies Mr. Destronelli has taken many forms, among them those of "a hawk, a child, a butterfly" (S 54). He was in the asylum, and after she ran away she encountered him in other men who mistreated her. One of them was a tattooed Italian; another painted his toenails. She is certain that eventually "he" will murder her. This fantasy of the girl's corresponds to Vincent's dream and knits the story's symbolism into an even more complicated pattern. Its principal function is to emphasize her role as Vincent's alter ego. Like him, she is a traveler in circles and "a victim, born to be murdered," though her victimization has been on a much more concrete and rudimentary level than his. At the same time, Vincent sees even more clearly that as their life-patterns mesh, he is being cast in the role of her destroyer, Destronelli.

The final brief section of the story begins at the moment when D.J. follows Vincent home and stands on the walk outside his apartment. It is July, about two months after their separation. Since then Vincent has been

wasted by pneumonia, and his constant haunting by the girl has resulted in a “paralysis of time and identity” (S 56). On this evening he goes out for supper just as the long-threatening rain is about to begin. There is a clap of thunder and, as she joins him in the “complex light” of a street lamp, the sky is like “a thunder-cracked mirror,” and the rain falls between them “like a curtain of splintered glass” (S 57).

It can be only a partial justification of the complexity of this story to say that it enmeshes the reader as it does the characters. Capote once said, “All I want to do is to tell the story and sometimes it is best to choose a symbol.”<sup>3</sup> For “The Headless Hawk,” he chose too many symbols. It is the most complex and involuted of all his short stories, several of which tend toward excess in this respect. Only his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, surpasses it in symbolic density, and it is interesting to note that as his career progressed, Capote has moved first to a simpler fictional technique and finally to the “nonfiction novel.”

The symbolism in “The Headless Hawk,” too heavy to be carried naturally by the action, is concentrated principally in three focal points which are themselves intricately and arbitrarily contrived: the painting, Vincent’s dream, and the girl’s rambling fantasies. All of it is intended to point up meanings already more or less explicit in the dramatic action. These meanings finally come down to one: Vincent himself is the headless hawk. He is both victim and victimizer, and he is directionless and alone. Through a balance brilliantly achieved, whatever else one must say about the story, the girl becomes both a living person and a projection, a delusion of the submerged consciousness (what Miriam is for Mrs. Miller and the wizard man for Kay). At the same time she is a profitless encounter, a test which Vincent fails by rejecting instead of loving. It is this aspect of his theme that Capote emphasizes in his next story.

Walter Ranny of “Shut a Final Door” is in many respects identical with Vincent; certainly the title of his story would fit Vincent’s as well. The two stories differ mainly in perspective. Walter is viewed far more objectively than is Vincent, for the story’s focus is less on the undulating consciousness than on the external world of persons, places, and events. In this respect it points toward Capote’s later work—not the deeply submerged *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, but the later, more social short novels, *The Grass Harp* and *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Essentially, though, “Shut a Final Door” is part of the dark fiction of fear, failure, and captivity.

The story opens on a sufficiently “social” note: “Walter, listen to me: if everyone dislikes you, works against you, don’t believe they do so arbitrarily; you create these situations for yourself” (S 58). Anna’s remark, for all its glib triteness, is the story of Walter’s life. Too insecure for love or

even friendship, he is a treacherous coward for whom the reader feels an immediate distaste, only partially removed as the story probes more deeply into his fears.

The conversational tone of the opening is appropriate, for the dominant motif in the story involves malicious and inescapable voices. That, and circles: "He said you said they said we said round and round. Round and round, like the paddle-bladed ceiling-fan wheeling above" (S 59).

The fan is in a drab side-street hotel in New Orleans, where Walter has come with "a feeling of having traveled to the end, the falling off" (S 59). He lies under the fan thinking that his life has been a circle. Trying to find the center, the explanation of it, he rejects as "crazy" Anna's opinion that it was his own doing; he prefers to blame his parents. Still looking for the center, he decides to begin with Irving, the first person he'd known in New York. Like "The Headless Hawk," this story begins at the end, jumps back to the beginning, then progresses to the end again, completing a circle that symbolizes the protagonist's life.

Irving, delicate and boyish, is friendly to Walter during his first lonesome days in New York. He has many friends and introduces Walter to all of them. Among them is Margaret, "more or less Irving's girl friend" (S 60), whom Walter steals, hurting Irving irreparably and establishing the pattern of betrayal that will characterize his own brief social climb. Soon he realizes that he has no friends and tries to analyze his trouble:

He was never certain whether he liked X or not. He needed X's love, but was incapable of loving. He could never be sincere with X, never tell him more than fifty percent of the truth. On the other hand, it was impossible for him to permit X these same imperfections: somewhere along the line Walter was sure he'd be betrayed. He was afraid of X, terrified. (S 64)

Walter meets Rosa Cooper, a wealthy heiress, and begins spending most of his weekends at her Long Island home, making valuable contacts. Among these is Anna Stimson, a horsey fashion editor with a highly irregular past. Walter makes her his mother confessor because "there was nothing he could tell her of which she might legitimately disapprove" (S 66). He asks Anna if she loves him.

"Oh," said Anna, "when was anything ever what it seemed to be? Now it's a tadpole now it's a frog. . . . Flying around inside us is something called the Soul, and when you die you're never dead; yes, and when we're alive we're never alive. And so you want to know if I love you? Don't be dumb, Walter, we're not even friends. . . ." (S 66-67)

The theme of deceptiveness is already a familiar one, and will be exploited most fully in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Often quite effective when woven into the plot and atmosphere of the stories, it here sounds like shallow cynicism, neither well dramatized nor adequately “distanced” from the author. It is an indication of the way Capote loses power when he tries to philosophize.

When on the same day Walter is fired from his job and dropped by Rosa, he is suddenly flooded with vivid memories of boyhood trips with his father to Saratoga. He has just decided to go there when the telephone rings. It is a long-distance call from a town he doesn't know, and after some rattlings a strange, dry voice says, “Hello, Walter.” He hears breathing as clearly as if the person were standing beside him, but when he asks who it is the only answer is, “Oh, you know me, Walter. You've known me a long time” (S 70).

On the train Walter has a dream in which he sees coming toward him a funeral-like procession of cars bearing many of his past and present acquaintances. Feeling naked, he hails the first limousine and sees his father open the door. “Daddy, he yelled, running forward, and the door slammed shut, mashing off his fingers, and his father, with a great belly-laugh, leaned out the window to toss an enormous wreath of roses” (S 71). Walter's problem is basically the same as Vincent's and this dream is reminiscent of his. Both dramatize a fear which is ultimately of death, though Walter's is couched in simpler, more clinical terms: he is a child rejected by his father.

D.J.'s counterpart in this story is the woman Walter finds looking at him when he wakes from this dream. She is a cripple with her left foot encased in a giant shoe. He helps her with her luggage, but it is only that evening, in a hotel bar, that they become acquainted. She explains that she is there because her doctor is going to lecture to a medical convention about her case. Like Walter, she is afraid. She tells him she is a domestic and takes care of a boy named Ronnie: “I'm better to him than his mother, and he loves me more” (S 73). Walter finds her depressing but is too afraid of loneliness to leave her. When the bar closes, the woman asks him, blushing, if he wants to go to her room. He goes, but, seeing her coming out of the bathroom, reeking with dime-store perfume and wearing only “a sleazy flesh-colored kimono and the monstrous black shoe” (S 73), he realizes that he can “never go through with it. And he'd never felt so sorry for himself: not even Anna Stimson would ever have forgiven him this” (S 73–74). When she is ready he comes to the edge of the bed, kisses her cheek, and says, “I think you're so very sweet, but . . .” (S 74). Then the telephone rings.

Walter's search for a mother, as well as his father, is made explicit and becomes one of the principal themes of the closing section. When the phone rings, the woman answers, mistakes “Ranny” for “Ronnie,” and is frightened

that something has happened to the boy. Then she gets the name correct and begins to hang up, but Walter seizes the phone. The message is the same as before, and after hearing it Walter falls across the woman, crying and begging, "Hold me, please" (*S* 74). She calls him "Poor little boy," and he goes to sleep in her arms (*S* 74). The next day he takes the train for New Orleans, "a town of strangers, and a long way off" (*S* 75). As he lies sweltering in the hotel room, now back at the moment at which the story began, the telephone rings. "So he pushed his face into the pillow, covered his ears with his hands, and thought: think of nothing things, think of wind" (*S* 75).

Walter's fixation is powerfully, if somewhat crudely, conveyed by the telephone calls, which could have no "natural" explanation. Like Miriam, the bodiless voice is a projection of subconscious fears, and it has the same kind of artificiality that she does. Essentially, of course, they are both related to the more subtle wizard and headless hawk.

The next and final "dark" story, "Master Misery," recalls most strongly the first, "A Tree of Night." The heroines of both are young women, and their fear contains a strong sexual element. More than any of the other stories, "Master Misery" is heavy with suggestions of sleep, dreams, childhood, and the unconscious; and while it differs from "Miriam" and "Shut a Final Door" in containing nothing that is not literally possible, it is perhaps the most bizarre story of all. It is the one that Capote said he liked especially, though hardly anyone else seemed to.

Sylvia is one of a class familiar in American fiction: the young girl from the Midwest come to work in New York. She is also a wandering spirit, confirmed in restlessness and unconventionality because she "wants more than is coming to her" (*S* 109). She is close kin to D.J. of "The Headless Hawk" and also to later heroines, among them Holly Golightly. As the story opens, Sylvia is returning to the apartment she shares with Henry and Estelle, an "excruciatingly married" couple from her Ohio hometown. The day has been unusual, for in a restaurant she overheard a man talking about someone who buys dreams. His companion found this "too crazy" (*S* 101) for him and left the address lying on the table, where Sylvia later picked it up. Estelle says it is too crazy for her, too, and asks incredulously if Sylvia really went to see "this nut" (*S* 101).

Though she denies it, Sylvia did; unable to get the idea out of her mind, she had gone to the man, whose name was A. F. Revercomb, and sold a dream for five dollars. He had been pleased with it and asked her to return. Unsettled by the experience, Sylvia speculated that he was mad, but finally left the question open. On the way home she walked through the park and was badly frightened by two boys who began following her. Going to bed at the end of this fateful day, Sylvia feels "a sense of loss, as though she's been the victim of some real or even moral theft, as though, in fact, the boys

encountered in the park had snatched (abruptly she switched on the light) her purse" (S 101). She dreams of "cold man-arms" encircling her, and Mr. Revercomb's lips brushing her ear. The day's experiences, especially the selling of her dream, have blended in one overwhelming fear of violation.

A week later she again finds herself near Mr. Revercomb's house. It is the Christmas season, an especially lonely time, and she is drawn to a window display in which a mechanical Santa Claus slaps his stomach and laughs. The figure seems evil to her, and with a shudder she turns away.

Later, as she dozes in Revercomb's waiting room, the quiet is broken by a loud commotion and a "tub-shaped, brick-colored little man" (S 104) pushes his way into the parlor, roaring drunkenly, "Oreilly is a gentleman, Oreilly waits his turn" (S 104). He is quickly thrown out; when Sylvia emerges a short while later, she sees him, looking "like a lonely city child" (S 104) and bouncing a rubber ball. She smiles, for he seems a harmless clown. Oreilly admits that he has made a fool of himself but also accuses Revercomb: "I didn't have an awful lot to begin with, but then he took it every bit, and now I've got *niente*, kid, *niente*" (S 105). As to his present occupation he explains, "I watch the sky. There I am with my suitcase traveling through the blue. It's where you travel when you've got no place else to go" (S 105). He asks Sylvia for a dollar for whiskey, but she has only seventy cents, for, confronting "the graying invisibility of Mr. Revercomb (impeccable, exact as a scale, surrounded in a cologne of clinical odors; flat gray eyes planted like seed in the anonymity of his face and sealed within steel-dull lenses)" (S 106), she had not been able to remember a dream.

She tells Oreilly that she will probably not go back, but he says, "You will. Look at me, even I go back, and he has long since finished with me, Master Misery" (S 106). Starting off in the rain, they approach the Santa Claus display and Oreilly, standing with his back to the figure, says,

"I call him Master Misery on account of that's who he is. . . . Only maybe you call him something else; anyway, he is the same fellow, and you must've known him. All mothers tell their kids about him: he lives in hollows of trees, he comes down chimneys late at night, he lurks in graveyards and you can hear his step in the attic. The sonofabitch, he is a thief and a threat; he will take everything you have and end by leaving you nothing, not even a dream. Boo!" he shouted, and laughed louder than Santa Claus. "Now do you know who he is?"

Sylvia nodded. "I know who he is." (S 106-107)

In an artificial juxtaposition similar to those in "The Headless Hawk," Oreilly speaks of Revercomb while standing in front of the Santa Claus,

emphasizing the growing identification of these two figures and giving the first clear hint that he himself will assume a destructive role toward Sylvia, much as Vincent did toward D.J. In this scene the rain provides the customary atmosphere of distortion and blurred identities.

Sylvia, now living both specifically and generally in a world of dreams, has begun to lose her grip on the world of everyday reality. She has moved to a cheap furnished room and let it become filthy. Fired from her job, she has lived for a month on the income from her dreams. Estelle visits her, scolds her, and insists on knowing whether the decline is because of a man. Sylvia, amused, admits that it is.

“You should have come to me before,” Estelle sighed. “I know about men. That is nothing for you to be ashamed of. A man can have a way with a woman that kind of makes her forget everything else. If Henry wasn’t the fine upstanding potential lawyer that he is, why, I would still love him, and do things for him that before I knew what it was like to be with a man would have seemed shocking and horrible. But honey, this fellow you’re mixed up with, he’s taking advantage of you.” (*S* 108–109)

Estelle is the first of Capote’s characters to be ridiculed in this way, but she will not be the last. Though satirized here as an embodiment of society’s fatuous gentility, she also speaks with its prosaic rightness. Sylvia is, indeed, getting mixed up with a man who will take advantage of her—not only Mr. Revercomb, but that grey eminence’s more immediate representative, Oreilly.

Sylvia answers, also more truly than she knows, that the affair she is involved in hasn’t “anything to do with love” (*S* 109). She rejects the suggestion of marriage and reminds Estelle that they’re “not children any more; at least, I’m not” (*S* 110), but her actions when finally left alone seem intended to belie the assertion. First she sucks a piece of sugar, her grandmother’s remedy for bad temper, then she pulls from under the bed a musical cigar box made for her by her brother when she was fourteen. The tune it plays is “Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning.” Inside this box of childhood memories she keeps the little book in which she has begun recording her dreams, since they are “endless” now and hard to remember.

Later, hurrying to Mr. Revercomb’s she finds the mechanical Santa Claus has been replaced by the equally disturbing display of a plaster girl riding madly on a bicycle that gets nowhere. But Mr. Revercomb likes her dream about the “three blind children” (*S* 110), and she leaves with an envelope containing ten dollars.

In one of Sylvia’s conversations with Oreilly, Master Misery, already linked with the maniacal Santa Claus, is explicitly probed down to his final

meaning, death. Oreilly tells her that their vicious circle of dream-selling is “just like life” (S 112), but she disagrees: “It hasn’t anything to do with life. It has more to do with being dead. I feel as though everything were being taken from me, as though some thief were stealing me down to the bone” (S 112).

When Oreilly is arrested for stealing a bottle of liquor, Sylvia collapses. For days she lies in her room, hardly eating, drugged with sleep. On the radio she hears a weather report reminiscent of Joyce’s “The Dead”: “A snow-storm moving across Colorado, across the West, falling upon all the small towns, yellowing every light, filling every footfall, falling now and here” (S 114). Discovering that snow has smothered the city, she opens the window to feed the birds and forgets to close it; snow blows into the room. “Snow-quiet, sleep-silent, . . . Mr. Revercomb, why do you wait upon the threshold? Ah, do come inside, it is so cold out there” (S 115).

The figure she dimly sees at the door just before losing consciousness is not Revercomb’s but Oreilly’s, and when she wakes he is holding her in his arms and singing, “*cherryberry, moneyberry, happyberry pie, but the best old pie is a loveberry pie . . .*” (S 115). When she asks why he isn’t in jail he says he was never there, then quickly changes the subject. With “a sudden feeling of floating” (S 115) she asks how long he has been with her, and he replies that she let him in yesterday—then quickly begins the “wicked” story of how he escaped from the police.

Oreilly stays with her over the weekend, and it is like a beautiful party. They laugh and dance and she feels loved and declares that she will never be afraid again. She decides that she would like to get her dreams back and go home. “And that is a terrible decision, for it would mean giving up most of my other dreams” (S 117). He insists that she go directly to Revercomb with the request; she does, and soon is back in his arms crying, choking, then laughing hysterically. “He said—I couldn’t have them back because—because he’d used them all up” (S 118).

As if on a signal, they separate, Sylvia giving Oreilly her last five dollars to buy whiskey for his travels in the blue. Then she starts toward home.

I do not know what I want, and perhaps I shall never know, but my only wish from every star will always be another star; and truly I am not afraid, she thought. Two boys came out of a bar and stared at her; in some park some long time ago she’d seen two boys and they might be the same. Truly I am not afraid, she thought, hearing their snowy footsteps following after her: and anyway, there was nothing left to steal. (S 119)

This closing line is delicately ambiguous. Possibly a continuation of Sylvia’s thoughts, it is also the last of several hints that her virginity has been

lost to Oreilly. This suggested sexual theft is, of course, only a metaphor for the author's real concern: the theft of Sylvia's dreams by Mr. Revercomb. She dreams of Mr. Revercomb as a father-lover, and in her delirium his role is transferred to Oreilly. Sylvia is victimized in much the same way as D.J. was, and both their stories have as a major theme the sad fact that victims who try to be lovers are doomed not only to see themselves reflected in one another but also to advance each other's destruction.

While Capote may be granted his fondness for this story, it is nevertheless weak in several respects. Like "The Headless Hawk," though to a lesser degree, it is a network of meanings too often artificially represented by symbols and only half realized in concrete dramatization. Oreilly in particular is difficult to see as a human being, and the identification of him with Sylvia, Revercomb, Santa Claus, and the cycling girl is too obviously contrived, as is much of the action.

The principal weakness of the story, however, is at its center, the business of selling dreams. "Dreams" can mean and half-mean many things, and the story contains a vagueness which is less suggestive than confusing. It might, for example, be read with some validity as an attack on psychoanalysis or on the scientific mentality in general—or perhaps an expression of a young writer's fear of exploitation.

While the implications of the story are vague, its overall pattern is clear, and even clearer when it is compared to the stories that preceded it. Like them, it traces the decline into captivity of an individual made vulnerable by refusal or inability to accept reality. But though the pattern is a familiar one, there is a significant change of emphasis: for the first time the victim-heroine is viewed with definite approval. While Capote's early stories are characterized, from a moral standpoint, by a fluctuating and sometimes almost nonexistent narrative point of view, all the earlier protagonists have to some extent been *held responsible*. Even in Kay there was a trace of the victimizer as well as the victim. But Sylvia completely escapes responsibility. She does so by being a childlike, innocent dreamer. The dreamer (almost always feminine), who made her first appearance in D.J. and here becomes the central character of the story, will be the typical protagonist of the stories that follow *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*. Because the dreamer is unconventional, whatever moral disapproval enters these stories is reserved for the society from which she deviates.

"Master Misery" completes the first phase of Truman Capote's career as a writer of fiction, the dominant characteristics of which should by now be evident. The protagonist, while varying and developing in ways already discussed, is always and essentially a victim. The central action of each story is not so much his movement into the state of captivity as an immersion in his

own deeper being that culminates in a shattering and final revelation of his plight. In each case the dark force that haunts the protagonist is projected outward—through characters of varying degrees of credibility, through images or dream or delirium, through concrete symbols—until it may be said to constitute the very framework and texture of the story.

But in each case it is also focused in one particular manifestation or set of related ones: a wizard man in a tree of night; Miriam; Mr. Destronelli and a headless hawk; a disembodied telephone voice; Mr. Revercomb-Master Misery. That these figures dominate the stories is pointed up by the fact that in every case but one they appear in the title. And Capote's custom of so naming his stories is to continue. It has been noted that the next phase of his career is marked by a new emphasis on the dreamer. The titles of several of the stories express or are related to the dreamer's dream or ideal: "Children on Their Birthdays" and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, for example. One can see, then, in the very titles of the stories, a progression from fear to fantasy, from captivity to some kind of wistful freedom. Movement from captivity to freedom is also the theme of Capote's next, and longest, piece of fiction—*Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

#### NOTES

1. *The Selected Writings of Truman Capote* (New York: Random House, 1963). Quotations from this volume are identified in the text by *S* and the page number.
2. Malcolm Cowley, ed., *Writers At Work: The Paris Review Interviews* (New York: The Viking Press, 1960), p. 290.
3. *Current Biography*, 1951, p. 93.



ALFRED KAZIN

*The Imagination of Fact:  
Capote to Mailer*

When Truman Capote explained, on the publication in 1965 of *In Cold Blood: The True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*, that the book was really a “nonfiction novel,” it was natural to take his praise of his meticulously factual and extraordinarily industrious record of research as the alibi of a novelist whose last novel, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, had been slight, and who was evidently between novels. Capote clearly hungered to remain in the big league of novelists, so many of whom are unprofitable to everyone, even if he was now the author of a bestselling true thriller whose success was being arranged through every possible “medium” of American publicity. Capote is a novelist, novelists tend to be discouraged by the many current discourtesies to fiction. Clearly Capote wanted to keep his novelist’s prestige but to rise above the novelist’s struggle for survival. *In Cold Blood*, before one read it, promised by the nature of the American literary market to be another wow, a trick, a slick transposition from one realm to another, like the inevitable musical to be made out of the Sacco-Vanzetti case.

What struck me most in Capote’s labeling his book a “nonfiction novel” was his honoring the profession of novelist. Novels seem more expendable these days than ever, but *novelist* is still any writer’s notion of original talent. What interested me most about *In Cold Blood* after two readings—first in *The New Yorker* and then as a book—was that though it *was* journalism

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From *Bright Book of Life: American Novelists and Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, pp. 209–241. © 1971, 1973 by Alfred Kazin.

and soon gave away all its secrets, it had the ingenuity of fiction and it was fiction except for its ambition to be documentary. *In Cold Blood* brought to focus for me the problem of “fact writing” and its “treatment.” There is a lot of “treatment” behind the vast amount of social fact that we get in a time of perpetual crisis. These books dramatize and add to the crisis, and we turn to them because they give a theme to the pervasive social anxiety, the concrete human instance that makes “literature.”

*In Cold Blood* is an extremely stylized book that has a palpable design on our emotions. It works on us as a merely factual account never had to. It is so shapely and its revelations are so well timed that it becomes a “novel” in the form of fact. But how many great novels of crime and punishment are expressly based on fact without lapsing into “history”? *The Possessed* is based on the Nechayev case, *An American Tragedy* on the Chester Gillette case. What makes *In Cold Blood* formally a work of record rather than of invention? Because formally, at least, it is a documentary; based on six years of research and six thousand pages of notes, it retains this research in the text. Victims, murderers, witnesses and law officials appear under their own names and as their attested identities, in an actual or, as we say now, “real” Kansas town.

Why, then, did Capote honor himself by calling the book in any sense a “novel”? Why bring up the word at all? Because Capote depended on the record, was proud of his prodigious research, but was not content to make a work of record. After all, most readers of *In Cold Blood* know nothing about the case except what Capote tells us. Capote wanted his “truthful account” to become “a work of art,” and he knew he could accomplish this, quite apart from the literary expertness behind the book, through a certain intimacy between himself and “his” characters. Capote wanted, ultimately, to turn the perpetually defeated, negative Eros that is behind *Other Voices, Other Rooms* into an emblematic situation for our time. As Norman Mailer said when running for Mayor, “Until you see what your ideas lead to, you know nothing.” Through his feeling for the Clutter family *and* its murderers, Capote was able to relate them—a thought that would have occurred to no one else.

Fiction as the most intensely selective creation of mood, tone, atmosphere, has always been Capote’s natural aim as a writer. In *In Cold Blood* he practices this as a union of Art and Sympathy. His book, like so many “nonfiction” novels of our day, is saturated in sexual emotion. But unlike Mailer’s reportage, Capote’s “truthful account” is sympathetic to everyone, transparent in its affections to a degree—abstractly loving to Nancy Clutter, that all-American girl; respectfully amazed by Mr. Clutter, the prototype of what Middle America would like to be; helplessly sorry for Mrs. Clutter, a victim of the “square” morality directed at her without her knowing it. None of these people Capote knew—but he thought he did. Capote became

extremely involved with the murderers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, whom he interviewed in prison endlessly for his book and came to know as we know people who fascinate us. He unconsciously made himself *seem* responsible for them. Kenneth Tynan drew blood when, with the glibness which knows that “society” is always to blame, Tynan entered into the spirit of the book completely enough to denounce Capote for not doing everything possible to save his friends Perry and Dick.

This fascinated sympathy with characters whom Capote visited sixty times in jail, whom he interviewed within an inch of their lives, up to the scaffold, is one of many powerful emotions on Capote’s part that keeps the book “true” even when it most becomes a “novel.” Capote shows himself deeply related to Alvin Dewey of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, who more than any other agent on the case brought the murderers in. And as a result of *In Cold Blood* Capote, who had so successfully advertised his appearance on the jacket of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1948, had by 1969 become an authority on crime and punishment and an adviser to law-and-order men like Governor Reagan. Capote was a natural celebrity from the moment he published his first book. *In Cold Blood* gave him the chance to instruct his countrymen on the depths of American disorder.

Yet with all these effects of *In Cold Blood* on Capote, the book itself goes back to the strains behind all Capote’s work: a home and family destroyed within a context of hidden corruption, alienation and loneliness. Reading *In Cold Blood* one remembers the gypsy children left hungry and homeless in *The Grass Harp*, the orphans in *A Tree of Night*, *The Thanksgiving Visitor* and *A Christmas Memory*, the wild gropings of Holly Golightly in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* toward the “pastures of the sky.” One remembers Capote himself in his personal pieces and stories in *Local Color* searching for a home in New Orleans, Brooklyn, Hollywood, Haiti, Paris, Tangier and Spain—then returning to Brooklyn again in “A House on the Heights”

twenty yards ahead, then ten, five, then none, the yellow house on Willow Street. Home! And happy to be.

The victims in *In Cold Blood* were originally the Clutters, but by the time the crime is traced to the killers and they are imprisoned, all seem equally victims. As in any novel, innocent and guilty require the same mental consideration from the author. In any event, innocence in our America is always tragic and in some sense to blame, as Mr. Clutter is, for incarnating a stability that now seems an “act.” Capote is always sympathetic to Nancy Clutter, who laid out her best dress for the morrow just before she got murdered, and Nancy is the fragile incarnation of some distant feminine goodness, of all that might have been, who gets our automatic

sympathy. But despite Capote's novelistic interest in building up Mr. Clutter as the archetypal square and Mrs. Clutter as a victim of the rigid life-style surrounding her, Capote's more urgent relationship is of course with "Perry and Dick." Almost to the end one feels that they might have been saved and their souls repaired.

This felt interest in "Perry and Dick" as persons whom Capote knew makes the book too personal for fiction but establishes it as a casebook for our time. The background of the tale is entirely one of damaged persons who wreak worse damage on others, but the surface couldn't be more banal. Perry is the "natural killer" selected by Dick for the job, and Dick's father can say to Agent Nye of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation:

"Was nothing wrong with my boy, Mr. Nye, . . . an outstanding athlete, always on the first team at school. Basketball! Basketball! Dick was always the star player. A pretty good student, too . . ."

Terror can break out anywhere. The world is beyond reason but the imagination of fact, the particular detail, alone establishes credibility. It all happened, and it happened only this way. The emotion pervading the book is our helpless fascinated horror; there is a factuality with nothing beyond it in Perry's dwarfish legs, the similar imbalance in Dick's outwardly normal masculinity and his actual destructiveness. On what morsels of unexpected fact, summoned out of seeming nowhere by the author's digging alone, is our terror founded! On the way to rob the Clutters, Dick says:

"Let's count on eight, or even twelve. The only sure thing is every one of them has got to go. Ain't that what I promised you, honey—plenty of hair on them—those walls?"

The Clutters are stabbed, shot, strangled, between mawkish first-name American "friendliness" and bouncy identification with one another's weaknesses. Nancy couldn't be sweeter to her killers, Perry worries that Dick may rape her, Kenyon asks Perry not to harm his new chest by putting the knife on it. All this "understanding" between "insecure" people makes the crime all the more terrifying. It is the psychic weakness that removes so many people, taking their "weakness" for themselves, from any sense of justice. So much fluency of self-centered emotion makes crime central to our fear of each other today.

We may all have passing dreams of killing. But here are two who killed perversely, wantonly, pointlessly, yet with a horrid self-reference in the pitiful comforts they offered their victims that establishes their cringing viciousness. And the crime, like the greatest crimes of our time, is on record but remains

enigmatic, “purposeless,” self-defeating. The will to destroy is founded on what we insist are personal weaknesses, but which we cannot relate to what has been done. Even before the Hitler war was over, there were Nazis who said, “At least we have made others suffer.” The fascination of Capote’s book, the seeming truthfulness of it all, is that it brings us close, very close, to the victims, to the murderers, to the crime itself, as psychic evidence. Killing becomes the primal scene of our “feelings” that with all the timing of a clever novelist and all the emphatic detail brought in from thousands of interview hours by a prodigious listener, Capote presents to us as a case study of “truth” we can hold, study, understand.

As a novelist, dramatist, travel writer, memoirist, Capote had always been rather a specialist in internal mood, tone, “feeling”; now an action, the most terrible, was the center around which everything in his “truthful account” moved. He was ahead of his usual literary self, and the artfulness of the book is that it gets everyone to realize, possess and dominate this murder as a case of the seemingly psychological malignity behind so many crimes in our day. The book aims to give us this mental control over the frightening example of what is most uncontrolled in human nature.

Technically, this is accomplished by the four-part structure that takes us from the apparently pointless murder of four people to the hanging of the killers in the corner of a warehouse. The book is designed as a suspense story—why did Perry and Dick ever seek out the Clutters at all?—to which the author alone holds the answer. This comes only in Part III, when the book is more than half over. Each of the four sections is divided into cinematically visual scenes. There are eighty-six in the book as a whole; some are “shots” only a few lines long. Each of these scenes is a focusing, movie fashion, designed to put us visually as close as possible now to the Clutters, now to Perry and Dick, until the unexplained juncture between them is explained in Part III. Until then, we are shifted to many different times and places in which we see Perry and Dick suspended, as it were, in a world without meaning, for we are not yet up to the explanation that Capote has reserved in order to keep up novelistic interest. Yet this explanation—in jail a pal had put the future killers on to the Clutters and the supposed wealth in the house—is actually, when it comes, meant to anchor the book all the more firmly in the world of “fact”—of the public world expressed as documented conflict between symbolic individuals. It was the unbelievable squareness of the Clutters as a family that aroused and fascinated the murderers. The book opens on Kansas as home and family, ends on Alvin Dewey at the family graveside,

Then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat.

The circle of illusory stability (which we have *seen* destroyed) has closed in on itself again.

Capote's book raises many questions about its presumption as a whole, for many of the "fact" scenes in it are as vivid as single shots in a movie can be—and that make us wonder about the meaning of so much easy expert coverage by the writer-as-camera. ("A movie pours into us," John Updike has said. "It fills us like milk being poured into a glass.") One of the best bits is when the jurors, looking at photographs of the torn bodies and tortured faces of the Clutters, for the first time come into possession of the horror, find themselves focusing on it in the very courtroom where the boyishness and diffidence of the defendants and the boringly circular protocol of a trial have kept up the jurors' distance from the crime.

There is a continuing unreality about the murder of the four Clutters that Capote all through his book labored to eliminate by touch after touch of precious fact. He is our only guide through this sweetly smiling massacre. He is proud of every harrowing or grotesque detail he can dredge up—Perry unbelievably tries to buy for a face mask black stockings from a nun, remembers that after the attack on Mr. Clutter he handed a knife to Dick and said, "Finish him. You'll feel better." The labor after so many facts emphasizes the world of conflict, social bitterness, freakishness, the "criminal" world, the underworld for which Capote asks compassion in the epigraph from Villon's "Ballade des pendus":

Frères humains, qui après nous vivez,  
N'ayez les cueurs contre nous endurcis,  
Car, si pitié de nous povres avez,  
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.

—But now, "real" or "unreal," this murder is public. Closeness is the key. The hope of the book is to get us close, closer, to what occurred in the heart of Middle America and occurs every day now. There is in us, as well as in the Clutters' neighbors, "a shallow horror sensation that cold springs of personal fear swiftly deepened."

The horror is now in the nature of the "fact" material. What can be reconstructed as fact from actual events may take the form of a cinematic "treatment" and easily use many shifts of time and place. But it makes our participation in the story more narrow and helpless than a real novel does. The attempt at closeness is all through Capote's work; he attempts to induce it here by identifying us with "real" people we may think we know better than we do—victims and murderers both.

The reason for the "nonfiction novel" (and documentary plays, movies, art works) is that it reproduces events that cannot be discharged through

one artist's imagination. Tragedy exists in order to be assimilated by us as individual fate, for we can identify with another's death. Death in round numbers is by definition the death of strangers, and that is one of the outrages to the human imagination in the killing after killing which we "know all about," and to which we cannot respond. Capote worked so long on this case—"his" case—because to the "fact writer" reporting is a way of showing that *he knows*. The killing of the Clutter family was not "personal," as even Gatsby could have admitted about his murderer's mistake in killing him. History is more and more an example of "accident." The Clutters were there just for their killers to kill them.

"The event" is fascinatingly inscrutable though it is in the public light—just one of many killings in our time by people who did not know their victims. As with so many mass murders, many witnesses and documents are needed to reconstruct the true history of the crime. But irony more than truth is the motif of such fact books, for the point made is that there is no "sense" to the crime. This is what relieves the liberal imagination of responsibility and keeps it as spectator. In a "real" novel—one that changes our minds—a single Raskolnikov or Clyde Griffiths commits a singular crime (and is usually pursued by a single law-enforcer who has no other crime to uncover). The resolution of the crime—murder is the primal fault—gave the moral scheme back to us. But as Joan Didion said when she decided not to do a "fact" book around the taped memories by Linda Kasabian of living in the Charles Manson "family," there was nothing she could *learn* by writing such a book.

In the many gratuitous murders that have soundlessly bounced off the imagination of our time, murderers and victims remain in every retrospect forever strange to each other. Apart from "war crimes" like Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Dresden, Mylai, the dropping of Viet Cong prisoners on villages from American helicopters, the torture, confessions and executions of whole masses of people as "enemies of the state," there are the murders by Detroit policemen (described by John Hersey in *The Algiers Motel Incident*) of three Negroes just because they have been found in a motel with white women, the killing of parents and children on a Kansas farm by two not abnormally rootless American boys of whom we know enough to know (even if they do talk of killing as "scoring") that we don't know them, the murder of eight-months-pregnant Sharon Tate and six other people by members of the Charles Manson "family."

These are now public events, matters of record, horrors taking place in the well-publicized arena that is now the domain of "reality." The news of these things is so instantly and widely disseminated that the sense of being left behind can frustrate the writer brought up on the necessary consistency of art, the significance of even a murderer's motive, and Chekhov's belief that

if a gun is mentioned in Act One it must go off in Act Three. What we are dealing with here is not the pressure of "reality" on fiction, but the shape that so many public crimes and happenings are taking in a middle-class culture that for the first time is dividing on a wide scale, and where the profoundest disaffection is often felt exactly among these dutiful thinkers who are most conscious of literature itself as a tradition. One sees on every hand how many cherished personal images of literature are being destroyed by the fury of public events and technological change.

But if white middle-class writers who have always thought of literature as theirs are struggling to find a form and language for this "crisis of literature," so-called minority writers brought up on collective experiences of oppression—who have all too sufficiently been named as Negro, coolie, Black, African, peasant—have always thought of themselves as creatures of history, and have often created works of literature without thinking of themselves as more than powerful speakers, as Malcolm X did in the extraordinary recital of his life to the editor friend who then wrote it.

James Baldwin cares desperately for literary distinction. He has achieved it not through his novels, which after *Go Tell It on the Mountain* seem heavy expositions of a complicated sexual travail, but through his ability to turn every recital of his own life into the most urgent symbol of American crisis. In *Notes of a Native Son* he describes himself on August 3, 1943, a fanatical Harlem preacher's emotionally alienated son,<sup>1</sup> following his father's coffin to the cemetery through Harlem streets that were "a wilderness of smashed plate glass" after a wartime race riot. The day of his father's funeral was Baldwin's nineteenth birthday; the day of his father's death had seen the birth of a posthumous child.

Only Baldwin, with his genius for finding the widest possible application for his personal fury, could put his disturbed emotions into this trinity of death, the heaped-up glass in the Harlem streets, the birth of a posthumous son. In this aria, Baldwin shows himself an extraordinary spellbinder. Rage, grief, loneliness are his literary capital, and he works on his own poignancy and American guilt with the same fervor. Now that militant Black nationalism has dismissed him (along with so many other talented writers) as superfluous, one can agree that Baldwin joined the cause rather late and has never been a natural militant.<sup>2</sup>

As a writer Baldwin is as obsessed by sex and family as Strindberg was, but instead of using situations for their dramatic value, Baldwin likes to pile up all possible emotional conflicts as assertions. But for the same reason that in *Giovanni's Room* Baldwin made everybody white just to show that he could, and in *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* transferred the son-father quarrel to a quarrel with a brother, so one feels about *Another Country* that Baldwin writes fiction in order to use up his private difficulties; even his

fiction piles up the atmosphere of raw emotion that is his literary standby. Why does so powerful a writer as Baldwin make himself look simpleminded by merely asserting an inconsequential succession of emotions?

They encountered the big world when they went out into the Sunday streets. It stared unsympathetically out at them from the eyes of the passing people; and Rufus realized that he had not thought at all about this world and its power to hate and destroy.

“They out there, scuffling, making that change, they think it’s going to last forever. Sometimes I lie here and listen, listen for a bomb, man, to fall on this city and make all that noise stop. I listen to hear them moan, I want them to bleed and choke, I want to hear them crying.”

The college boys, gleaming with ignorance and mad with chastity, made terrified efforts to attract the feminine attention, but succeeded only in attracting each other.

But in *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin dropped the complicated code for love difficulties he uses in his novels and simplified himself into an “angry Black” very powerfully indeed—and this just before Black nationalists were to turn on writers like him. The character who calls himself “James Baldwin” in his nonfiction novel is more professionally enraged, more doubtfully an evangelist for his people, than the actual James Baldwin, a very literary mind indeed. But there is in *Notes of a Native Son* a genius for bringing many symbols together, an instinctive association with the 1943 Harlem riot, the streets of smashed plate glass, that stems from the all too understandable fascination of the Negro with the public sources of his fate. The emphasis is on heat, fire, anger, the sense of being hemmed in and suffocated; the words are tensed into images that lacerate and burn. Reading Baldwin’s essays, we are suddenly past the discordancy that has plagued his fiction—a literal problem of conflict, for Baldwin’s fiction shows him trying to transpose facts into fiction without sacrificing the emotional capital that has been his life.

This discordancy has been a problem in Black writing, as in most minority writing that deals with experiences that may in fact be too deep, too painful, and so inexpressible. Nor does the claim to literature work for those, like Eldridge Cleaver, who mythologize rape into a form of social protest—*Soul on Ice* is propaganda. To turn the facts into literature, and literature into whatever will “change our minds,” is a special problem for radicals. The heroic Soviet writer Andrey Sinyavsky said in his great polemic against “socialist realism” that a work of literature can spring from anything

but must not be eclectic. A peculiar directness, an unconscious return to scriptural models, a lack of all literary pretense, saved Malcolm X as a writer. He cared desperately about salvation, not literature, and made his Autobiography the searing personal document it is by never saying "my book."

It is safe to say that Malcolm never thought of his life as a novel. In East Lansing, Michigan, where Malcolm Little grew up, Negroes weren't allowed into town after dark. When Malcolm was four, the family's home was set afire by two white men; white policemen and firemen stood watching as the house burned down to the ground. Malcolm's father, a free-lance Baptist preacher and a follower of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement, was murdered by white men; his mother broke down and spent the next twenty-six years in the state asylum. Malcolm and the other younger children became wards of the state.

He eventually went to a suburb of Boston to live with a tough older sister; as a crude country kid he excitedly entered into the big-city world of jazz, drugs and hustling that he observed as a shoeshine boy at Roseland State Ballroom in Boston. He helped to rob a jeweler, was sent to prison, learned to read and write, was converted by his brother to the Black Muslim movement. There he found for the first time expression of his strong natural devoutness in what he thought of as a liberating universal religion of all the dark and oppressed peoples. But he was forced out of the movement by the leader's jealousy and was murdered while speaking to his followers from the stage of the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem.

In Malcolm's literal recital of his life to Alex Haley—he was a naturally gifted speaker as well as a religious agitator too busy to write—the freedom he displays comes from his austere sense of fact and his ability to read other people's souls. The book is an example of straight autobiography in a time of novelized autobiographies<sup>3</sup>—of autobiography as a religious pilgrimage, of a man seeking his way up from his personal darkness to some personal light. Everything is rooted in the Negro's tie to history through his oppression. All love relationships are sparse, treated as gifts, but are not elaborated. There is not much room in Malcolm's book for love. He found himself only as a leader, and he expected to become a sacrifice.

No doubt someone will make a novel of Malcolm's life, as William Styron has made a novel of Nat Turner's insurrection. Turner lived as a slave, was hanged as the murdering leader of a slave revolt, and left twenty pages of "confession," taken down by the court-appointed counsel who hated him. Styron is an elegantly accomplished novelist who in a book entitled *The Confessions of Nat Turner* still wanted to be a novelist, a Virginian who felt himself intensely involved with the Negro struggle and wanted to write a historical novel that would reflect the present crisis and above all bring white and black together. Surely this much relevance would not violate the

integrity of fiction! Indeed Styron's strong feelings as a liberal Southerner did not override his novel, which far from being declamatory in the evangelical style of Harriet Beecher Stowe (who also wrote a novel about Nat Turner) turns Nat Turner into an extraordinarily sensitive and dreamy autodidact who once petted with another slave boy but died a virgin, who organized an insurrection but could kill no one but the white woman he loved, whom he could possess only by standing guard over her corpse with a sword.

Styron's book is full of sensitive landscapes that could apply to any Southern boy's growing up. They do not make the connection between slavery and insurrection that must have existed in Nat Turner's mind for him to organize the "only effective, sustained," the only significant slave revolt in American history. Styron wanted to dispel the strangeness of the "Negro"—especially in bondage, where even the most concerned Southern defender cannot now imagine his individual *feelings*—by showing him to be as complicated as oneself. But though many Southern white writers were deeply moved by Nat Turner, the book was violently attacked by Black nationalists. Styron's Turner was too sensitive for them. Harriet Beecher Stowe had answered the angry Southern critics of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by providing documentation for every horror she described in her novel. But Mrs. Stowe was worried not about "fiction" but about the violation of Christianity in a slave society. Styron was relevant to too many things at once: to the art of the novel, to the original twenty-page confession, and above all, to his contemporary belief that our psychology can illuminate the mind and heart of a Negro slave in 1831. Entering into Nat Turner's "dreams" as confidently as we do, we recognize that what our contemporary, William Styron, wanted most to do in this book was to become a Negro mind, to get past the everlasting barrier, to make "human" and "clear" what makes us afraid in the shadows we still occupy.

That ambition is natural to our Freudianism and our liberalism. Othello will always be strange to the Venetians, but what a Southern writer of Styron's liberal urgency wanted above all, in 1967, was to dispel the strangeness by dramatizing Turner's "feelings," which would show that Negro and white are kin. Styron has always been a novelist of feelings—elegiac in *Lie Down in Darkness*, histrionically "wild" in *Set This House on Fire*. Nat Turner waiting for death talks so much to us about his dreams that he becomes our alter ego—another Southerner Styron wants and needs to understand for the sake of justice and civic peace. But the narrative is so dreamlike that we cannot really believe this man has been a slave and the organizer of so many killings. The violence that is the background to the imaginative literature of fact, the violence that in literature still has the power to surprise and to transform us, to reveal us to ourselves when we are caught in the *act*—this is missing in Styron's book. Though it finally describes the insurrection, Nat Turner's

1967 introspectiveness does not prepare us for it. The link between a tortured self and a violent self, such as novelists describing a killing must show in a killer, is not present in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron himself called his book “a meditation on history,” and it is more than that it is a dramatic novel. But of course Nat Turner was a “real person.” So there is no end to the many meditations on history we can weave around him.

Our relationship to things of public record is never as sharp and finished as it can be to a wholly invented character or deed. What is invented in one mind can remain a fable for the reader. What has actually happened and been recorded—this has already been participated in and glossed by so many people that we are confronted with rival myths, partisan fragments of fact in many minds at once. Nat Turner existed, so we shall never agree on what he was “really” like. Norman Mailer’s version of the 1967 march on the Pentagon, *The Armies of the Night*, is scornfully rejected by people who marched with him. Eichmann the organizer of the gas chambers, on trial in Jerusalem, provoked so many different versions of his character and responsibility that even many who suffered together at his hands came into conflict over the truth of events that they had lived through side by side.

But this is natural. What is artificial is the interposition of so much “art” into journalism as a way of making “literature.” Why should any pretense to literature be brought to the agonizing facts of our time except as a way of glorifying the individual journalist suddenly interested in being “creative”? Great history has usually been narrative history, but the narratives have been shaped by a point of view, a philosophy of history and of human motives. History is what the unifying passion of the historian brings to the scattered facts. It is not an ironic and derisory style daubed on the facts like theater makeup.<sup>4</sup> Art and outrage have no necessary connection with each other. This is another horror for us who for thirty years have tried to make Hitlerism accountable to our humane culture. The horror is that so many frivolous, hysterical, ignorant, *trivial* people could have captured the hearts of so many Germans and have killed human beings for reasons no more “significant” and “historical” than their own murderous vanity and rage. One is now supposed to honor Napoleon for the millions of deaths he caused because he was the vehicle of historical progress. In the case of Hitler and his gang, no delusion is possible. Like the boy who stabbed an enemy in a gang war and as he took the knife out, said to the corpse, “Thanks very much!” Hitler operated on the weakness of his victims and the fear he inspired in the outlookers. He had no serious historical ideas, no tenable hopes. All those millions died to the frenzy of murdering gangsters. They died *meaninglessly*. And how do you make art out of what is inherently meaningless, was never a contest? Nowhere has totalitarianism as a climate, or totalitarianism as a

subject, been able to produce a work of art. What it does provoke, from the many ground down in our time by the Moloch of "History" or "Race," is occasional personal testimony. The victims alone can testify to the power of these murderous abstractions. Their own existence is the moral authenticity they have saved from what André Malraux properly defined as the only purpose of the concentration camps. "The supreme objective was that the prisoners, in their own eyes, should lose their identity as human beings."

In any event, experience does not necessarily take the form of "literature" to those who in the modern Hell, the degradation of whole classes and races of people, have known the lowest abyss of suffering. Even Tolstoy, whose shame in the face of other people's destitution was only "moral" suffering, could say nothing more than: "One cannot live so! One cannot live so!" The "structuring," to use a more mod word than "fictionalizing," may come later in the victim's life. Usually it does not come from the victim at all, but from concerned intellectuals. The anthropologist Oscar Lewis wrote a whole series of books—*The Children of Sánchez* and *La Vida* are the best known—in which, having taped the detailed monologues of those usually illiterate people who live below the level of anything *we* know as poverty, he transcribed this testimony, translated it, obviously selected from it, inevitably heightened it.

Lewis had a conscious rivalry with belles-lettres. He often stated his belief that the real "culture of poverty" was his specialty and that such poverty was beyond the ken of even the grimmest naturalistic novels. (Although James Agee similarly wished to confront his middle-class readers with the lives of powerless tenant farmers, the moving force behind *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was a poet's discovery of documentary as a form.) Lewis thought of himself as a transformer of his bourgeois readers. He could have echoed Whitman: *Through me, many long dumb voices, / Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves, / Voices of the diseas'd and despairing . . .* Should an anthropologist so openly put the emphasis on "me"? Lewis insisted that *his* material was not to be duplicated elsewhere, that he was working out a wholly new literary domain. The transmutation of research into "a new kind of book" inevitably inflates the writer's idea of himself.

This sense of oneself as a "pioneer" is very important to the writing of the "nonfiction novel." Norman Mailer would not have attempted his literary march on the Pentagon, would not have re-examined the astronauts, if he had thought any other writer capable of this. Mailer will always be the dominating voice in every book of reportage he writes—he has to feel that he is writing history as a form of action. Then, energetically moving against history's own actions, he feels himself in complete control of materials that have been opened up by his literary curiosity. The raw material in all such cases is a fact of human experience so extreme that the writer is excited by his

literary intimacy with it. This suggests an influence on the audience proper to the shocking novelty of the material. Oscar Lewis was driven not so much by the anthropology that he had learned as a practiced field worker in Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, as by literary abilities set in motion by his need to use material that would liberate, agitate, revolutionize. So Mailer has been saying for years that the really repressed material is in our social thinking, not in the private psyche—that the struggle in America (and America is the persona behind all his nonfiction tracts) is whether this fat overgrown self-indulgent society, unable to master “progress,” will be able to confront its secret fears and festering injustices. Capote in his murder book is saying, less directly, that murderers are loose all over the place. Notice the attention he gives to the bodies and most intimate physical habits of all “his” characters. There is the connection between Mr. Clutter, who disdained evil and complexity, and the outsider, vagabond, pervert, who said to his pal, “Finish him off. You’ll feel better.”

Oscar Lewis’s “characters” in *La Vida* describe sexual sensations that have never been reported by women in our middle-class fiction for the reason that these women have much more to live for. The lack of money among Lewis’s people is nothing compared with their lack of general satisfaction. At the same time the absolute domination by the family seems to fill up the vacuum created by emotional scarcity. We have here something like the bondage we have seen in Malcolm X and James Baldwin. But in Lewis’s transparently literary creations these wretched of the earth are supposed to be real people talking into a tape recorder. This verisimilitude was Lewis’s pride as a social liberator whose polemic took the form of getting people to tell their life stories. We are involved with whole families whom *we* never see in Mexico. And if our middle-class souls protest that we never seem to get out of these low dark rooms and alleyways, Lewis would respond that ours is an era marked by the return of the repressed, the painful, the unacceptable, the frightful.

Revolution or therapy? For purposes of the imagination of fact, the horrible is like Artaud’s prescription for “the theater of cruelty”: we put into the play what we are most afraid of. But do *we* as readers of the nonfiction novel, as mere spectators of the television horror show, act anything out? Do we ever do anything more than have “feelings”? Before the great screen of fact created by the information and communications revolution of our time, we remain viewers, and it is truly amazing how much crisis and shock we can take in without giving up anything or having the smallest of our habits changed in the least. The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem was, as Harold Rosenberg said, a necessary purging of emotion—for the survivors and intended victims! But perhaps the S.S. man in Russia quoted in Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was just a thunderstruck tourist when he reported that

“there was, gushing from the earth, a spring of blood like a fountain. Such a thing I had never seen before.”

In the often apocalyptic personal remembrance of Hitler’s hell, the survivor’s natural feeling of guilt is also a pervasive horror of human nature that has filled the air since the war. Often enough in this new literature of exposure the truly horrible fact comes in as a judgment on oneself. In Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, his memoir of Auschwitz, a child being hanged proves too light for the rope and strangles so slowly that Wiesel, a former Chassid, cries out with the other prisoners that God himself is hanging on the gallows. In *Counting My Steps*, Jakov Lind’s memory of his adventures under the Nazi occupation, he describes the police driving Jews out of their houses in Amsterdam while he scurries for safety to the apartment of a married woman, also a refugee.

A few minutes after the last shouting had died away, afraid of special punishment, all of them went, one by one. . . . We had been eating silently for nearly fifteen minutes when from outside came the sounds of pots and pans being dragged over the cobblestones, the crying of a child, the barking of a dog, the shouting of a loudspeaker, march music, and the tenor of a high-flying bomber. . . . We sat and ate our lunch. . . . I went to her bed, she opened her gown, my fly. [He makes love for the first time in his life.] A key turned in the door. . . . Gunther kissed his wife, said, “They will soon be here. Let’s go.” I had passed the test and survived. All that was left now was to beat the police to it as well.

We say about a book like Jerzy Kosinski’s *The Painted Bird*, the stupefying itinerary of cruelties inflicted by Polish peasants during the war on a homeless boy, “What a writer!” And to ourselves we add, “With experiences like that, how can you miss?” It is the writer himself who seems to get turned on in these shattering memoirs, to rise above our helpless nonparticipation. Such books seem to be made out of a hardness that has burned away everything but the ability to write with this concentrated purity of feeling. Literary power is still our ideal, and we are jealous of the power that discovers itself in extreme experiences. We locate imaginative authority in the minority man, the battered refugee, the kook, the deviant, the mad poet, the suicide, the criminal. Genius, says Sartre in his book on Genet, is not a gift but a way out one invents in desperate cases. (This is obviously Sartre’s hope for the downtrodden masses.)

Subject—the “situation,” the accident, the raid, the murder—is so primary in these novelized special cases that the only force apparently able to do justice

to extreme experiences is the writer's myth of himself as an agent for change. The world and the battered author, the revolutionary demonstration and the ego, the crime and the reporter, the moon and me!

These are the now chilling polarities in Norman Mailer's brilliantly literary but evanescent descriptions of the 1967 march on the Pentagon, the 1960 and 1968 national conventions, the first landing of American know-how on the moon. They move us out of the inherent consistency and exhaustive human relationships of the novel onto the great TV screen of contemporary history, and Mailer's illusion is that he is somehow helping to change history. Mailer is the greatest historical actor in his own books, but they do not convey any action of his own. They are efforts to rise above the Americanness that he loves to profane, but which fascinates him into brilliance. The nonfiction novel exists in order *not* to change the American situation that makes possible so much literary aggression against it.

Mailer's tracts are histrionic blows against the system. They are fascinating in their torrential orchestration of so many personal impulses. Everything goes into it on the same level. So they end up as Mailer's special urgency, that quest for salvation through demonstration of the writer's intelligence, realism, courage, that is to be effected by making oneself a gladiator in the center of the ring, a moviemaker breathing his dreams into the camera.

Yet the theme of Mailer's reportage is the unprecedented world now, rushing off to its mad rendezvous with the outermost spaces of blind progress. Mailer's reportage responds excitedly to great public demonstrations, conventions, crowds, coordinations of technological skill. He has carried over from his fiction many sensory equivalents for the sound and weight of crowds, for physical tension, anxiety, conflict, for the many different kinds of happenings that his mind can register as he watches Jack Kennedy arriving in Los Angeles in 1960, senses the Florida cracker's feeling that *he* has made it as the Saturn booster goes up from its Florida pad in 1969. Mailer has both lived and written his life with the greatest possible appetite for the power and satisfaction open to successful Americans since 1945; but his reportage has become steadily more baleful and apocalyptic—not least because his subjects soon lose their interest for everybody but himself.

One aim of his highly colored style has been to find new images for energy, for savoring the last possible tingle of orgasm, for life among the managers, for the sexual power and thrust (sex as thought, thought as sex) inseparable from the experience of self-representative American males. But a new reason for so much style is to keep the zing in his subjects. Mailer has been the hungriest child at the American feast, directly in the line of those realistic novelists for whom John O'Hara spoke when he said that the development of the United States during the first half of the twentieth century was the greatest possible subject for a novelist.

But clearly Mailer's reportage represents his dilemma as an artist forced back on too many "ideas"—a superbly gifted writer too good for this genre. *Of a Fire on the Moon* is a book of such brilliance, and of such sadness in trying to keep different things together, that like a rocket indeed it has been set off by forces that at every moment threaten to explode it. Proust says somewhere that notes are fantasies. But in Mailer it is precisely with his fantasies, the greatest of which is that he can bring to some portentous world-historical consummation the battle in himself between so many loves and so many Spenglerian despairs, that he has written his moon book. It is not *exactly* a book about the journey of the Apollo 11, not exactly a book about the "WASP" types who fascinate him by their bureaucratized steadiness, all those dumb other reporters, the computer age. . . . It is a book about a novelist trying to write instant history.

Of course we all have a sense these days of being ridden down by history, and want to do something about it. Never has there been such a concerted consciousness, in the name of history, of how little history is leaving our minds and our souls. Never have there been so many techniques for circulating facts and dramatizing them. Real history, partisan history, and commercial history are so thick a part of contemporary writing that it is as if History had come back to revenge itself on its upstart rival, Fiction. But not without Fiction's own techniques, as one can see nowhere better than in Mailer's allegory of *himself* as history. The effort sprouts more coils around Mailer himself than the serpents did around Laocoön and his sons. With one breath he must say yes! serpents are of the essence and *I* can take anything! with the next make a mighty heave to get the damned things off him, two Americans to the moon, and the book to the publisher.

Such ambition, such imagination, such wrath, such sadness, such cleverness, so many ideas! The flames licking Saturn-Apollo on its way up had nothing on this. It is as if Mailer were sketching the possibilities of one brilliant novel after another. The dreaming, longing, simulating—of masterpieces—give the reader the sense that Mailer was really dreaming of other books all the time he was writing this one. The giveaway at crucial passages of philosophizing—and that was another reason for taking on the assignment; it was like asking Hamlet to give a lecture on Monarchs I Have Known—is that with the whole universe to travel up and down on his typewriter, Mailer cannot help fudging the world-historical bit; he is not always clear to himself, and damn well knows it. Rather than dramatize the American contradictions that are eating him up, he tries to keep them all in eloquent bursts that stagger you with ideas, but that leave you uneasy. The performance is not of the moon but of the effort to talk about it.

Journalism will no more diminish than will the "communications industry," but the new art-journalism, journalism as a private form, has

already had its day. It went through a whole cycle in the Sixties, and no longer astonishes. Issues die on it as fast as last week's issue of *Time*, and while the professional reporter can still depend on a bored downgrading of human nature, Mailer depended for his best "pieces," like *The Prisoner of Sex*, on challenges to his manhood that not even the Kate Milletts will always provide. Mailer identified creative vitality in his best tract, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel: The Novel as History* with his revolutionary élan. But America has worn out the revolutionary in Mailer; the historical blues are more a problem to the novelist-as-reporter than to the novelist or reporter as such. Mailer in *Of a Fire on the Moon* describes the lifting of the Saturn-Apollo in language born in the envy of *Moby-Dick* and manifest destiny—language that somehow suggests there may yet be political hope in so much mechanical energy. Some transformation of minds may yet take place in outer space!

But the possibility of doom is just as strong in Mailer's own moon trip as in his enthusiasm for a technical wizardry of which, in the end, he knows less than he does about doom. With so many agonies of contradiction in himself, not the brilliant novelist's lesser rhetoric will do—that just passes out symbols like party hats to *surprise*—but the patience and depth of fiction itself, dramatic imagination, the world reconstructed in that personal sense of time about which space centers, sex movements and all other plurals know nothing, but which is a writer's secret treasure. Despite all our rapture about them now, the great nineteenth-century novels were not and certainly are not the "world." The world is a world, dumb as nature, not a novel. The world as our common experience is one that only the journalist feels entirely able to set down. It is a confidence that those who stick to fiction do not feel, for if the "world" is not an experience in common, still less is it a concept on which all can agree. It is not even as close as we think. As Patrick White, the Australian novelist, says in one of his books—"Why is the world which seems so near so hard to get hold of?"

#### NOTES

1. In an interview in E. W. E. Bigby's *The Black American Writer* (Penguin), Baldwin says: "I've hated a few people, but actually I've hated only one person, and that was my father. He didn't like me. But he'd had a terrible time too. And of course, I was not his son. I was a bastard."

2. Baldwin up to the 1960s was a markedly esthetic and even precious writer whose essay attacking *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (and not just Mrs. Stowe), "Everybody's Protest Novel," was more expressive of his literary sophistication than his later attempts at militancy. In conversation, during his expatriate days in Paris, Baldwin once said memorably that a perfect article for a Jewish magazine would be "A Negro Looks at Henry James."

3. Hortense Calisher describes these as “veiled autobiography posing as novel—currently a novelist’s straight path to being lovable.”

4. “The new journalism” is a technological product, like the drawn-out dramatization of the day’s news on television by reporters who, being on camera, have naturally come to think of themselves as actors. There is so much “news” today, and so much submission to it by a vast audience that submits to every fresh shock as cavemen submitted to thunderstorms, that the reporter-as-actor can get away with anything, especially getting the facts wrong, so long as he hypnotizes the audience.

Henry Luce encouraged his staff to think of an article rewritten from the *New York Times* as a “story.” Then, especially on failing newspapers like the *New York Herald Tribune*, writers were given their head in the hope of titillating an audience surfeited with mere “news.” Tom Wolfe, who was trained as a scholar in American studies but understandably went further as a dramatizer of celebrities in a pixie hah-hah style designed to make you think of *him* as an original, has written many amusing profiles of American leaders like Hugh Hefner, Leonard Bernstein, but has become altogether too conscious of mere personality, especially his own. So much of contemporary magazine and even book review journalism now deals in personal gossip about the American great that the only justification for a “fact piece” is usually forgotten in Wolfe’s *ad hominem* writing.

In any event, such writing depends on a most credulous audience. When Michael J. Arlen described the frivolity of the “New Journalism” one reader replied in the June 1972 issue of *The Atlantic*, “The most insulting accusation Arlen made was that the New Journalism is non-factual. . . . Wolfe never suggests any lack of truth or any sacrifice of reality. Instead, he insists, and rightly so, that the New Journalism adds to the depth of reality and truth, that literary devices such as symbolism, dialogue, experimentation in narration, imagination in development, etc. complement the facts by adding new dimensions of reality, providing the reader with an entry into the situation being recounted.”

Inevitably, Wolfe has come to think that “the new journalism” makes novels unnecessary. Journalists take themselves too seriously. First they describe facts, then they see “trends,” and finally, they see themselves as a trend.



J. DOUGLAS PERRY, JR.

*Gothic as Vortex: The Form of Horror  
in Capote, Faulkner, and Styron*

**A**n examination of Capote, Faulkner, and Styron reveals that modern American gothic is not only a matter of theme or image, as Irving Malin suggests,<sup>1</sup> but of narrative form as well, that certain basic modes of rendering are traditional to gothic, and that in structure, as in theme and image, writers like Capote, Faulkner, and Styron parallel Melville and Poe, and ultimately such gothicists as “Monk” Lewis and Mary Shelley.

A convenient rule of thumb for modern American gothic might be that its structures are analogous to its images and themes. If one considers gothic to be made up of the interaction of theme, image, and structure, Malin has covered two of the three areas. He identifies the three images of American gothic as the room, the voyage, and the mirror, and the three appropriate themes as confinement, flight—really two sides of the same coin—and narcissism.<sup>2</sup> It is with the remaining area, the three corresponding structural principles (which I have labeled *concentricity*, *predetermined sequence*, and *character repetition*) that this article will deal.

One more point should be made here. The most pervasive gothic theme, the most pervasive gothic image, points to the over-all gothic structure: the fear of being drawn in and the image of the whirlpool find their expression in a structural vortex, composed of a series of rings or levels which create a kind of hierarchy of horror, like Dante’s inferno.

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The three structural principles are simply ways in which a whirlpool is shifted from a visual representation to the printed page. The process down the side of the whirlpool becomes the sequential experiencing of levels, a series of events, funneling into the final one. The sequence is predetermined because the whirlpool cancels free will and random motion. To move through the whirlpool is to find oneself moving in smaller and faster circles; a novel conveys this sensation by repeating its initial event or situation in more and more strident ways, creating for us a sense of concentricity. Finally, there is the matter of character repetition, the recurrence of archetypal figures, or clusters of them, throughout the various subplots of the novel, in an obsessive and stereotypical fashion. This character repetition lets us see the workings of the gothic world, for as the main characters or their proxies reappear at successive levels, they become increasingly grotesque, distorted more and more by the whirlpool's pull.

In a sense, it is arbitrary and misleading to isolate these structures this way, because they are simply facets of the same process, even as the themes express each other: the room's boundaries both promote and define one's flight, and the mirror is not only what one flees, but what one flies to. Concentricity (which implies boundaries) and sequence (which is simply flight through the concentric events) have the same interlocking relationship. As readers, we experience the spatial arrangement of the novel (its chapters or levels) as a matter of duration, as though we ourselves flee downward through the circles of the vortex. The last structural element, character repetition (which expresses narcissism), is made possible through the interaction of the other two: it is observable because a series of human communities can exist simultaneously and be experienced concentrically in the novel.

All three of the structural principles are molded into a novel which, like the half-spent suction of the *Pequod's* whirlpool, sucks the reader in, only to throw him back out again, like Ishmael, or Poe's Maelstrom man. George Poulet's analysis of Poe, with slight modifications, can be applied to all American gothic:

A sort of temporal circle surrounds Poe's characters. A whirlpool envelops them, which, like that of the maelstrom, disposes its funnel by degrees from the past in which one has been caught to the future in which one will be dead. Whether it moves in the limitless eternity of dreams or the limited temporality of awakening, the work of Poe thus always presents a time that is closed.<sup>3</sup>

The first principle, concentricity, is far easier for a spatial form, like painting, than for novels. Nevertheless, the novel can utilize what Hillis Miller calls "the Quaker Oats effect":

A real Quaker Oats box is fictionalized when it becomes a picture of a Quaker Oats box which bears in turn another . . . and so on indefinitely, in an endless play of imagination and reality. The imaginary copy tends to affirm the reality of what it copies and at the same time to undermine its substantiality. To watch a play within a play is to be transformed from spectator into actor and to suspect that all the world may be a stage and the men and women merely players. To read a narration within a narration makes all the world a novel and turns the reader into a fictional character.<sup>4</sup>

Such an illusion becomes all the more desirable in the whirlpool world of gothic.

It is in just such a manner that Mary Shelley draws us into her tale. As we read *Frankenstein* we are, in effect, cutting across a series of interrupted and resumed narratives, drawing a straight line through the concentric circles made by her narrators. After Mary Shelley's own preface, voyager Robert Walton writes letters to his sister embodying the narrative of Dr. Frankenstein who in turn supplies the monologue of the monster. Each story teller is interrupted by the other and only allowed to finish when his interrupter has finished. One charts one's progress through the book by the level of hearsay.

A similar if more crudely manipulated concentricity occurs in *The Monk*, between Ambrosio's fall from innocence and his on-going corruption. In a hiatus of more than one hundred pages, a second plot is introduced, involving the narration of Don Raymond, who interrupts himself first for the autobiography of Marguerite and then for Agnes's capsule gothic tale. One is farthest from the surface and from a sense of reality here, for Agnes's story—the tale of the bleeding nun—is so fantastic that not even Agnes believes it until, in melodramatic fashion, Agnes and Don Raymond themselves succumb to the Bleeding Nun.

With so many tales being recounted successively, recurrence of character types is almost inevitable. It happens in *The Monk*, of course, but the classic example of this repetition occurs in the dark and fair heroes and heroines of *Wuthering Heights*. The confusion of names in *Wuthering Heights*—with so many overlapping Heathcliffes, Lintons, and Earnshaws for namesakes—becomes not merely a problem of multiple marriages and dense plotting, but the first source of disorientation in Lockwood's gothic encounter:

In vapid listlessness I leant my head against the window, and continued spelling over Catherine Earnshaw—Heathcliffe—Linton, till my eyes closed, but they had not rested five minutes when a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres—the air swarmed with Catherines.<sup>5</sup>

Although there is no such confusion of names in *Frankenstein*, the character of the Promethean hero is central to each ring of the concentrically formed novel. His magnitude increases proportionately as one approaches the center of the book. The outermost ring is occupied by Mary Shelley herself who, despite her disclaimer that the novel was “commenced partly as a source of amusement, and partly as an expedient for exercising my untried resources of mind,” provides the book with this envoi: “And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words.”<sup>6</sup>

At this point, the interaction of character repetition with concentricity and sequence becomes clear. The concentricity is apparent precisely because of the recurrence. At each new level, the reader finds the patterns obsessively reestablishing themselves. As a temporal experience, the growing horror is based partly on our recognition of the inevitable course of events, a sequence we have already faced in a milder form on the previous level.

Inversely, the concentricity and sequence strengthen the reader’s impulse to make the analogies. For example, Robert Walton’s uncompleted journey becomes much more sinister when one sees the horrible outcome of Dr. Frankenstein’s idealistic quest.

I have started my discussion with these nineteenth-century examples both because the formal methods and patterns are clear, and because they are the prototypes, as Leslie Fiedler might say, in Capote, Faulkner, and Styron. In these American authors, the use of these techniques may be more elaborate, but the issues which are treated are of the same existential profundity and ambiguity as those of *Frankenstein*. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* concerns itself, as so many American novels do, with an adolescent’s quest for identity. Joel Knox, like Robin Molineux before him, seeks out the fabled relatives that may give him identity and security. When he arrives at Skully’s Landing, he finds only a madhouse inhabited by his long lost father (in a near catatonic state); his father’s second wife in name only (Miss Amy), a Havisham-like relic of Southern womanhood; and his cousin Randolph, a homosexual and transvestite. These are Joel’s role-models, the gothic family. It is cousin Randolph, Joel’s ultimate alter-ego, who poses the gothic dilemma by linking the identity quest to the gothic whirlpool:

What a subtle torture it would be to destroy all the mirrors in the world: where then could we look for reassurance of our identities? . . . Narcissus was no egotist . . . merely another of us who, in our unshatterable isolation, recognized, on seeing his reflection, the one beautiful comrade, the only inseparable love.<sup>7</sup>

This passage, which clearly demonstrates Malin's diagnosis of theme and image, mirror and narcissism, leads to the kind of motifs that Ishmael attaches to water in *Moby-Dick*:

Still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus who because he could not grasp the tormenting mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.<sup>8</sup>

Capote's horizon is narrower than Melville's partly because it is more exclusively gothic. The circle is vicious rather than transcendental. Joel enters the whirlpool and fails to resurface. As I have been suggesting earlier, this is a formal matter as much as a thematic one. Close to the end of the book, after Joel emerges from a series of progressively more sinister levels of gothic, he enters the final delirium, the delirium that renders him fit for the Cousin Randolph's proclivities. The brief final section of the book opens with a description of the delirium as whirlpool, with Joel in his coffin at the center of a ring of grotesques—which includes every character in the novel but Joel:

Miss Wisteria . . . leaned so far over she nearly fell into the chest: listen, she whispered . . . are the dead as lonesome as the living? Whereupon the room commenced to vibrate slightly, then more so, chairs overturned . . . a mirror cracked, . . . down went the house, down into the earth, . . . past the deepest root, into the furry arms of horned children whose bumblebee eyes withstand forests of flame. (C, p. 113)

The center of the final whirlpool is Randolph's window, where Joel, on his first day at Skully's Landing, saw "the queer lady" (C, p. 40). Joel's final submergence is accomplished by means of this specter, whom he now knows to be Randolph:

Gradually the blinding sunset drained from the glass, . . . a face trembled like a white beautiful moth, smiled. She beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where he stopped and looked back at the bloomless descending blue, at the boy he had left behind. (C, p. 127)

Unlike Poe's "Descent into the Maelstrom," there is no corresponding ascent; Joel makes his irrevocable choice.

To see the shape of the book, the gothic vortex, is to see only the symptom. The cause and ultimate meaning lie elsewhere. The reason why Joel must accept Randolph is that Randolph becomes the self-negating way out of an untenable and omnipresent situation: a perverted and sterile sexual triangle encountered, with different participants, not less than five times in the book. Joel finds either himself or Randolph at the apex, the variable element in each of these triangles, and each time Joel experiences or witnesses it, the triangle becomes more intense, more sinister. First Joel is a pawn in the sibling rivalry of the cruel Florabelle, totally feminine but totally self-centered, and the somewhat overbearing Idabelle, who has become a tomboy to escape the pressures of sexuality. All this can be accepted as part of the mildly confusing but normative world of adolescence. Not so healthy is the successive menage à trois of Ransom, Miss Amy, and the sexually ambivalent Randolph who, like Joel, drifts alone in the middle. Joel is then put between Zoo, feminine, warm, but somehow unattainable, and Randolph who is, at this point in the story, unacceptable.

Randolph's account of Ransom's incapacitating accident reveals a far more sinister triangle: Pepe, the stud prizefighter; Dolores, who, like Florabelle, lives only for self-worship; and Randolph, attracted differently by both, satisfied by neither. After hearing this story, Joel himself becomes the middle man in a similar but odder triangle with Miss Wisteria—a Florabelle transformed into a grotesque parody of the Southern Belle—and Idabelle, Miss Wisteria's inappropriate and hapless suitor. It does not help that Miss Wisteria in turn now covets the now terrified Joel.

The character repetition of this particular sequence makes Joel's end seem not only inevitable, but almost preferable. In effect, Capote has used the structures to turn the gothic inside out. The reader comes to understand that given the gothic nature of the outside world, which ravages Zoo, Ransom, and Randolph, the bond between Randolph and Joel—as perverse as it may be—is the most affirmative situation Joel can find.

Faulkner, in *Sanctuary*, also turns the gothic inside out. One finds in *Sanctuary*, as in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, that while the center of the pool is the most dramatic, it is at the beguilingly calm margin that the real danger lurks. Not Popeye, but Narcissa is the real source of evil in *Sanctuary*. Faulkner uses the formal principles I have described to achieve this, but in a different way from Capote. For instance, instead of the slow but steady progress from the edge to the center, Faulkner flicks us back and forth between the two extremes. The novel begins with a confrontation, over a mirror-like pool, of Horace and Popeye who are, in some ways, the alpha and omega:

The spring welled up . . . upon a bottom of whorled and waved sand. . . . In the spring the drinking man leaned his face to the broken and myriad reflection of his own drinking. When he rose up he saw among them the shattered reflection of Popeye's straw hat.<sup>9</sup>

In one sense, this is a chance encounter between men from opposite poles: Horace, the respectable small town lawyer and family man; Popeye, the vicious and impotent bootlegger. Horace comes and goes at once, with no sense of participation in Popeye's world. Nevertheless, Horace first sees Popeye as an image mixed in with his own like the kaleidoscopic everyman shiftings of Joe Christmas's face when he dies. Horace is in flight from the sterile respectability of his marriage when Popeye, the social misfit, enters his life. In fact, as Olga Vickery points out, "there are certain startling similarities between these two morally antithetical figures":

Popeye's rapt and unnatural absorption in watching Temple and Red perform an act in which he can never share is echoed by Horace's painful exclusion from the grape arbor where Little Belle casually experiments with sex. . . . Popeye's brutal act fuses with Horace's thoughts and culminates in the nightmare vision of the rape of a composite Temple-Little Belle.<sup>10</sup>

What Vickery notes about the men, and implies about Temple and Little Belle, is even more applicable to the antipodal figures of Narcissa and Temple. If Temple's father is a judge, the law runs rampant through the Benbow family.<sup>11</sup> This familial tie with the law makes both women see law as a personal convenience rather than an institution for human betterment. Both of them are concerned with the appearance of respectability. "Honest women," Ruby sneers at Temple. "Too good to have anything to do with common people. . . . Just let a man so much as look at you and you faint away because your father the judge and your four brothers might not like it" (F, p. 55). Miss Jenny has fainter but similar scorn for Narcissa: "Do you think Narcissa'd want any of her folks could know people who would do anything as natural as make love or rob or steal?" (F, p. 115). In *Sanctuary*, the gothic world is synonymous with a loveless world, and Temple and Narcissa match the impotence of Popeye and Horace with a corresponding frigidity. Because they are not looking for adult relationships, both Temple and Narcissa are drawn to Gowan, but only to a certain point, as Horace's anecdote reveals:

"He asked Narcissa to marry him. She told him that one child was enough for her. . . . So he got mad and said he would go to Oxford,

where there was a woman he was reasonably confident he would not appear ridiculous to.” (F, p. 161)

Imprisoned throughout the book, and standing as the sole exponents of the nongothic world, are Lee Goodwin and Ruby, and it is their destruction, or rather Lee’s destruction and with it the meaning of Ruby’s life, that finally crushes Horace.

The feeling of character repetition is heightened by the structuring of the narrative. Instead of moving from one situation to a more sinister one to a final one, Faulkner shuttles back and forth between the respectable world of Jefferson and the depraved worlds of Old Frenchman’s Place and Memphis, counterpointing his landscape and characters, holding to a strict chronological sequence. A quick check of Cleanth Brooks’s chronology<sup>12</sup> reveals that only once does Faulkner allow the two plots to slip out of synchrony; the result there is to intensify the gothic.

In chapter XXII, Horace has learned from Clarence Snopes of Temple’s whereabouts, and in the next chapter, on June third, he interviews her. In chapters XXIV and XXV, Faulkner jumps ahead to June seventeenth, describing Popeye’s murder of Red, Red’s wake, and the departure of Popeye and Temple. Yet when the reader returns to Horace in Jefferson (XXVI), it is still June fourth: Horace is writing a letter to his wife in the aftermath of his horror over Temple’s recital; Narcissa is preparing for Horace’s defeat at the hands of the district attorney; and Clarence Snopes is headed for Jackson. Thus, while Popeye and Temple move beyond his reach and arrangements are made with Judge Drake and a “Memphis Jew” lawyer, Horace continues to conduct his life at a snail’s pace. At the beginning of chapter XXVII, it is still only June tenth for Horace, calling to make sure that his star witness is still safely in Memphis, a fact which may comfort Horace, but not the reader. Abruptly, Faulkner brings Horace to the eve of the trial. Temple has disappeared and only reappears to give the false testimony which convicts Lee.

Faulkner manipulates time to create a doubleness, to put Horace in molasses while evil moves by him on greased skids. The result is to make physically impossible what Miss Jenny knows to be societally impossible: “You won’t ever catch up with injustice, Horace.” (F, p. 115)

The final gothic twist, the final concentric pattern, is provided by Popeye’s own trial. Here Popeye, that most impotent of the impotent men in *Sanctuary*, finds himself being defended by the ultimate parody of Horace’s idealism: “His lawyer had an ugly, eager, earnest face. He rattled on with a kind of enthusiasm. . . . A fellow policeman, a cigar clerk, a telephone girl testified, while his own lawyer rebutted in a gaunt mixture of uncouth enthusiasm and earnest ill-judgment” (F, p. 303). Like the sideshow in *Other Voices, Other*

*Rooms*, this courtroom comedy is the final degradation of and commentary on man's desire to act meaningfully. Both Horace's idealism and his actions are seen as if through the wrong end of a telescope, leaving a searing void like the fiery vortex which engulfs Goodwin in front of Horace's outraged eyes:

Horace couldn't hear them. He couldn't hear the man who had got burned screaming. He couldn't hear the fire, though it swirled upward, unabated, as though it were living upon itself, and soundless: a voice of fury like in a dream, roaring silently out of a peaceful void. (F, p. 289)

In a slightly different manner from Capote, Faulkner has turned the gothic inside out. Evil seems initially a bizarre and isolatable element, confined to the aberrations of Popeye and Temple. Eventually, Horace's twin battles—with the natural world which threatens his sterile existence, and with the monstrous people who threaten his client—these merge. Nature itself, in all its forms, becomes the menace, menacing even the villains who become its victims, disrupting society, the law, and the community. When one recognizes that nature is gothic from Horace's point of view, one simultaneously realizes that Horace, all of us in fact, are unnatural, that good and evil are artificial, man-made concepts. In *Sanctuary*, Faulkner stops just short of what he later says in *As I Lay Dying* or *Light in August*: that it is man, not his universe, that is out of kilter, that the sensation of gothicness is man's projective response to the absurdity of his own existence in a totally consistent, self-sufficient, and alien universe.

If one characterizes Capote's subject matter as individual in its concerns, and Faulkner's as societal, one must call Styron's interpersonal. He is less concerned with Law and the coercions of the Community because he seems largely unconvinced that communal society can exist in America. The permanence of Jefferson, Mississippi, is negated by the transience of Port Warwick, Va.:

In America, our landmarks and our boundaries merge, shift, and change quicker than we can tell: one day we feel rooted. . . . Then . . . it is all yanked out from beneath us, and when we come down we alight on—what? The same old street, to be sure. But where it once had the solid resounding sound of Bankhead McGruder Avenue . . . now it is called Buena Vista Terrace ("It's the California influence," my father complained, "It's going to get us all in the end").<sup>13</sup>

Even the name of the narrator, Peter Leverett, is invariably garbled and lost in introductions, becoming Levenson or Levitt, lending further

evidence to a theory of instability: "There must be something basically unsound about the structure of my name," Peter observes (S, p. 141). For Styron, the same problem prevails that Capote and Faulkner documented: a sense of the void at the center of things, a conviction that chaos is about to rise up and swallow man's personal order. To Styron, this feeling manifests itself not among or within people, but between them, at that instant when one person tries to establish himself in terms of his relations to others. So, in *Set This House on Fire*, three major figures (and several minor ones) of distinct and somewhat antagonistic temperaments, establish a temporary equilibrium of their opposing tensions, only to lash out at each other in the end, all in the name of self-actualization. The two survivors—Cass Kinsolving and Peter Leverett, the murderer and the not-so-innocent bystander—are left with the task of rehearsing and reconstructing the significance of the triangle.

The theme of the void provides ample explanation for Styron's adaptation of gothic methods and form. In addition, because the problem is interpersonal in nature, a treatment of gothic as group dynamics, character repetition becomes a crucial and valuable structure in Styron's story. Instead of providing merely the grotesque commentary of Capote, or the suggestive analogies of *Sanctuary*, it boxes the compass of man's capacity for good and evil. Peter, Cass, and Mason, like the three somewhat similar brothers Karamazov, cover the spectrum of observing, doing, and embodying.

Yet it is not the variety of characters, but their sameness that finally emerges as important. Here again is where the gothic concentricity, the argument from character analogy plays the major part. Peter and Cass uncover their pasts by telling the history of their involvement with each other, to each other. In so doing, they also collaborate on Mason's history, piecing together motive and murderer, cause and effect, during the entire book. Gradually, the fact of their parallel pasts overshadows the sequence of events they are trying to reconstruct. All the men are nearly identical in age: Cass and Mason cross the watershed age of thirty just before the rape, murder, and apparent suicide which occur in Sambuco; Peter, a year younger, fails to confront the issues of Sambuco until after his return home, when a general kind of angst leads him to seek out Cass and the truth. Styron suggests something like Erik Erikson's delayed identity crisis in these men. With the significant exception of Peter, accounts are given of each man's initial sexual encounter, invariably in the late teens: from Mason's *flagrante delicto* in boarding school to Saverio's rape-murder of Angelina. Thirteen years later, the mild anxiety of Peter is set over against Cass's almost classic nineteenth-century self-flagellation. Saverio murders mindlessly; Cass murders in an ecstasy of mistaken vengeance; and Mason, like Gatsby, attempts to realize himself in a grandiose self-conception, a pursuit of "the green light, the orgiastic future,"<sup>14</sup> only

to find himself at an impotent dead end, pursued by Cass and the insatiable demands of his own unattainable fantasies.

In each man, one finds an inner compulsion, a need to establish his value by meeting the impossible standards he has set for himself. Like the overreachers in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, each refuses to recognize his own human frailty, the underlying egotism of his idealism. Like Mary Shelley, Styron uses the concentricity to drive the point home. In an obsessive way, the form of the novel is a series of nightmarish self-confrontations, of gradually increasing intensity. The cosmic unfairness of it all is that, in each case, the characters confront their moment of truth at the time when they are physically and emotionally drained, and totally inadequate to the challenge.

As one might expect, the book begins with Peter who occupies the outermost circle of the vortex, who is least susceptible to the maelstrom, and whose encounter with the nightmare is the slightest. The novel is a series of descents, with the first unchronologically but appropriately Peter's descent to Carolina and Cass, by way of Port Warwick. The reader is next given, in flashback, not the main event he has come to expect, but Peter's tragi-comic arrival at Sambuco, gothic enough in Peter's near manslaughter, by car, of a half-wit Italian motorcyclist, but retrospectively mild in comparison to the novel's final outcome:

DiLieto . . . lay face up on the road, blood trickling gently from nose and ears, and with a sort of lopsided, dreamy expression on his features, part agony, part a smile, as if in mindless repose. . . . One eye socket was pink and sunken (I thought this my doing), and with a grisly feeling I glanced around for the missing eye. . . . For what seemed like an endless time I kept trampling around the prostrate diLieto, reeling with shock. (S, pp. 32–33)

Peter is given no time, at Sambuco, to regroup from the combination of the accident itself and the travel fatigue which precipitated it and, like Faulkner's Horace, never quite catches up. In fact, Peter attributes all his misfortune to an initial sleepless night on the road: "Had I been able to sleep easily that night, I might very well have been spared my trouble of the next day. Without that misadventure, I most surely would have arrived in Sambuco fresh as a buttercup: not haggard, shattered, and cursed with a sort of skittish, haunted depletion of nerves from which I never quite recovered" (S, pp. 29–30). Peter observes that such second thoughts are no good, but both his and Cass's narratives are full of them. This is the first in a series of "if onlys" where the physiological state of the character predetermines the catastrophic outcome. Once more, sequence is all. From the moment

Peter barges onto the movie set at Sambuco, until his groggy mid-afternoon awakening to the news of Mason's death, hallucination and illusion are his constant companions.

Cass repeats the pattern laid out for Peter. While in Paris when he has gone to study painting, Cass experiences a drunken hallucination, an Italian pastoral fantasy. He sets out for Rome and eventually Sambuco in quest of the sun-drenched South. When he arrives in Sambuco in a state of virtual collapse, he creates such a scene that he, like Peter, winds up confronting the local functionary. Cass's travel fatigue is heightened by his fall off the wagon. It is this alcoholic arrival, and relentless, ever-deepening alcoholism of his stay there that establishes the feeling of horrifying inevitability. His lack of money, his drunken desperation, his extra-marital involvement with Francesca, his acquiescence in Mason's sinister and ever growing domination over him, and his horror at Mason's rape of Francesca: all of these culminate in Cass's act of vengeance and self-liberation, the murder of Mason. Styron's vision becomes clearer at each level of the vortex. The nature of the universe is to demand more of man than he is equipped to deliver; the nature of our relations with our fellow man is to ask him to answer for our own inadequacies, to fulfill us; and the nature of our fellow man is such that he cannot do this. So each character projects his inadequacies and frustrations on the other: Peter lives vicariously through Mason's fleshed-out fantasies; Mason subjugates Peter and Cass for self-aggrandizement; Cass flees home, family, artistic responsibility, and self for an Italian Never-Never Land, an idyll with Francesca, and so unwittingly singles her out to be Mason's means of violating Cass through her. And if Francesca's hopes for herself and her family are projected on Cass, her fears are projected onto Saverio, bringing about a self-fulfilling prophecy:

What Mason had done to her just that same evening clung to her flesh like some loathsome disease. . . . So it was that when she met Saverio in the shadows and he put out his fingers harmlessly . . . to stroke her, the intense male hand on her arm brought back, like horror made touchable, the touch and the feel and the actuality, and she found herself shrieking. (S, pp. 453–454)

She lashes out at him preemptively, and as he strikes back, she continues to scream, "unaware now that this was Saverio, or anyone, aware of nothing save that the whole earth's protuberant and insatiate masculinity had descended upon her in the space of one summer night" (S, p. 454). The half-wit kills her in self-defense, and so provides the most graphic example of the inevitably gothic dimension of all human relationships, the mutually destructive nature of people's needs for one another.

Nevertheless, the epilogue of *Set This House on Fire*, like the epilogue of *Moby-Dick*, is written by the survivors of the whirlpool, not its victims. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael, like Peter, is the one least involved with the cosmos of the story, and his survival is a demonstration of the difference in stature between him and Ahab. Cass is far closer to Ahab than Ishmael and suggests that Styron envisions another kind of survivor from one who returns merely to tell somewhat uncomprehendingly his tale. Cass has grown and learned, has learned that the gothic vision, with its Manichean values, its all or nothing philosophy, is out of kilter with human nature and self-actualization:

But to be truthful, you see, I can only tell you this: that as for being and nothingness, the one thing I did know was that to choose between them was to choose being, not for the sake of being, much less the desire to be forever—but in the hope of being what I could be for a time. That would be an ecstasy. God Knows it would. (S, pp. 476–477)

The epilogue is two documents: one testifying to Cass's anticipated paternity, a reestablishment of creativity on several counts; the other Peter's reprieve in the miraculous recovery of diLieto. Only Cass emerges as the clear victor, perhaps because we are dealing once again with a kind of double gothic. Perhaps the real gothic world is Peter's, a world of twilight perceptions, evanescent pleasures, vicariousness and lost opportunities, a world where the lack of a real dark night of the soul also means the impossibility of a real redemption.

Character repetition, sequence, and concentricity are the formal means of portraying the gothic sensation of existing in time and space. As such they apply to all of the Faulkner, Styron, and Capote. The family resemblances of *Lie Down in Darkness* to *The Sound and the Fury* are only partly explained by influence, for in fundamental ways Faulkner and Styron differ at the start: Faulkner's concern with the Compsons turns on the family as microcosm of society; Styron sees the family as the most intense and glaring example of the failure of human relationships, the unendingly destructive demands of one on another. The similarities spring from Faulkner's and Styron's mutual fascination with time: with clocks and how to stop them, with existence, consciousness and its denial, with the sterile repetitiveness of family curses and familial neuroses, swirling on through time. Both writers stress subjective time, multiple narrations which substitute a series of fragmented and irreconcilable time-consciousnesses for a Greenwich stability. Capote's *In Cold Blood* is the archetypal horror machine of time, an inexorable pit and pendulum alternation, as Capote

jerks the reader back and forth from Clutter farm to Kansas highway, in rigid chronological sequence and tightening geography, until the bright blue shotgun flash in the dark.

All three writers use the gothic form, with its denial of final absolute affirmation, tragic or otherwise, to capture the irony of our twentieth-century existence: the conviction that the search for self-awareness may not only be fatal, but fruitless, because it is equivalent to self-negation; that selfhood is an arbitrary but necessary construct of man's self-protective ignorance; that self-awareness and self-destruction are one and the same: "The intense concentration of self in the middle of such a heartless immensity, my God! Who can tell it?"<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Irving Malin, *New American Gothic* (Carbondale, Ill.: University of Southern Illinois Press, 1962).

2. Malin, especially pp. 79–80, 106–107, 126–128.

3. George Poulet, *Studies in Human Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 333–334.

4. J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1968), p. 35.

5. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1942), p. 37.

6. Mary W. Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: Dell, 1970), pp. 8, 14.

7. Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (New York: Signet, 1958), p. 78. In subsequent references to this book, page numbers will appear after the citation, in parentheses, with the author's initial: (C, p. 78).

8. Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1952), p. 26.

9. William Faulkner, *Sanctuary* (New York: Vintage, 1958), p. 3. See note 7.

10. Olga Vickery, "Crime and Punishment: *Sanctuary*," reprinted in *Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 132.

11. Robert Kirk thinks Narcissa's father may be Judge Benbow of *Absalom, Absalom!: Faulkner's People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 323. William Volpe makes the same assumption in his Sartoris family tree: *A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner* (New York: Noonday, 1964), p. 66.

12. Cleanth Brooks, *The Yoknapatawpha Country* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 287–289.

13. William Styron, *Set This House on Fire* (New York: Signet, 1961), pp. 14–15. See note 7.

14. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribners, 1953), p. 182.

15. Melville, p. 529.

LEE ZACHARIAS

*Living the American Dream:  
"Children on Their Birthdays"*

Like Vladimir Nabokov in *Lolita*, Truman Capote gives away the climax in the beginning: "Yesterday afternoon the six o'clock bus ran over Miss Bobbit."<sup>1</sup> On a level of action, what happens cannot be the point. Known for working in a tradition that has been both horrifying for the simple pleasure of thrill and symbolic in painfully obvious and heavy-handed ways, the author relinquishes the thrill of surprise and suggests that his narrator won't recognize symbols if he sees them.

Called "daylight gothic" by Mark Shorer, "Children" contains none of the dark gothic paraphernalia of such stories as "The Headless Hawk" or "Shut a Final Door"; it falls into that large category Richard Dillard calls "the imaginative response to experience," including the most famous American gothic works, e.g., the fiction of Hawthorne, Melville, and Faulkner, as well as the novels of the black humorists, a catch-all classification which contrasts to the realistic tradition, "the pragmatic response to experience." Shorer describes the mood of the story as "buoyant summer rain shot through with sun," but quotes out of context: "Since Monday it has been raining buoyant summer rain shot through with sun, but dark at night and full of sound, full of dripping leaves, watery chimneys, sleepless scuttlings." (p. 134.)<sup>2</sup> The mood of the story is a balance between sun and darkness, buoyant summer rain and sleepless scuttlings. It is gothic in the sense that *Lolita* is gothic;

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both have that delicate balance of nostalgia and terror, accuracy and imagination that Leslie Fiedler considers so important in *Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>3</sup> What *Lolita* and "Children" share is a moving, affectionate comedy that is also brutal and shattering, a brilliant use of black humor that allows us to delight in that which should spin us into despair. Thus Capote places the wall that is art between man and the horror of life, a wall, Chester Eisinger suggests, is created by gothic trappings, the rage of the '40s.<sup>4</sup>

Specifically the rage of the '40s was the application of these trappings to the adolescent novel, rendering with extreme subjectivism the old initiation story. "Children" is less subjective than Capote's adolescent novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; the narrator includes himself "at least to some degree" among "the grownup persons of the house," hinting that he will be a reliable narrator who needs little initiating. Common to the adolescent novel (and *Lolita*) is an unwillingness to grow up, a wish to stop time. Though this episodic story has a definite duration of one year, the sense of being trapped by a small town suggests timelessness: "It was the summer that never rained; rusted dryness coated everything; sometimes when a car passed on the road, raised dust would hang in the still air an hour or more. Aunt El said if they didn't pave the highway soon she was going to move down to the seacoast; but she'd said that for such a long time" (p. 119).

Time has stopped, but it hasn't; duality is the heart of the story.

As Richard Meeker sees it, "Children" describes the effects of Miss Bobbit, whose pact with the devil proves her undoing, on the teenagers of a small Southern town.<sup>5</sup> Miss Bobbit is seen at some distance. We never understand her on a human level, never identify with her, and never cry for her. The narrator has no special relationship with her; he simply observes her and her effect on his family.

Again like *Lolita*, "Children" is full of darkly prefiguring imagery. On the first page the children eat devil cake, and the bus bringing Miss Bobbit storms around Deadman's Curve. Storm imagery recurs: the lightning rods on Mrs. Sawyer's roof, Miss Adelaide's "ominous thundering in the darker keys," the buoyant summer rain that is dark at night, and the last "natural" image, the voices "like lightning in the rain" warning Miss Bobbit of her impending doom. Our narrator is especially adept with natural images; narrator as observer rather than participant not only provides the distance but avoids discrepancy between his word-magic description and the colloquial dialogue, which serves as verbal undercut to fantasy flights of language. Balanced against the lush imagery, it keeps the events firmly fixed in reality. A similar interplay in structure results in the dramatic undercut that devastates: the story opens with a flat statement creating tension between theme and event, fills a rich middle with small poem/undercuts, and ends with an even flatter statement that eliminates sentimentality.

A wiry little girl in a starched, lemon-colored party dress, she sassed along with a grownup mince, one hand on her hip, the other supporting a spinsterish umbrella. . . .

[She spoke] in a voice that was at once silky and childlike, like a pretty piece of ribbon, and immaculately exact, like a movie-star or a schoolmarm. . . . Tangee gave her lips an orange glow, her hair, rather like a costume wig, was a mass of rosy curls, and her eyes had a knowing penciled tilt; even so, she had a skinny dignity, she was a lady, and, what is more, she looked you in the eye with manlike directness. "I'm Miss Lily Jane Bobbit, Miss Bobbit from Memphis, Tennessee," she said solemnly. . . .

Before storms, leaves and flowers appear to burn with a private light, color, and Miss Bobbit . . . seemed set against the darkening all around, to contain this illuminated quality. She held her arms arched over her head, her hands lily-limp, and stood straight up on the tips of her toes. She stood that way for a good long while, and Aunt El said it was right smart of her (pp. 119–120, 122).

Aunt El's remarks, an excellent example of the undercut that brings the illuminated creature back to earth, are representative of the dialogue, statements without answers gently suggestive of a lack of fulfillment through day-to-day communication with one's family and friends, and an effective use of the indirect. It is in an indirect way that the story is about Miss Bobbit, though it is not, as Meeker suggests, simply about her effect on small-town teenagers. Who this combination Shirley Temple/Gypsy Rose Lee really is, what happens to her as metaphor, not as character, is the key. There are sly clues to her identity throughout; the most direct occur when she visits the narrator while the rest of his family is at church:

"The odors of a church are so offensive," she said, leaning forward and with her hands folded primly before her. "I don't want you to think I'm a heathen, Mr. C.; I've had enough experience to know that there is a God and that there is a Devil. But the way to tame the Devil is not to go down there to church and listen to what a sinful mean fool he is. No, love the Devil like you do Jesus: because he is a powerful man, and will do you a good turn if he knows you trust him. He has frequently done me good turns, like at dancing school in Memphis . . . I always called in the Devil to help me get the biggest part in our annual show. That is common sense; you see, I knew Jesus wouldn't have any truck with dancing. Now, as a matter of fact, I have called in the Devil just recently. He is the only one who can help me get out of this town.

Not that I live here, not exactly. I think always about somewhere else, somewhere else where everything is dancing, like people dancing in the streets, and everything is pretty, like children on their birthdays. My precious papa said I live in the sky, but if he'd lived more in the sky he'd be rich like he wanted to be (p. 127).

and when the narrator observes:

It has not been easy for him, Miss Bobbit's going. Because she'd meant more than that. Than what? Than being thirteen years old and crazy in love. She was the queer things in him, like the pecan tree and liking books and caring enough about people to let them hurt him. She was the things he was afraid to show anyone else. . . . "I'm not going to die," she said. "You'll come out there, and we'll climb a mountain, and we'll all live there together, you and me and Sister Rosalba." But Billy Bob knew it would never happen that way, and so when the music came through the dark he would stuff the pillow over his head (p. 134).

An illuminated creature who burns with a private light, who thinks always about somewhere else where everything is pretty, whose precious papa says she lives in the sky, who is the queer things in a thirteen-year-old boy, the things he's afraid to show anyone else, who promises what he knows will never happen, Miss Bobbit is his dreams. The wealth of American cultural details suggests that she may be all our dreams.

What then does Capote say about our dreams? "Tangee gave her lips an orange glow. . . ." There is a taintedness about them, an artificiality. "*Merci* you kindly. . . ." Our dreams are a kind of bad French, romantic but imprecise. "The older boys . . . had watched the house into which she'd disappeared with misty, ambitious faces. . . ." Our dreams are misty ambitions. The implication of the Delmore Schwartz story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" is that the narrator's dream of viewing his parents' courtship as a film gives him a sense of responsibility for the past, and he leaps up, trying to stop the film. David Madden correctly points out that in America there is an implicit responsibility to live dreams; the American Dream is supposed to be the American Reality, although there is no single definition for that dream. "Children" is about some forms of that dream. "The migration of the individual dreamer who leaves the small town by bus or by hitchhiking is the most common sort in American literature. . . ."<sup>6</sup> For Aunt El the dream of moving on is not a responsibility, but an idle threat; Miss Bobbit tries to live that dream.

It is no coincidence that her voice is "like a movie-star or a schoolmarm." Madden calls the little red schoolhouse "the temple of phony dreams";

Eisinger calls it ironic that children dream of release from their miserable lives in the golden world of Hollywood, in that only children of distorted personality and vision could see that place as symbol of beauty and fame.<sup>7</sup> Eisinger implies that Capote's children are grotesque because they see Hollywood as dreamland, but he doesn't add that in that respect much of America is grotesque. Two phony dreams, those drilled into us as education and those sold to us as entertainment, make up Miss Bobbit's voice.

A duality in Miss Bobbit's character suggests a duality in our dreams. Both innocent and tainted, she is aloof, demanding chivalry that goes unrewarded; yet she is also seductress: Billy Bob and Preacher Star grow "cross-eyed jealous" over her, and at the talent contest she sings ". . . if you don't like my peaches, stay away from my can, o-ho o-ho!" (and) ". . . with a bump, up-ended her skirt to display blue-lace underwear . . ." (p. 132). Now on her way to living the dream she is dedicated to (having refused to attend "the phony temple"), the genuine Hollywood screen test, the schoolmarm part of her voice disappears, and she sings in a "rowdy sandpaper voice." Her act ends with a full split and the bursting of a Roman candle "into fiery balls of red, white, and blue, and we all had to stand up because she was singing 'The Star Spangled Banner' at the top of her lungs" (p. 133).

Miss Bobbit, in her starched party dress, twirling a parasol, sitting on the front porch, demanding that she be called Miss Bobbit, citing the "well-known fact that gentlemen are put on the face of the earth for the protection of ladies," is a vision of the Old South, but this same Miss Bobbit entertains tawdry dreams of stage glory that no girl of Southern legend ought to have had, becomes "soul-sister" to a Black girl named Rosalba Cat, and puts down the South by adding, "Do you suppose boys behave this way in towns like Memphis, New York, London, Hollywood, or Paris?" Her primary dream is to leave the provincial South (that agrarian society that was by legend so cultured) for Hollywood; the vague implication is that any urban society would be an improvement. "Miss Bobbit told everyone that Rosalba was her sister, which caused a good many jokes; but like most of her ideas, it gradually seemed natural" (p. 126). The paradox of her character makes clear the inconsistent absurdities of our dreams, which, because like Miss Bobbit dreams have a certain magic, gradually seem natural.

"These [Capote's "daylight" stories] are stories about people who, inhabiting a world of love, live peaceably with their selves, and are even capable—as in the instance of Miss Bobbit—of transforming those around them. These characters dream still . . . but their dreams are gentle, even happy. . . ."<sup>8</sup> The narrator is so much part of this world of love he can expose the provincial shabbiness without condescending. But Miss Bobbit is not part of that world. We see little of Miss Bobbit's mother, a "gaunt shaggy woman with silent eyes and a hungry smile" trailing in the background; when she presents

the woman to the crowd on Billy Bob's front porch, "this homely woman" acknowledges herself with an abrupt nod. As for Miss Bobbit's papa, now that he's in the penitentiary, "we don't hear from him no more." Well then. If Miss Bobbit is not from a loving world, can love save her now that she's come to one?

But it was over money that Billy Bob and Preacher had a big falling out; that was not the real reason, of course: the real reason was that they had grown cross-eyed jealous over Miss Bobbit. . . . Only Miss Bobbit seemed to know what she was doing. She plugged in the lawn hose, and gave the boys a closeup, blinding bath. Gasping, Preacher staggered to his feet. Oh honey, he said, shaking himself like a wet dog, honey you've got to decide. "Decide what?" said Miss Bobbit, right away in a huff. Oh, honey, wheezed Preacher, you don't want us boys killing each other. You got to decide who is your real true sweetheart. "Sweetheart, my eye," said Miss Bobbit. . . . "What sort of businessman are you going to make?" (pp. 128–29).

In Miss Bobbit's world it is business over love, and she transforms those around her from friends to enemies.

Her business acumen is evident from the start:

Then, and with an earnest expression, Miss Bobbit turned back; the sunflower yellow of her eyes darkened, and she rolled them slightly sideways, as if trying to remember a poem. . . . "No doubt you have noticed and admired the dress I am wearing. Every stitch of it was handsewn by my mother. . . . If you want any kind of sewing done, please come to my mother (pp. 120–121).

To Miss Bobbit an advertisement is a poem. The day she visits the narrator she arranges for Billy Bob and Preacher to work for her in her capacity as sole subscription agent in the county for "an impressive list of magazines," after explaining that she has called on the Devil to help her. Just as she knows Jesus wouldn't have any truck with dancing, she knows He won't have any truck with business. Her particular business, magazines, is one of the chief American dream-selling industries, and she gets into it through the Faustian bargain that turns dreams into empty illusions. That the Devil claims her is evident when the dogs that Sister Rosalba calls some kind of devil howl dirges under her window.

In the episode of grotesque comedy involving Mr. Henderson, the former wildcat oil prospector who is obsessed with the suspicion that Miss Bobbit and Rosalba are trying to steal all his toilet paper (a suggestion of filthy

money earned American style), Miss Bobbit shows her devil-like potential in real terms, bringing the metaphysical implication of the dog episode back to earth, for throughout she functions on a real level while creeping between the lines as metaphor. Some grown men have to tie Henderson up, but Miss Bobbit tells them they do not know how to tie a proper knot and does such a good job of tying one herself that the circulation in Henderson's hands and feet stops and it is a month before he can walk again. The sad fact about Miss Bobbit is that Jesus is not going to have truck with any of her dreams.

Still Capote does not indict her for selling out, for dreaming the wrong dreams. That becomes clear when Manny Fox comes to town, presenting the *Fan Dancer without the Fan*, "also, Sensational Amateur Program Featuring Your Own Neighbors—First Prize, A Genuine Hollywood Screen Test." Manny Fox also lets it be known that for a fee of \$150 he can get adventurous boys in the county high-class jobs working on fruit ships sailing from New Orleans to South America. Manny Fox, a stereotypical American character, sells dreams, but, of course, he's a fraud. "Well, she [Miss Bobbit] surely did deserve a Hollywood screen test, and, inasmuch as she won the contest, it looked as though she were going to get it. Manny Fox said she was: honey, he said, you're real star stuff. Only he skipped town the next day, leaving nothing but hearty promises" (p. 133). Miss Bobbit's Faustian bargain shows that the dreams sold by American popular culture are impossible. Trying to live them demands that the dreamer sell out, and one can't trust the Devil to keep his end of the deal.

Nevertheless for a while it looks as though Miss Bobbit will get to Hollywood. She is responsible for the capture of Manny Fox, attracting wide attention and resulting in the offer of good-paying jobs with the United Fruit Company for the swindled boys, and the Sunbeam Girls of America present her with a Good Deed Merit award. "I do not approve of the organization," she said. "All that rowdy bugle blowing. It's neither good-hearted nor truly feminine. And anyway, what is a good deed? Don't let anybody fool you, a good deed is something you do because you want something in return" (pp. 133–134). Unable to understand a world of love, Miss Bobbit performs a good deed because she wants something in return: she remains a business-woman, pragmatic to the core. When the boys receive checks covering their losses, she lays it on the line: they are to invest in something practical, like her, financing her trip to Hollywood in return for ten percent of her life's earnings. "Not one of the boys wanted to do it: but when Miss Bobbit looked at you, what was there to say?" (p. 134). Nothing, because her pragmatism is veiled with an aura of magic, a "shadow whirling on the window-shade." Here is the duality, echoed throughout, that is the center of the story. Miss Bobbit believes in the American responsibility to live our dreams. Her pragmatism would be more appropriate in the real world of all that is forgotten

the night of the show, “mortgages, and the dishes in the kitchen sink,” which is after all not such a bad world, gentle and full of love. But without love, Miss Bobbit can’t resist the dream world she believes to be just as real, and she sells her dream like a commodity (just as Sylvia does, less metaphorically, in “Master Misery”) to the boys of the town. Shorer describes the outrageous comedy of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* as moving from the “soft humor” of “Children on Their Birthdays,” but “Children” is scarcely soft humor, though so many of its characters are gentle. Holly, heroine of the novella, understands what Miss Bobbit does not, that “it’s better to look at the sky than live there. Such an empty place, so vague. Just a country where the thunder goes and things disappear.”<sup>9</sup> Miss Bobbit’s dedication to the imaginative realm of experience has been inspiring to the town. Even the narrator wonders if she couldn’t come back just as though she were really there, but he knows that for her to do so the shadows must be confused. By instinct he understands what Miss Bobbit does not. Miss Bobbit’s failure is that she responds pragmatically to phenomena that require imaginative response. She fatally mingles the modes, trying to live an experience that is only to be dreamed.

Yes, she is more than being thirteen years old and crazy in love, and “Children on Their Birthdays” is after all a story of initiation, Billy Bob’s and ours, to the sad truth that those things we are afraid to show are not to be shown, for they are dreams, worlds private to the imagination. If we do bring them out and they grow to seem natural and we think we might live them, our dreams become illusions, and what happens to illusions Capote makes brutally clear:

Only there was a strange smile about yesterday, and that was the day she was leaving. Around noon the sun came out, bringing with it into the air all the sweetness of wisteria. Aunt El’s yellow Lady Anne’s were blooming again, and she did something wonderful, she told Billy Bob he could pick them and give them to Miss Bobbit for good-bye. . . . Billy Bob was still in the garden picking roses; by now he had enough for a bonfire, and their smell was as heavy as wind. Preacher stared at him until he lifted his head. As they looked at each other the rain began again, falling fine as sea spray and colored by a rainbow. Without a word, Preacher went over and started helping Billy Bob separate the roses into two giant bouquets; together they carried them to the curb. Across the street there were bumblebees of talk, but when Miss Bobbit saw them, two boys whose flower-masked faces were like yellow moons, she rushed down the steps, her arms outstretched. You could see what was going to happen; and we called out, our voices like lightning in the rain, but Miss Bobbit,

running toward those moons of roses, did not seem to hear. That is when the six o'clock bus ran over her (pp. 134–135).

#### NOTES

1. Truman Capote, "Children on Their Birthdays" in *The Grass Harp and A Tree of Night and Other Stories*, (New York: Random House, Signet Books, 1951), p. 119. All further references to the story will refer to this edition and will be cited in the text.

2. See Mark Shorer, Introduction to Truman Capote, *Selected Writings* (New York: Random House, 1963), pp. vii, x.

3. See Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 591.

4. Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 236.

5. Richard K. Meeker, "The Youngest Generation of Southern Writers" in R.C. Simonini, Jr., *Southern Writers: Appraisals in Our Time* (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1964), p. 183.

6. David Madden, ed., *American Dreams, American Nightmares* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), pp. xxiii–xxvii.

7. *Ibid.*, p. xxvii; Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties*, p. 241.

8. Shorer, Introduction, p. x.

9. *Ibid.*; Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's and Three Other Stories* (New York: Random House, Signet Books, 1958), p. 60.



JOHN HERSEY

*The Legend on the License*

**T**he imminent death of the novel is announced from time to time, but the very repetitiousness of the bulletins testifies to stubborn vital signs. I bring other news from the hospital. Journalism is on a sickbed and is in a very bad way.

The trouble did not begin but came out into the open with the appallingly harmful phrase Truman Capote used in 1965 to categorize *In Cold Blood*. It was, he said, a “nonfiction novel.” The blurring of fiction and journalism sanctioned by that phrase is now widely practiced and widely condoned. This has not been particularly good for fiction; it may be mortal to journalism.

In fiction that *is* fiction, no holds need be barred. Novelists may introduce or disguise real people and real events as they choose. Tolstoy disguised all but the generals. Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* was suggested by an actual crime, but he did not feel the need to call his creation “a true-life novel.” Malraux, who had an enormous influence on some of the novelists of my generation (e.g., Ralph Ellison), often depicted originals—among others, Chiang Kai-shek in all the splendid irony of his left-wing youth. E.L. Doctorow has had harmless fun with Morgan, Ford, and others. And so on.

The only caution in all this is the one so acutely perceived by Flannery O’Connor (in *Mystery and Manners*): “It’s always wrong of course to say that

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you can't do this or you can't do that in fiction. You can do anything you can get away with, but nobody has ever gotten away with much." In other words, there are tests. A test, for one thing, of quality; of art. Or, to put it more brutally for authors, a test of gifts. But the point is that always, in fiction, there is the saving notice on the license: THIS WAS MADE UP.

As to journalism, we may as well grant right away that there is no such thing as absolute objectivity. It is impossible to present in words "the truth" or "the whole story." The minute a writer offers nine hundred ninety-nine out of one thousand facts, the worm of bias has begun to wriggle. The vision of each witness is particular. Tolstoy pointed out that immediately after a battle there are as many remembered versions of it as there have been participants.

Still and all, I will assert that there is one sacred rule of journalism. The writer must not invent. The legend on the license must read: NONE OF THIS WAS MADE UP. The ethics of journalism, if we can be allowed such a boon, must be based on the simple truth that every journalist knows the difference between the distortion that comes from subtracting observed data and the distortion that comes from adding invented data.

The threat to journalism's life by the denial of this difference can be realized if we look at it from the reader's point of view. The reader assumes the subtraction as a given of journalism and instinctively hunts for the bias; the moment the reader suspects additions, the earth begins to skid underfoot, for the idea that there is no way of knowing what is real and what is not real is terrifying. Even more terrifying is the notion that lies are truths. Or at least these things used to be terrifying; the dulling of the terror that has come about through repeated exposure tells us how far this whole thing has gone.

Let me now drive my own stakes in the ground. I have always believed that the *devices* of fiction could serve journalism well and might even help it to aspire now and then to the level of art. But I have tried to honor the distinction between the two forms. To claim that a work is both fiction and journalism, or to assert, as Doctorow recently did, that "there is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there is only narrative"—these are, in my view, serious crimes against the public. In a backward look in *The New Journalism* Tom Wolfe, citing a piece of mine from 1944, remarked, "Here we start getting into the ancestry of the New Journalism." The word "ancestry" makes me feel a bit like the Peking Man, and in laying claim to authority in this field I prefer to think of myself as nothing more remote than a grandfather.

Now. After reading three recent publications—Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, an entertaining book, Wolfe's best so far; Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, a powerful work that unquestionably enhances Mailer's claim to the kind of literary top billing he has always so tiresomely shined after;

and Truman Capote's "Handcarved Coffins," a gobbet of commercial trash by this once brilliant writer in his new collection, *Music for Chameleons*—I am one worried grandpa. These three hybrids clinch it. The time has come to redraw the line between journalism and fiction.

## I

"Handcarved Coffins," which Capote calls both "nonfiction" and "a short novel," belongs here, in the company of the Wolfe and Mailer books, only because of Capote's place in the line of parentage of the hybrid form; it can be dealt with briefly. The story must represent to its author a nostalgic yearning for the remembered powers of *In Cold Blood*, the fine, shapely, hard-fibered novel (as novel) that appears to have been the model Norman Mailer wanted to knock off its pedestal, but couldn't quite, with *The Executioner's Song*. Vivid as *In Cold Blood* was as a novel, it had serious flaws on the nonfiction side, arising from the fact that its actions and dialogue had been reconstructed long after the described events, yet were presented in the book with all assurance as being exactly what had happened; the dialogue, rebuilt from a great distance, stood within the authenticating marks of direct quotation. Besides suffering from troubles like these, which are intrinsic to a genre that claims to be both fiction and not, "Handcarved Coffins" groans under others far more grievous.

For one thing, the tale does something that journalism simply must not do: it strains credulity well beyond the breaking point. There is a much-too-muchness about it, which convinces one that the fictionist has decidedly had the upper hand over the journalist. The story is told in interview form, through a series of dialogues between Capote and a number of characters, the most prominent being a detective from a certain State Bureau of Investigation, who is trying to solve a succession of ghastly murders that have been announced beforehand to the victims, in all cases but one, by the arrival in their hands of beautiful miniature coffins, carved from "light balsam wood" and containing candid photographs of the doomed persons. The murderer has dispatched two of his victims, an elderly pair, by insinuating into their parked car, to await their return to it, nine rattlesnakes that have been "injected with amphetamine." Perhaps we can swallow that one. But try this: A recipient of one of the little coffins, driving along a lonely road in "an eccentric vehicle of his own invention" with no top and no windshield, is cleanly decapitated by "a strong steel wire sharpened thin as a razor" and stretched across the road between a tree and a telephone pole at exactly the right height to catch him just under the chin; the wire "slice[s] off his head as easily as a girl picking petals off a daisy." And so on, murder after murder, until we have been taken far beyond the last shore of belief. (We will come back in due course to this crucial matter of belief.)

An even worse fault of this creaky tale is that it is told as if in a game of blindman's bluff. It is the reader who is blindfolded. He has no idea where he is. The story takes place in an invisible place: a nameless town in an unspecified state. The characters are *there*, but they are unseeable as real people. Their names have been changed. Capote says he "had to omit a few identifying things" (*The New York Times*, January 7, 1979)—which implies his having substituted other made-up ones. (The principal suspect "had long simian-like arms; the hands dangled at his knees, and the fingers were long, capable, oddly aristocratic." Altogether, the ace among rules of reliable reporting—that the facts should be "hard"—is here repeatedly and fatally broken.

## II

Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff* is a vivid book, a tainted book. It gives an account of the Mercury phase of the United States space program, and its thesis is that test pilots of rocket aircraft, genuinely, and the seven Mercury astronauts, more ambiguously, shared an ineffable quality compounded of spiffy courage, arrogant recklessness, dry-palmed sass, and super-jock male potency (on earth they indiscriminately balled "juicy little girls," and in the sky they whipped around in Pynchonesque flying phalluses), to all of which Wolfe gives the catchy tag "the right stuff." Wolfe's style-machine has never run more smoothly than in this book. The writing is at times wonderfully funny. Some of the passages on flying are classy. A quick and easy read. Then why tainted? Because Wolfe is the paradigm of the would-be journalist who cannot resist the itch to improve on the material he digs up. The tricks of fiction he uses dissolve now and then into its very essence: fabrication. The notice on the license reads: THIS WAS NOT MADE UP EXCEPT FOR THE PARTS THAT WERE MADE UP.

The source of the taint is the pair of pieces Wolfe wrote in 1965 for the *Herald-Tribune* Sunday magazine about *The New Yorker*. We must recall them at some length, because in them one finds in gross form the fundamental defect that has persisted ever since in Wolfe's writing, and that is to be found in the works of many of the "new journalists," and also indeed in that of many "nonfiction novelists"—namely, the notion that mere facts don't matter.

In the introduction to *The New Journalism* Wolfe tried to laugh off his *New Yorker* pieces. He called them "some lighthearted fun. . . . A very droll *sportif* performance, you understand." They were nothing of the kind. They made up a vicious, slashing lampoon. Begging the question whether *The New Yorker* may at some point have deserved a serious critique, there seems to be no way to explain the stunningly irresponsible street cruelty of Wolfe's exercise except by guessing that he could not bear to face it that "his" New Journalism

would have to be measured sooner or later against the meticulously accurate and vivid reporting of such *New Yorker* writers as A. J. Liebling and Daniel Lang, and against the vivid devices used by the wonderful Joseph Mitchell or, let's say, by Lillian Ross and Truman Capote; who in turn were writing in an honorable tradition, not New at all, reaching back to George Orwell, Henry Mayhew, James Boswell. . . .

Wolfe called his first piece "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead." This "true" story was a collage of shameless inventions. Not satisfied with making up lots of little decorative details, such as imaginary colors and types of paper used at *The New Yorker* for memos and manuscripts, Wolfe reached farther into the territory of fiction to devise blunt weapons with which to assault William Shawn, the magazine's editor. He dreamed up a Shawn memorandum which was supposed to have warned the staff against talking to him; he gave a description of the magazine's editorial process which according to an analysis of Wolfe's pieces by Renata Adler and Gerald Jonas, was erroneous "in every particular, large and small"; and he gave a picture of Shawn's role that "was not a little untrue, not half true, but totally, stupefyingly false."

Shawn's "retiring" nature, Wolfe asserted, could be accounted for by "what the records show, actually, in the Cook County (Chicago) Criminal Court"—that Leopold's and Loeb's original intended victim in their famous murder had been "a small and therefore manageable teenage boy from the Harvard School," whose first name was William ("the court records do not give the last name"), and that the two had decided not to kill William Shawn "only because they had a personal grudge against him and somebody might remember that." Shawn's trauma is totally a Wolfe fantasy. The court records *do* give the last name of the intended victim, and the first as well. It was not a teen-aged William Shawn. It was a nine-and-a-half-year-old boy named John O. Levinson, who testified at the trial.

The coda of the second piece, the climax of the whole charade, is a perfect example of a Wolfe fantasy flying out of control. Wolfe has been building a (false) picture of Shawn slavishly attached to the formulas of the founder of the magazine, Harold Ross. In this scene we see Shawn sitting alone at home, on the very evening when down at the St. Regis the staff is celebrating the magazine's fortieth anniversary. According to Wolfe, Shawn is listening to "that wonderful light zinc plumbing sound" of Bix Beiderbecke's recording of "I Can't Get Started": "(those other trumpet players, like Harry James, they never played the real 'I Can't Get Started')." At the end of the recording "Bix hits that incredible high one he died on, popping a vessel in his temporal fossa, bleeding into his squash, drowning on the bandstand. . . . *That* was the music of Harold Ross's lifetime. . . . Here, on that phonograph, those days are *preserved* . . ."

Adler and Jonas:

The facts are, of course, that "*That*" was not "the music of Harold Ross's lifetime." Or anybody else's. The facts are that "Bix" did not die playing, nor did his death have anything to do with his "temporal fossa." He died in bed, of pneumonia. Nor did Beiderbecke make a recording of "the real 'I Can't Get Started.'" In fact, he never played it—with or without "that incredible high one." It would have been difficult for him to play it. "I Can't Get Started with You" was written in 1935, four years after Beiderbecke's death.

When Wolfe wrote his advertisements for himself in *The New Journalism*, nine years later, he still couldn't suppress his snickers at the reaction to his *New Yorker* caper, and to the subsequent new wave of nonfiction, on the part of "countless journalists and literary intellectuals," who, he said, were screaming, "*The bastards are making it up!* I'm telling you, Ump, that's a spitball he's throwing. . . ." But his laughter had an edge of nerves; altogether too many folks in the stands had seen and called attention to his applying a little greasy stuff to the pellet.

In the seven years since then, two things have happened: Wolfe has grown quite a bit more careful (and hard-working), and the public has become increasingly inured, or maybe the word is numb, to the blurring of fiction and journalism. *The Right Stuff* has been accepted as fairly accurate by people in the know. I talked with a number of journalists who had covered the space program, and while one complained of "outright lies" in the book, all the others seemed to think that Wolfe had "made an effort to be as accurate as he could be," that he had "done his homework," that he had made mistakes, but those had been errors of judgment and value that any conventional journalist might have made. Most of them thought he had been too kind to Scott Carpenter and too hard on John Glenn. The official National Aeronautics and Space Administration view was also favorable. Christopher Kraft, in charge of the Johnson Space Center in Houston, declined to talk about the book, but his public relations chief, John MacLeish, said after consultation with others that despite a number of technical errors there was "a high degree of accuracy" in the book. The two astronauts I talked with, John Glenn and Deke Slayton, said, respectively, that Wolfe was "accurate on the details of my flight" and "mostly pretty accurate."

Taint, then? Well, alas, yes. Some questions remain. Enough to add up. Enough so that, in the end, one cannot help wondering whether even these interested parties, in their numbed acceptance of the premise that there is no difference between fiction and nonfiction, between real life and a skillfully drawn image of a dream of it, haven't been to some extent taken in. I give you the example of the way in which Senator Glenn, in speaking to me, paid tribute to the hypnotic ambiguity of Wolfe's prose. Glenn is pictured in the

book as an insufferable prig, a prude, a killjoy, yet he said to me, “I came out pretty good in the book, so I can’t complain.” NASA seemed to think it had come out pretty well, too. Did it?

Wolfe’s fiction-aping journalism, he wrote in 1973, “enjoys an advantage [over fiction] so obvious, so built in, one almost forgets what a power it has: the simple fact that the reader knows *all this actually happened*. . . . The writer is one step closer to the absolute involvement of the reader that Henry James and James Joyce dreamed of and never achieved. . . .” Whew. That *is* a big advantage. But let’s focus for a moment on much smaller things, such as that little word “all.”

In defining the New Journalism, Wolfe wrote that a journalist need use just four devices of fiction to bring this amazing power to the page: scene-by-scene construction, dialogue, point of view, and what he called “status details.” But the resources of fiction are by no means so barren as all that. One essential requisite and delight of fiction, for example is the absolute particularity it can give to every individual, every character. Wolfe has apparently ruled this out; he is a generalizer. Let him find a vivid or funny trait in more than one member of a class, then without exception the whole class has it. Thirty-six military pilots show up at the Pentagon to apply for the space program; without exception they wear “Robert Hall clothes that cost about a fourth as much as their watches.” “They had many names, these rockets, Atlas, Navajo, Little Joe, Jupiter, but they all blew up.” All test pilots talked something he calls Army Creole. All seven astronauts went in for Flying and Drinking, Drinking and Driving, Driving and Balling. All Russian space vehicles were launched “by the Soviet’s mighty and mysterious Integral” though, as Wolfe knows, Integral was not a person or a state organ but a space ship in Evgeny Zamyatin’s novel, *We*. “Every wife . . .” “Every young fighter jock . . .” “Everyone . . .” “Invariably . . .” “All these people . . .” “All . . .” (*All this actually happened . . .*)

Another big advantage over other writers that Wolfe apparently feels he has is that since he is using fictional modes, he is, even though dealing with nonfictional matter, freed from the boring job of checking verifiable details. If something turns out to have been dead wrong—well, that was just the free play of fancy. Some of the many details Wolfe should have checked but obviously did not are: The kind of car John Glenn drove. Whether Slayton, pictured as an active partisan at the meeting Wolfe calls the Konokai Seance, was even present. What operant conditioning means. The Latin name for the chimpanzee. What jodhpurs are. What cilia means. When the compass was invented. . . .

But there are disadvantages in the method, too, at least for the reader. One is the frequent juxtaposition of passages that are wholly made up with

others that are only partly made up or, beyond the use of one of the four devices, not made up at all. Side by side, for example, are a long parody of an airline pilot's voice reassuring the passengers on the last leg of a flight from Phoenix to New York when the landing gear won't lock, and an account of how the test pilot Chuck Yeager gets drunk, breaks two ribs falling off a horse on a moonlight gallop, doesn't tell the base doctor, and two days later goes up in an X-1 and buffets through the sound barrier, hurting so badly his right arm is useless. (Right stuff.) Both passages are funny, wildly hyperbolic, interchangeable in voice and tone. It is not hard to tell which of these is mostly made up (or is it wholly made up?). But what becomes not so easy, after many such oscillations, is to perceive exactly where the line between reporting and invention in any "real-life" episode actually lies.

This difficulty is immensely reinforced by the way Wolfe uses his third fictional device: point of view. At will, he enters the consciousness of his characters. We have the stream (or in Wolfe's case one has to say river) of consciousness of wives of astronauts, waiting out re-entry. We find ourselves in each astronaut's mind as he barrels across the sky. For an awful moment we become Lyndon Johnson. We may be dismayed to find ourselves suddenly trapped in a chimpanzee's head. Finally (James and Joyce certainly never gave us *this* pleasure) we are right there in God's mind, out of patience with John Glenn and barking at him, "Try the automatic, you ninny." Beyond the dicey issue of freely inventive re-creation of thoughts and dialogue, long after their transaction, a further trouble is that Wolfe never makes the slightest attempt, which any novelist would make as a matter of course, to vary the voice to fit each character. What we hear throughout, ringing in every mind, is the excited shout of Tom Wolfe. Each astronaut in turn *becomes* Tom Wolfe. Without even a little jiggle of lexical sex-change each astronaut's wife becomes Tom Wolfe. Right Stuffers who are alleged to speak nothing but Army Creole are garlanded with elegant tidbits like *esprit*, *joie de combat*, *mas allá!* The chimp talks pure Wolfe. God help us, God becomes Tom Wolfe and with His sweet ear chooses the Wolfeish "ninny."

"Class has always been Tom Wolfe's subject," John Gregory Dunne has written (*The New York Review of Books*, November 8, 1979). Dunne sees Wolfe as exposing the unmentionable in a purportedly egalitarian society: the existence of class. Wolfe is always on the side of the outsider, the underdog. Low Rent is good. He declares himself a literary lumpenprole, one of "the Low Rent rabble at the door," of "the Kentucky Colonels of Journalism and Literature." Placing such great emphasis on status seems to have affected Wolfe's decibel range. Whispering, as any outsider knows, is genteel. Understatement is upper class. A consequence of such understandings is the central disaster of this gifted writer's voice: He never abandons a resolute tone of

screaming. The test of every sentence is: Will its sound waves shatter a wine glass at twenty feet? It is not surprising that he writes so beautifully about the rupture of the sound barrier.

While he has largely cooled his typographical excesses in this book (there are only three exclamation points, and no italicized words at all, on the first page), the aural and psychological overamplification is still very much there. The voice of every character, even that of a quiet woman like Glenn's wife, is Jovian. One can say that the charm in Wolfe is his enthusiasm. On nearly every page, though, this attractive quality sends him floating off the ground. When he is establishing the driving part of *Flying and Drinking*, *Drinking and Driving*, *Driving and Balling*, in which "all" the astronauts indulged, his excitement over their recklessness at the wheel leads him to write, doubtless in a *sportif* spirit: "More fighter pilots died in automobiles than airplanes." No time period. According to Navy statistics which Wolfe himself cites, there was a 23 percent probability that a Navy career pilot would die in an aircraft accident. Did one in four die on the road? In 1952 sixty-two American Air Force pilots died in crashes in thirty-six weeks of flying at Edwards Air Force Base, 1.7 per week. Did two a week die in cars? The point is not that this little example of possibly humorous overkill announces in itself the death of journalism. The point is that this one happened to be readily catchable. How many others are not? Are they on every page? How can we know? How can we ever know?

And so we come through many cumulative small doubts back to the issue of "accuracy." Let us grant that among Wolfe's works, this book is relatively "accurate" (perhaps because relatively much of it is based on written records, notably the NASA official history, *This New Ocean: A History of Project Mercury*). But "relatively 'accurate'" may not be good enough, when we look for the whole meaning of the work.

By now we are thoroughly skeptical, and, remembering John Glenn's having read the abuse he took at Wolfe's hand as praise, we begin to see abysses of ambiguity, of ambivalence, in the book. Wolfe loves what he loathes. The individual words mock and slash and ridicule; the sentences into which they are combined somehow ogle and stroke and admire. As Eric Korn put it (*Times Literary Supplement*, November 30, 1979), "If there's one thing more unlovable than the man of letters showing his contempt for physical valor, it's the man of letters fawning on physical valor. Wolfe contrives to do both at once." Glenn and NASA are both right and awfully wrong to think they come out "pretty good."

Looking back, we see that this double-think has been there, off and on, all through Wolfe's work. His class struggle seems to be in his own heart. The New Journalism was a product of the sixties, and like much of what hit the

kids in that decade, Wolfe's struggle seems to have been a generational one. To adopt his voice: Young and new are good, old and old are bad; but O I love you Mummy and Daddy, you bitch and bastard. This lumpenprole affects beautifully tailored white suits and his prose often gives off a donnish perfume—*prima facie, beruf*, pick your language. If Tom Wolfe is at all interested in class, it is in a new elite of those few "outsiders" who, at any given moment, are "in." The quasi-fictional method allows Wolfe to be both out and in.

Precisely this ambiguity makes for really zippy entertainment—the dazzle of the magic show. Great fun. But. It leaves us with serious doubts about a mode of journalism that straddles in its ambiguities the natural and obligatory substance of such a book: the horrendous issues of the space program, its cost, philosophy, technological priorities, and impact on national jingoism and machismo in a cold-war atmosphere which, as we saw in the winter of 1979–1980, could so easily be brought to dangerous warmth.

I believe that the double-think flaw is intrinsic to Wolfe's method. One who gets the habit of having it both ways in form slips into the habit of having it both ways in attitude and substance. The legend on the license really does matter.

As to deeper and subtler forms of social harm that this journalism also may cause, more later.

### III

The case of Norman Mailer is much more complicated, because Mailer is so richly talented and so grossly perverse.

Readers know by now that the first half of *The Executioner's Song* is based on the horrifying story of two wanton murders in Utah by a bright, sick, witty, cowboyish paroled recidivist named Gary Gilmore, who, having been condemned to death for the crimes, staunchly insisted on being executed. The second half tells how the strong smell of money given off by this death-row drama drifted east with the weather systems and attracted New York's media vultures, the swiftest among them being one Lawrence Schiller, who had already picked the bones clean from other carrion: Jack Ruby, Marina Oswald, Susan Atkins, for examples. (Schiller had also—though Mailer finds it convenient to omit this from 1,056 pages which seem to leave absolutely nothing else out—arranged for Mailer to make bucks cleaning the dear flesh from the skeleton of poor Marilyn Monroe; and was, of course, to arrange the same for Mailer with Gilmore's remains.)

Besides nursing Gilmore along, making sure to keep the condemned man's death-resolve firm (else contracts might fly away), Schiller dug up a mass of background material, including the element that was eventually to attract the romantic fictionist in Mailer—the love story between Gilmore and a sad, dumb, compliant doxy named Nicole Baker, who had

been married at thirteen, had been twice a mother and twice divorced by nineteen, had long been in and out of mental hospitals, and would do anything for her man, whoever he might happen to be, including “rubbing peepes” (for “Uncle Lee,” at five), turning tricks (not exactly for a pimp, just for a nice guy who had some horny friends), ratting (to attractive cops), attempting suicide (at Gary’s request through the mail), and spilling all the details of Gary’s limp erections and requests to shave pubic hair and experiments in threesome (to Larry Schiller). Schiller’s pumping out of this pathetic Nicole is a shocking tale of commercial sadism from which Mailer, who later used every jism-dripping morsel of the material, manages to remain somehow serenely detached. One of the conveniences of having a book be both fiction and journalism is that when the journalist’s money-grubbing dirty tricks begin to stink, the novelist can soar away on wings of art, far above it all.

Mailer does want it both ways. Had he, like Orwell with *Down and Out in Paris and London*, for instance, or like Solzhenitsyn in his first three books, simply called his work a novel and let it go at that, we could perhaps have lived with the immediacy of the reality underlying the fiction—remembering that some reality underlies every fiction. But no. This had to be labelled “A True-Life Novel.” (Mailer has played this doppelgänger game before, of course. *Armies of the Night* was subtitled “The Novel as History, History as a Novel.”) “I called [*The Executioner’s Song*] a novel because it reads like one,” Mailer has said in an interview (*The New York Times*, October 26, 1979). And it does. He is right. A powerful and moving novel. But also: “This story does its best to be a factual account . . . and the story is as accurate as one can make it.” The book jacket praises the work as fiction and also calls it “a model of complete, precise, and accurate reporting.” The legend on this license reads: THIS WAS MADE UP AND IT WAS SIMULTANEOUSLY NOT MADE UP.

It simply cannot have been both. What it cannot be, if we look closely, is “precise and accurate reporting.” Asserting that it is can only mean sending journalism into the intensive-care unit.

There is a false syllogism at work here, having to do with a Wolfeish “all this actually happened.” A: Gary Gilmore did kill, was condemned, did insist on being executed. B: Mailer has written an immensely detailed and artful novel about the Gary Gilmore case, in which he uses mostly real names. Therefore C: This must be reporting. Mailer puts it somewhat differently, though of course not diffidently. “God,” he says (*The New York Times*, January 27, 1980), “was at least as good a novelist as I am.”

The novel is presented in terse, highly charged paragraphs, like tiny chapters, which allow Mailer both to keep the point of view rapidly shifting among a very large cast of vivid characters—Mormons, families in their

cobwebs, druggies and deadbeats, a whirligig mother of a murderer, straight victims and their heartbreaking survivors, Nicole and her procession of men, jailbirds, jailers, civil libertarians, lawyers, television and movie con men, and, of course, the fascinating psychopath at the heart of the yarn, as well as many others; and also to build a grim, gripping suspense. Since we know the outcome from the very beginning, this latter is a brilliant feat. It is a deeply disturbing story, told by a bewitching minstrel of the dark side of the soul. But let us not say that it is accurate reporting.

Mailer reveals his method of work in three ways: by indirection through what we can infer from his picture of Schiller's researches; through his own direct account of his sources and routines in an afterword; and by what he has said about the book after its publication.

He freely admits that he has tinkered with dialogue. And here we go: Is a reporter entitled (was Capote, writing *In Cold Blood*, were Woodward and Bernstein, in *All the President's Men*, were Woodward and Armstrong, in *The Brethren*, entitled) to reconstruct extensive exchanges of direct speech from passages of action that had taken place long before the research—and claim that the published result is “precise and accurate”? Mailer evidently relied for bits of his dialogue on interviews of his own, many months after the events; but most of his raw material was at least secondhand, given to him by Schiller, who had extracted it, also mostly after the events, from the principals—so that the filtration leading to direct quotation is through three and (when the informant is repeating something another person has told him) even four sensibilities, to say nothing of a fallible memory or two or three. And then, on top of all that, for art's sake, Mailer has tinkered.

A more serious question is raised by what Mailer appears to have done with Gilmore's letters to Nicole. These are the stuff of old-fashioned melodrama—purloined letters. That is to say, a cub reporter for the *Deseret News* named Tamera Smith sweet-talked her way into Nicole's trust; Nicole asked Tamera to take the letters for safekeeping; Tamera promptly photocopied them without telling Nicole; and on Nicole's request returned the originals but not the copies. After Gilmore and Nicole had jointly attempted suicide, Tamera wrote a story partly based on the letters. Alerted by the story, the prosecutor's office then picked up the originals. And later “the carrion bird,” as Mailer from his artistic distance calls Schiller, having clamped a money-lock on Gilmore's lawyers, bullied them into demanding the letters from the prosecutor under laws of discovery; and so got his hands (and eventually Mailer's) on them. Gilmore, the copyright owner, of course never gave his permission for the use of the letters. He never had a chance. He got four bullets in the heart.

The journalistic shadow on these letters, however, hasn't to do with this sordid history. The question is, rather, just how far Mailer moved them away

from “precise and accurate” replication. What Mailer says about his editing of them in his afterword is wonderfully careful. He is frank to say he altered the interviews with Gilmore that Gary’s lawyers taped, just as one would alter one’s own remarks on a transcript: “The aim was not to improve his diction so much as to treat him decently.” But watch the prestidigitator’s hand very closely here:

With Gilmore’s letters, however, it seemed fair to show him at a level higher than his average. One wanted to demonstrate the impact of his mind on Nicole, and that might be best achieved by allowing his brain to have its impact on us. Besides, he wrote well at times. His good letters are virtually intact. . . .

It is true that Gilmore had a weird and interesting mind, and there is no way of knowing exactly where and how much Mailer meddled. One clue is in “voice.” Granting that one’s spoken and written voices may differ markedly, there seems such a gulf between Gilmore’s articulation on the tapes and in his letters that we can’t help wondering exactly whose brain it is, in the latter, that is having its impact on us.

First, from the tapes (altered for decent treatment):

I seen that she wasn’t on the list until just, you know, yesterday. . . .

I guess perhaps they didn’t quite take me literal. . . .

They act like they’re really doing something by giving you a big meal, but it ain’t like the menu in the paper. You don’t get it good, you know. . . .

And then this Mailerish voice in the letters:

I’m so used to bullshit and hostility, deceit and pettiness, evil and hatred. Those things are my natural habitat. They have shaped me. I look at the world through eyes that suspect, doubt, fear, hate, cheat, mock, are selfish and vain. All things unacceptable, I see them as natural. . . . There are dead cockroaches in the corners. . . . I can hear the tumbrel wheels creak.

What will I meet when I die? The Oldness? Vengeful ghosts? A dark gulf? Will my spirit be flung about the universe faster than thought? Will I be judged and sentenced, as so many churches would have us believe? Will I be called to and clutched at by lost spirits? Will there be nothing? . . . Just an end?

Mailer may conceivably be able to produce photocopies of many letters like these with elevated language in Gilmore's longhand, but any reader who is the least bit interested in journalism will have grown suspicious long before reading them in print. For an interesting reason.

Almost without exception, reviewers of *The Executioner's Song* called attention to what they saw as the simple and direct language Mailer uses in the novel. "A meticulously limited vocabulary," Joan Didion wrote, "and a voice as flat as the horizon" (*The New York Times*, October 7, 1979). Only one reviewer I have come across (Diane Johnson in *New York Review of Books*, December 6, 1979) seemed even to notice what I quickly came to think of as Mailer's tag lines—touches of prose, nearly always final lines in the chapterettes, buffed to such hummingbird-feather iridescence as almost to hurt the eye with the lights of their beauty and intensity. Pure Mailer. From a journalistic standpoint, the significant thing about these tag lines is that each Mailerism is presented as if *within the point of view of a character*. This is not reporting; it is projection. And the cumulative force of the projections pushes the book right out of the country of journalism. To feel this cumulation, we must look at quite a few examples:

*Nicole, on a visit to Gary in prison:* It was as if they stood on a ledge and sorrow was as light as all the air below the fall.

She felt modest in the middle of her own sorrow, as if some quiet person in heaven was crying with her too.

*On her druggie sister April:* She was in touch with the heavy strings on the fiddle. *And:* Most of the time she had a toothache in her expression.

*Brenda:* Gary sat there like he was grinding bones in his mind.

*Spence McGrath, Gary's employer, watching Gary eat a brown-bag lunch:* [He] ate the food in all the presence of his own thoughts.

*Bessie Gilmore, Gary's mother:* She thought it had to be the way a tomb would smell if a strong man was buried in it.

Pain was a boring conversationalist who never stopped, just found new topics.

The picture would flicker over her eyes like a moth in a closet.

"Oh Gary," whispered the child that never ceased to live in the remains of her operations and twisted joints.

*Mikal, Gary's brother:* It was like a bigger dude squeezing your machismo to see if it leaked.

*Larry Schiller:* The memory burned into the skin right under the beard. At times like that, fat felt comfortable—one more layer of asbestos against the flames.

[Nicole was] like a waif in a house whose windows were wet with fog.

*Vern Damico:* Stanger's eyes were gleaming, like his hooves were flashing in the air.

*Earl Dorius, Assistant Attorney General:* That hand moved around the clock like anxiety circulating in one's chest.

*Dennis Boaz, Gary's first lawyer:* The mind could undulate like a jellyfish.

*Rikki Baker:* [Gary] got upset about it the way people can brood about bad weather.

*Noall Wootton, prosecutor, reacting to Gary's changes of mind during the trial:* It was like dealing with a crazy pony who was off on a gallop at every wind.

*John Woods, psychiatrist,* wished for some absolute dazzler of a lawyer who could handle the jury like a basketball and take them up and down the court.

*Jerry Scott, state patrolman, taking Gary to prison after his sentencing:* Night had come, and the ridge of the mountain came down to the Interstate like a big dark animal laying out its paw.

Some scenes, if you rub them carefully between thumb and finger, turn out to have a palpable nap of invention on them—not whole cloth, but finished goods with miraculously tidy hems. For instance, some time after the execution, there is a scene in a drinking place near Provo called The Stirrup.

As Mailer tells it, three of the marksmen who had delivered bullets to Gilmore's chest were drinking and playing liars' dice in the bar one late afternoon. A waitress named Willa Brant sat down with them. One of the

men pulled out of his pocket a bit of the webbing that had strapped Gilmore's arm to the death chair and one of the slugs that, the guy said, had killed him, for her to touch. After a while a young married woman whom Willa knew slightly, named Rene Wales, came in and got talking with the executioners about the CBs in their pickups. "Before you knew it" Mrs. Wales went out with one of them to check out his radio. Forty-five minutes passed. Then the Mailer tag line: "Rene came in with the fellow, and both had a look on their faces like they'd been sopping up some of the gravy."

Now, the trouble with this as reporting is that it is told from the point of view of Willa Brant. But she is *not*, it turns out, one of the roughly 150 persons Mailer lists in his afterword as having been interviewed by Schiller, himself, or both. In the telling of the scene she is said to be a friend of Toni Gurney, whose name we do find on the list. So Schiller or Mailer got the episode from someone who was not there, and we get it at third or fourth hand. But the anecdote is told in considerable fine detail. It bears all the marks of having been so promising to begin with, in this game of pass-the-whisper, that the fictionist in Mailer simply couldn't resist touching up the whisper he heard. He writes in his afterword: "The names . . . of certain characters have been changed to protect their privacy"—and also, quite possibly, to ward off lawsuits. Of course we never know which names have been changed, so we can't tell whether Mrs. Wales's has been; we can only hope for her sake it has been. So the real trouble with this neat little set piece as journalism, and the trouble with many scenes in the book, is that we can never know where Mailer the reporter leaves off and Mailer the novelist takes over.

In fiction, the writer's voice matters; in reporting, the writer's authority matters. We read fiction to fortify our psyches, and in the pleasure that that fortification may give us, temperament holds sway. We read journalism—or most of us still do, anyway—to try to learn about the external world in which our psyches have to struggle along, and the quality we most need in our informant is some measure of trustworthiness. *The Executioner's Song* may satisfy us as fiction—it does me—precisely because the author's voice is so pungent, so active, so eloquent, so very alive. But there is deep trouble when we come to the journalistic pretensions of this novel, precisely because the temperament of the reporter is so intrusive, so vaunting, and, considering the specific story being told, so hard to trust.

When we read a novel of Mailer's, the wild shenanigans of his private life are none of our business, really; the art is there to speak for itself, and so is the strong voice of the weaver behind the arras. With good fiction, those are enough. But when we are told that a tale with the massive social implications of *The Executioner's Song* is "a model of complete, precise, and accurate reporting," we are entitled to know a bit more about the mind and temperament that have shaped our instruction. The facts about Mailer's life—and he himself has

been the trumpeting source of most of our knowledge of them—raise some questions about the trustworthiness of the authority behind this book.

Like Hemingway before him, Norman Mailer has made himself at home in a fantasy of pugilism, and has challenged all champs and all pretenders in all weights to fifteen rounds in the ring of letters; he has scattered his macho boasts and seed among a flock of wives, mistresses, and bare acquaintances; near dawn after a night of carousal and quarrels he made a pretty fair attempt on the life of one of these ladies with a cheap knife; he has romanticized marijuana, “the smoke of the assassins,” and rewrote one novel “bombed and sapped and charged and stoned with lush, with pot, with benny, saggy, Miltown, coffee, and two packs a day”; in a rage while directing a pseudo-movie he tried to bite an earlobe off an actor with the right name for the scene, Rip Torn; considering a mayoral run in New York he advocated jousting in Central Park as a therapy for muggers.

Can we trust a reporter with such a bizarre history of brutality, insecurity, mischief, and voguishness when he gives us, thinly, just three implied reasons (do they seem to be *justifications*?) for Gary Gilmore’s crimes: (1) the desperation of a young lover afraid of losing his beloved; (2) the damage done him by psychiatrists in, for instance, having transiently administered to him, long before the murders, a drug called Prolixin; and (3) a vague possibility, only glancingly hinted at, of a strain of infantilism in the killer?

Or can we trust this reporter when he devotes so much energy and space to rendering the sex and violence in the story—making of it not *Romeo and Juliet* but a mongrel, out of *Tristan and Isolde* by *Bonnie and Clyde*—and skimps the intricate, fascinating, and socially consequential questions of law and philosophy that hovered over the first execution in the country in many years?

Or when, in his eagerness to give us a dope-smoky, drive-in, stick-shift, gang-bang Western romance, he does not do anything like justice to the vision of the kindly people of the town of Provo, firmly (and perhaps, in the context of this drama, disastrously) fixed and drenched in Mormon ideas of the correctional effects of love and decency; or to their views of proper sexual conventions, and of the regions beyond death?

Am I saying that we can accept what Mailer says as a novelist and cannot accept what he says as a journalist? Baffled by the impossibility of knowing when he is which, I am. When we read a novel, we are asked to suspend disbelief, and as soon as we close the book we can be expected in normal circumstances to bring the suspension to an end along with the story, for in fiction, as Auden wrote is the case in poetry (in *The Dyer’s Hand*), “all facts and beliefs cease to be true or false and become interesting possibilities.” But when we read an ambitious journalistic work, we are asked to believe, and to carry belief away with the book. This is a crucial difference.

Why does Mailer claim so much? He has repeatedly said over the years that he would rather be known as a novelist than as a journalist. In a *Paris Review* interview some years ago, which he liked well enough to include in *Cannibals and Christians*, he said:

If what you write is a reflection of your own consciousness, then even journalism can become interesting. One wouldn't want to spend one's life at it and I wouldn't want ever to be caught justifying journalism as a major activity (it's obviously less interesting to write than a novel), but it's better, I think, to see journalism as a venture of one's ability to keep in shape than to see it as an essential betrayal of the chalice of your literary art. Temples are for women.

Disregard that last line. That was just Norman being a bad boy. But since the publication of *The Executioner's Song*, he has insisted over and over, that, yes, the book is both fiction and journalism. Asked how that could be, he said on one occasion (*The New York Times*, October 26, 1979): "A writer has certain inalienable rights, and one is the right to create confusion."

At the risk of taking Mailer seriously at a moment when we can see his tongue poking his cheek out, I would flatly assert that for a reporter that right is distinctly and preeminently alienable. If there is any one "right" a journalist never had to begin with, it is purely that one. This perversity of Mailer's brings us straight home: The widespread acceptance of *The Executioner's Song* as a "true-life story" is an ominous sign of journalism's ill-health these days.

#### IV

Good writers care about what words mean. Francis Steegmuller said not long ago (*The New York Times*, March 26, 1980) that when Auden died his Oxford English Dictionary was "all but clawed to pieces." The better the writer, it seems, the more frequent the appeals to the lexicographer. Yet some very good writers have lately seemed to want to ignore what the dictionaries say about matters essential to their craft: That "fiction" means something; which something is excluded from "nonfiction." Both the OED and Webster's point to original, central, and rather copious meanings of "fiction": fashioning, imitating, or inventing. Both dictionaries, in elaborating the active, current definition of the word, lay stress on a fundamental antithesis. OED: "invention as opposed to fact." Webster: "that which is invented, feigned, or imagined . . . —opposed to *fact* or *reality*" (emphasis Webster's).

Our grasp on *reality*, our relationship with the real world, is what is at stake here. We have to grope our way through that world from day to day. To make sense of our lives, we need to know what is going on around us. This need plunges us at once into complicated philosophical issues, having to do

with trees falling in distant forests. Can we always rely on what others tell us about what is “really” going on? A suspicion that we cannot has led to the great fallacy, as I see it, of the New Journalism, and indirectly to the blurring in recent years of fiction and nonfiction.

That fallacy can be crudely stated as follows: Since perfect objectivity in reporting what the eyes have seen and the ears have heard is impossible, there is no choice but to go all the way over to absolute subjectivity. The trouble with this is that it soon makes the reporter the center of interest rather than the real world he is supposed to be picturing or interpreting. A filter of temperament discolors the visible universe. The report becomes a performance. What is, or may be, going on in “reality” recedes into a backdrop for the actor-writer; it dissolves out of focus and becomes, in the end, fuzzy, vague, unrecognizable, and false.

The serious writer of fiction hopes to achieve a poetic truth, a human truth, which transcends any apparent or illusory “reality.” And in good novels, the temperament of the author, as expressed through the complex mix of elements that writers call “voice,” subtly becomes part of the impression of human truth that the reader gets. The fictionist may at times use real people or real events, sometimes deliberately remaking and transforming them, in order to flesh out imitation or make invention seem like reality. This sleight of hand works beautifully if the novelist is gifted, artful, and inventive; it is a disaster (and an open invitation to libel suits) when the writing is bad, when the invention is weak or nonexistent—in short, when fiction is not fiction.

Two kinds of grave social harm, beyond those already suggested, come from works like Capote’s and Wolfe’s and Mailer’s. The first is that their great success, whether in kudos or cash or both, attracts imitators. The blurring of the crafts becomes respectable, fashionable, profitable, enviable. The infection spreads. If the great Mailer can do it, so can any tyro, and the only certainty is that the tyro will fuzz things up worse than Mailer does. Headlines tell us that Capote has sold “Handcarved Coffins” to the movies for “nearly \$500,000.” The blurring has long since made its way into investigative journalism, which, of all forms of reporting, bears the heaviest weight of social responsibility. In *The Brethren*, the Woodward and Armstrong book on the Supreme Court which recently spent some time at the top of the bestseller list, the processes of filtration we have seen in the Mailer novel are similarly at work. Clerks vouch for justices’ subjective states, moods, thoughts, and exact words—mostly recaptured in distant retrospect. Chief Justice Burger refused all contact with the authors, yet: “Burger vowed to himself that he would grasp the reins of power immediately. . . .”

The second harm, related to the first, is far more serious. It is that these blurrings lead to, or at the very least help soften the way for, or confirm the reasonableness of, public lying. The message of Jules Feiffer’s *Little Murders*

is that tiny symbolic killings, done with the tongue, lead to big actual ones, done with guns. Habitual acceptance of little fibs leads to the swallowing whole of world-shaking lies. In the Dodge Aspen commercial, we are told we are watching two people in a following car through a hidden camera; what we watch (and overhear, as a hidden camera in a leading van could not possibly overhear) is a carefully rehearsed advertising routine. We write that off; it's just a formula; we're used to all that stuff. But have we also gotten used to writing off big lies? Did we write off—I am afraid the vast majority of Americans *did* write off—being told in official announcements that bombs were being dropped on North Vietnam, when in fact they were being dropped on Cambodia?

It would be preposterous, of course, to hold Mailer's and Wolfe's recent inventions responsible, retroactively, for lies told a decade ago. But the point is that the two phenomena—the blurring of fiction and journalism, as Mailer and Wolfe and many others have practiced it (for quite a bit more than a decade), and public lying, as Kissinger and Nixon and many others have practiced it (and some still do)—the two have had something like a symbiotic relationship with each other. Each has nourished and needed the other. Each in its way has contributed to the befogging of the public vision, to subtle failures of discrimination, and to the collapse of important sorts of trust.

But how could the blurring possibly be corrected at this late date? Hasn't the process gone too far? Isn't all this much too complicated? Aren't the shadings too subtle?

Not at all. It is very simple. To redraw the line we need merely think clearly about the legends on the licenses. All we need do is insist upon two rules:

The writer of fiction must invent. The journalist must not invent.

JACK HICKS

*“Fire, Fire, Fire Flowing Like a River,  
River, River”:* History and Postmodernism in  
Truman Capote’s Handcarved Coffins

The waters of history have long made a nurturing mother for us, as they play down to us traditionally through prose in tides of genre, rivers of continuous narrative, deep mimetic lakes of character. But for many postmodern American writers of fiction and non-fiction, this mother has become a diabolical matriarch—comic, deceptive, murderous. As an informing matrix for human life, she ceases to exist.

Turn first to fiction. For prose postmoderns disparate as John Barth, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Jerzy Kosinski and Thomas Pynchon, history is a deceiving agent, and the fictive tropes and texts giving her voice must be self-consciously exposed and undone. Barth burlesques the founding nostalgias of the New World, limning, instead, a bawdy new *ur*-myth, at the heart of which is an America opened as a fresh market for the international opium trade. His “historical” Captain John Smith is a mythic counteragent, and the tools of his founding trade are not beads and trinkets, blunderbusses, or the healing modern sciences, but texts: a trunkful of pornography to woo the New World “salvages,” and a secret diary, in which lurks an eggplant recipe guaranteeing the eternal, conquering priapus.

For Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-5*, the urge to history, encased in martial fiction, is a vicious comic ruse, and even the anti-war novel, which rejects warfare, valorizes the individual warrior of conscience, and is thus complicit

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in extending a history of senseless brutality. The form and its inevitable awakening protagonist, from Henry Fleming to Yossarian, make warfare morally palatable. Earth people are *easy*, the Tralfamadoreans tell us—they already know our accidental and absurd end—and they posit a planet and literature in which everything happens at once and leads finally nowhere. In Vonnegut's hand, they expose the petty human urge to cloak self-destruction in self-deluding myth.

In his postmodern fable *The Painted Bird*, Jerzy Kosinski also takes the historic World War II as his canvas. The will to yoke such grand terror in continuous narrative, and the need to create a young warrior who awakens in battle are both shown as annihilating impulses. The child protagonist blunders from village to village and realizes finally that the social cord itself is diseased. To be fully free, he must reject society and all its institutions, from language to history to the life narratives of others, all of which promise his extermination.

Similarly, for Thomas Pynchon in *V*, the urge to historicize is rooted in psychological paranoia, and it leads to omnivorous narratives of conspiracy that devour all of existence in quest of pattern and accounting. What once suckled us is an infernal machine here, ratcheting through phenomenal life as surely as the letter V yawns up and open, yearning forever at the acme of its own shape.

I cite Barth, Vonnegut, Kosinski and Pynchon because they are internationally known, and show in the mainstream radical doubts and revolutionary techniques deemed threatening and destructive two decades ago. In brief, while some of their postmodern peers are far more innovative and/or *avant garde*, this quartet illustrates the power of *influence*, the extent to which postmodernism has pervaded. And influence, I suggest, is one true test of any *avant garde*. The truly revolutionary can never content itself with remaining marginal or peripheral, and however violently it resists assimilation, it is most prominent—at least in literature—in how it refigures the core.

American literary postmodernism, then, brings strong counter-pressures into the mainstream, seen nowhere more vividly than in the reexamination of the will to historicize, and of the philosophical validity and implications of history herself. Note that I write of both fiction and non-fiction, and nowhere to this point have spoken of the term “novel” or of companion genres. Radical doubt now denies us the comfort of using such categories with ease. Indeed, writing free of history and thus beyond genre is a literary dream of some postmodern artists, and with the rise of serious literary non-fiction (the non-fiction novel to the new journalism, including work by Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Edward Abbey, Hunter S. Thompson, Frederick Exley, and others), the full blurring of the lines between fiction and fact is real.

## 2

Recent research takes me into the realm of American literary non-fiction since 1960, a profound and abundant surge of work calling for serious scrutiny. Many of our finest writers—including Didion, Mailer, Wolfe, Capote and Peter Matthiessen—have turned away from fiction, either because they sense elsewhere dramatic new, uncharted potential (Mailer's *Armies of the Night* and *The Executioner's Song* are results), or feel that conventional narrative forms (fed by myth and history) cannot perceive or contain recent strangenesses in the United States. Didion's *The White Album*, Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and Capote's *In Cold Blood* are varying issues of such convictions. And some writers work with a special passion to amplify/diagnose symptoms of the national heart, seeking new instruments for deep work. In Matthiessen's case, *The Snow Leopard* constitutes the former, *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse* the latter urge.

Hidden in this tide has been the assumption, as well, that the familiar categories within this genre (auto/biography, confession and memoir, long nature or wilderness meditation, the narrative of national achievement or catastrophe, the diary, the character study, the travel narrative, and the occasional essay)—ill-defined as they are—now impede our vision and are no longer reflexive literary modes. Thus unfamiliar, perplexing hybrids appear, many of which question the assumption that non-fiction functions to record history and the real and the forms it takes: Is Joan Didion's *The White Album* simply an intimate account of the profound social crises of the Manson Era? Or can it be more than the psychic historical diary it pretends to offer, a "confession" that draws power from fiction to create the certainty of intimate fact that it mimics? Is the "I" of the narrative, certified by her doctor's psychiatric evaluation, truly congruent with the "real" Joan Didion?

Against this backdrop, I will examine Truman Capote's *Handcarved Coffins*, for several purposes. First, recent American literary non-fiction is now a field of serious art requiring close attention, and Capote's *corpus* is a major mark. Second, the "fire, fire, fire flowing like a river, river, river" of *Handcarved Coffins* enacts, in the process of the text, the intrusion of the postmodern sensibility, in both a very unlikely author and in markedly atypical narrative and stylistic aspects.<sup>1</sup>

## 3

In contrast to that of Mailer and Didion, Capote's work is an unlikely candidate for the irruption of the postmodern, for as a literary heir to William Faulkner, he draws in fiction and non-fiction upon his Southernness. He writes with a poet's eye for exotic landscape and eccentric character in both his early fiction (*Other Voices, Other Rooms* [1948] and *A Tree of Night* [1949]) and non-fiction (*Local Color* [1950]).<sup>2</sup> But however

misty or gothic the surfaces, he writes from a received assumption that history and myth—often tragic—are reliable informants, restless and alive. Even in the environment itself, be it New Orleans, New York, Haiti or the wild rocks of Greece. As Faulkner's, his work is implicitly traditional, even conservative, in its acceptance of home and hearth and nurturing place, all held in a dense mythic/historic matrix.

Capote is far more conventional in technique, for there are few Faulknerian soundings of point of view, chronology, plotting or interiority. Conventional, as well, in his acceptance of genre: elegant as the prose and mystic the places of *Local Color* may be, it is a collection of travel pieces, each written on commission from magazines catering to mass audiences.

Similarly, *The Muses Are Heard* (1956) is a direct non-fiction novella of a rare 1955 tour of the USSR by a wide-eyed *Porgy and Bess* troupe. "The Duke in His Domain," his celebrated bitchy profile of actor Marlon Brando, brings artistry to a hitherto journalistic form—much as Lillian Ross did earlier in her *New Yorker* portraits—but it remains a character study, a genre piece.<sup>3</sup>

Even *In Cold Blood*, which Capote proclaimed wholecloth a new genre—"the non-fiction novel"—is decidedly realistic in philosophy and form.<sup>4</sup> The work remains riveting, a contemporary masterpiece, and while it is structurally informed by montage, the double narrative is continuous and unflinching, driving the reader through with cinematic immediacy. The rich store of Midwestern detail, the lives of the Clutters, Smith, Hickock blended in a history of the newer West, offers Capote a metaphoric bank, and both victims and murderers are rendered with alarming mimetic credibility.

The arc of the plot—from random mass murder as wound to the body politic, to the purgation of evil and the restoration of communal harmony in a graveyard close—employs history and myth as organizing and nourishing modes. Indeed, the protagonist is Detective Alvin Dewey, an embodiment of the need for moral right, and his quest traces ancient mythic forms. Like many recent fictional quests (both popular and serious), his pattern has sources in an ancient literary river, with antecedents in classic Greek and Shakespearean tragedies of violation and redemption.

The power of the work issues also in auctorial repression. The point of view is omniscient, author and/or narrator rigorously excluded from narrative episodes. We know Capote was no mere after the fact recorder in *In Cold Blood*, and found himself painfully involved with his subjects, especially Smith and Hickock, but he permits himself no appearance as character, save a ghostly reference or two as "a journalist."<sup>5</sup> There is, as well, no hint of post-modern narrative self-consciousness or textual self-reference.

"I wanted to produce a journalistic novel," he writes of *In Cold Blood*, in the Preface to *Music for Chameleons*, his last collection of non-fiction, "something on a large scale that would have the credibility of fact, the immediacy

of film, the depth and freedom of prose, and the precision of poetry.<sup>6</sup> He achieved that height, but almost immediately questioned its value, finding himself in deep depression. By 1975, he was central in the rise of literary non-fiction to art, but he doubted the validity of the pattern of both his life and craft. When he undertook *Handcarved Coffins* on a tip from Alvin Dewey, he quickly realized that the impulse to twin *In Cold Blood* was a decade too late and a lifetime away: a nostalgic wish, doomed.

Capote, who found himself “suffering a creative crisis and a personal one at the same time,” claimed to have reread every line he ever wrote. He sensed his work had come to a dead end:

I felt my writing was becoming too dense . . . by restricting myself to the techniques of whatever form I was working in, I was not using everything I knew about writing—all I'd learned from film scripts, plays, reportage, poetry, the short story, novellas, the novel. A writer ought to have all his colors available on the same palette for mingling (and, in suitable instances, simultaneous application). But how?<sup>7</sup>

The writer's crisis was personal—he was, by 1975, sorely impaired by drugs, drink, failing physical/mental health—but profoundly philosophic and artistic as well. The answer to his quandary lived in tapping the deepest sources of his dis-ease, his doubts of personal power, the social fabric, the continuing reliability of the historical impulse. And all fourteen of the pieces collected in *Music for Chameleons* reflect this decision.

*Handcarved Coffins* was undertaken in the sanguine hope that it would revive the time and achievement of *In Cold Blood*, that the mythic Blue River flowing through an even grislier plain than the earlier Kansas, would power another model of narrative continuity and social balance. But the dream dies, the source slows down and dries up, revealing a loss of faith in history and myth as viable patterns for life and art and in the narrative techniques that create such patterns. But this drying of old sources yields a variety of postmodern traits, at once destructive and creative: the deflection of the tide of single form into generic conflation; the disruption of mimesis once held in rushing narrative, pools of credible character. What emerges are techniques such as Capote's pastiche of diary extracts and dramatic scaffoldings, and an insistent, interrupting parenthetical style. Such devices jar the plates of social realism, bare the artifice of the narrative scape, insist on the textuality and intertextuality of setting, character, and plot.

Prior to working (c. 1970–1980) on the posthumously published *Answered Prayers* and *Music for Chameleons*, he admits, “I had tried to keep myself as invisible as possible.” It is wise to be chary of writerly attribution of purpose and design well after the art has emerged; creation rarely stops

at the border of the typed page. But Capote is accurate, continuing, “Now, however, I set myself at center stage. . . ,” and correctly describes his new style as “a severe, minimal manner.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus we find a highly self-conscious and self-referential narrator, with an urgent swerve from the masterly omniscience that served *In Cold Blood* so well, toward text as free assertion of personality, as a projection of the inner life: of hope, frustration, and most, fear.

#### 4

The force of *In Cold Blood* flows from the dense social and psychological vision of victims and murderers, two mingled versions of the American myth of success. The Clutters make a doomed Eden in River Valley Farm, “a patch of paradise,” and their prize apple orchard is not far from the county seat, Garden City. (23) Patriarch Herb Clutter embodies our dream of success by sweaty work and ingenuity, his spread won from the Kansas Depression dustbowl of the 1930s. Psychopathic killers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock are rootless, wandering, compelled by perverse democratic fantasies of utter mobility and windfall fortune. Every man a king at any moment, they tell themselves; life is a gamble each instant, as they realize ironically on their capture in Las Vegas.

The surface of *In Cold Blood* is sectioned into four books, eighty-five episodes, and it moves back and forth in time by flashback and flashforward. But it plays seamlessly as an accurately (as far as we can tell) imagined history of murder and social retribution. Under the orderly historical surface run multiple patterns that first bind us uncomfortably, then set us uncertainly free, healed for a time. Victims and murderers—two versions of our founding myths—there are elements of each in the Other, they will not remain comfortably apart. This is a source of anxiety for the careful reader, right from the opening excerpt of François Villon’s “*Ballade des Pendus*,” in which the condemned and the watching crowd are linked at the gallows.

The four Clutter killings, for example, are committed during the Thanksgiving season, an occasion with pagan, Christian and national mythic dimensions. The restoring protagonist, Detective Alvin Dewey, is an Anyman, and it is his lot to imagine the crime from clues, pursue the guilty, and set the trial in motion. On his course, he is ordained to take on the suffering (and wrath) of the community—in body and spirit—and heal himself and society in the final ritual purgation of Smith and Hickock.

Against this narrative of rich metaphor, informed by mythic and historical patterns, runs the deracinated text of *Handcarved Coffins*. The non-fiction novella is an account of multiple murder “in a small Western state” Capote fearfully elects not to name (67), and the apparent murderer a wealthy rancher he calls Bob Quinn. When a citizens’ committee votes to change the

course of the local Blue River, spreading water rights among his neighbours, Quinn plots and undertakes the murders of all eight members. Shortly before a grotesque death, each receives an intricately handcarved tiny balsam-wood coffin, on the pillow of which rests a candid photograph, a portent.

What originates as sequel is very quickly truncated. Bob Quinn is the murderer to Detective Jake Pepper and author Capote, but while the burden of proof is weighty, it is all circumstantial. Thus what the author hoped to find a second ritual of social violation and restoration refuses to assume that shape. The detective quest that structures *In Cold Blood* is denied certainty here. Nine victims fall, and the suspected killer's fortunes go unchanged, actually improve. The text reflects first Capote's increasing frustration with, then rejection of, history and myth as organizing and just forces, and this is most evident in the disruption of the narrative itself.

The Blue River is a metaphor for the author's desire for historical/mythic continuity, his hope for a revived narrative flow. It is first a source of life, gathering from the snow of distant mountains, nourishing the many ranches and lives in the valley. But it is soon treacherous (an accomplice in the drowning of Pepper's fiancée, Addie Mason), and finally demonic and death-dealing, a mirror in which to see his own forced, infernal baptism forty years earlier. To be born ritually into this world, Capote implies, is to be dragged in unwillingly, to be ceremonially drowned, inundated first beneath the waters of a hell-on-earth.

The waters no longer nourishing, the narrative churns itself into broken forms, subsumes other genres, seeks power in a conflation of screenplay, confession, diary. By the end of the second page, Capote has rigorously restricted his setting to that of a stage, with dialogue set off as lines for his actors, stage directions appended in parenthetical glosses. But this artifice flags, and as the Blue River surges and people continue to die, Capote moves almost chess-like through reduced narrative modes, inscribing his growing rage at Jake Pepper's impotence (and his own), and a rising awareness that his anger is funded by fear of social collapse and a very private demonology.

First screenplay, then the text is conflated to appropriate the apparent confession, as Capote mimes the structure of admission, seeks forgiveness for his own failings and those of the world in which he now finds himself. Errant lover to questioning mate: penitent to priest: patient to therapist: political criminal to torturer: murderer to interrogator: putative autobiographer to engrossed reader: These are all confessional structures by which truth may be revealed, redemption begun in apparent admission and purgation. But as in Joan Didion's "The White Album," they may also be powerful artistic ploys by which the illusion of self-scouring candour yields a highly effective mode of deceiving narration. And this, I suggest, is what Capote is up to.

Jake Pepper is powerless, doubted even by his superiors in the State Bureau. Denied effective solution to the horror continuing around him, Capote plumbs the cause for his own terror of Quinn and the Blue River. He finds it in the flow of nightmare images the two release, as they force repressed memory to the surface in dream and flashback. Beyond personal empathy for the victims and social indignation, the narrator reimagines his own forced, hellish river baptism by Reverend Bobby Joe Snow forty years earlier. Thus the narrative is further conflated, to absorb the stream of nightmare, and in the process, deflects our attention from social outrage to personal violation.

In remembering and confessing the trauma worked on him at age eight—first to Pepper and then to the willing reader—he confirms that the waters of history, myth, narrative are now deadly, and nourish an evil world. The ritual of baptism, for example, is not a cleansing ceremony, but one of forced induction into a satanic world. Thus the Blue River is transmuted, first into a haven for poisonous snakes, then into a means of extending hell on earth, harbouring “fire, fire, fire flowing like a river, river, river” (84).

The textuality and intertextuality of *Handcarved Coffins* grows as the narrative accumulates. Capote implicitly yearns for the fixity and shelter of *In Cold Blood*, and more explicitly, seeks to undo the powers of death and evil by incorporating wholesale letters, telegrams, written telephone memoranda into the narrative. The waters are turbid, not unlike the muddy Alabama river into which he was dragged, and generic conflation soon appropriates the diary. The author includes twenty-three entries from 1975–1979, as if this disruption of the narrative, this insistence on displaying unmediated materials, can stop a mounting historical horror by violating the smooth surfaces of the text. If the desire for continuous narrative is to drink from a poisoned source, then perhaps health can be summoned by the sympathetic magic of conflation, deflection, indirection.

The river of narrative must somehow be turned aside, and this simultaneous movement of destruction and creation also takes place at the micro-level of prose style. From youth, Truman Capote was a master of literary style, writing with a true sense of the sound, rhythm and texture of language, with a feel for trenchant detail and metaphor. But convinced that his prose had grown opaque and weighed him down, he soon turned to an absolutely reduced manner in *Music for Chameleons*, pruning and simplifying the rich descriptive language so powerfully turned loose in *In Cold Blood*. Diction, sound, rhythm, syntax—all are attenuated here, for language itself is a poisoned spring.

This reduction of style is evident in every aspect of *Handcarved Coffins*, but especially in Capote’s use of dialogue. Despite the gruesome deaths of the Roberts (by drugged rattlesnakes), the Baxters and their guests (fire), Clem

Anderson (beheading), Dr. Parsons (poison) and Addie Mason (drowning), the pulse of the town remains quotidian. Their speech is slack, mildly slangy, colourless, bordering on direct recording. Seven "Conversational Portraits" (Part III) close *Music for Chameleons*, most of which continue the author's use of "commonplace conversation with everyday people" (xviii). Dialogue throughout is sunken in the text—quotation marks are not used—and the effect is that of a mechanism with a spent spring, one running on the lees of old energy.

Stylistic reduction is also evident in Capote's insistent parenthetical style. The frequent use of interrupting commas, ellipses, and dashes illustrates his diversionary technique: these all highlight disjointed thought rhythms undercutting plain language. Most explicitly, we see it in the regular stage directions for his cast—notations of their tones of voice, gestures, bodily movements—which are set off in parentheses. Parenthetical asides provide emphasis, nuance, elaboration or extension of (or from) a central notion, but in *Handcarved Coffins* the major action or mental state is held increasingly by parentheses, as if protected within lacunae of the marks themselves. On more than thirty occasions, the narrator isolates his perceptions or responses, as if to suggest that the tale of unavenged death by the Blue River is growing peripheral. The eye of the text moves to the psychic life of the narrator, and he hides these tender moments within convex walls, like pearls held in a bony shell.

Genre is conflated in *Handcarved Coffins*, and style reduced, but the role of the narrator expands considerably. Capote was no stranger to first-person narrative—almost all the early non-fiction collected in *The Dogs Bark* issues from an "I"—but he felt most comfortable and effective hidden, buried in the scapes of his narrative.

Capote's emblem is the chameleon, a creature surviving by assuming anonymity, save those rare, dangerous moments that it emerges from its backdrop, like the dozen "scarlet, green, lavender" chameleons seduced by Madame's piano, lured out on her terra cotta floor to create a living art, "a written arrangement of musical notes. A Mozartean mosaic" (12). They live in a deep lack of self-definition, an expression of the protean self. Similarly, the author finds ease in the protections of omniscient coloration.

He writes often with a keen nostalgia for a place on earth, a lost time of social and historical continuity. Many of his characters (human and beast) are driven to re-create that lost state of wholeness, and the efforts prove misguided, self-destructive. A pet raven in "Lola" is so tamed she forgets how to fly, "thought she was something else," and menaced by a cat, falls from a sixth floor balcony. A crippled boy in "Greek Paragraphs" falls in love with the Greek Isles through his reading of classical literature and convinces his doting mother to debark on an isolated speck. He wants "to see the temple

by moonlight and sleep on the shores.”<sup>9</sup> He is torn to pieces by starving rats; his mother flees into the sea, from which she watches all night. She survives in Nice, trapped mute in memory.

Even Detective Jake Pepper is an outsider, marked early as an alien—in part, the reason for his impotence—and lives six years in a motel while he stalks Bob Quinn. Pepper has no place here, can neither arrest Quinn nor save his own fiancée. Defeated, he retires to Oregon, deferring his role to the narrator.

But chameleons, confidence men, magicians, conjurers, artists survive and flourish in Capote’s work. They live in their abilities to transform themselves, dwell in the illusions they create or embody.

As Jake Pepper fails, Capote succeeds him. “Just let me come there and look around,” Capote implores him early on, and from that point on the narrative narrows down, the focus tightening from social threat and historical loss to the impact of each on the first-person narrator. Familiar with the point of view, Capote had usually limited it to the role of narrator-observer, almost never permitting it to swell to postmodern textual self-consciousness or self-reference.

Thus when he writes of a black mirror early in “Music for Chameleons” he signals a sudden, unexpected shift toward postmodern vision and technique: “I shall overly describe it—in the manner of those *‘avant-garde’* French novelists who, having chosen to discard narrative, character, and structure, restrict themselves to page-length paragraphs dealing with the contours of a single object . . . a white wall with a fly meandering across it. So: the object in Madame’s drawing room is a black mirror” (7).

The narrator of *Handcarved Coffins* is fully self-revealed, but merely a midpoint between the announced self-conscious and self-reflexive intentions in the passage above and the Siamese twin narrators of “Nocturnal Turnings,” who talk themselves to sleep and close the collection. This is a postmodern *jeu d’esprit* comparable to that of John Barth in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Capote goes about as far as he can at this mid-point: his narrator intrudes to stage centre, and the narrative records his frustration and anger with the failure of history and myth—and with the agents (Pepper) who should continue these forces as modes of health. He projects himself further, asserting both his fear of what this drying up implies for him, as man and artist, and his resolve to take up Pepper’s role as protagonist. Increasingly, he limns his inner life, puncturing the text frequently in a kind of self-flagellation caused by philosophic and literary frustration. Postmodern in impulse, yearning for what is lost and angry at failure, the narrative subsumes the fact of the death of history and older modes. Out of the failed quest grows a new power, though, and near the end of *Handcarved Coffins* he draws a strength from the flux of water run to fire.

Capote leaves Pepper behind at the Prairie Motel, and sets off to confront Bob Quinn, and, in doing so, his own trauma and fear. Quinn fishes waist-deep in the Blue River, and beckons the narrator to join him. He will not go. Capote now knows that Quinn will never be brought to trial. But his own sense of power grows, out of his knowledge that historical, literary and literal rivers are all poisoned, and out of the decision not to be submerged. If water has turned to fire in nightmare, if history is a killing mother, and if the satanic has usurped the offices of divinity, Capote finds in embracing the irruption of the postmodern in his life and art a means of standing strong in narrative and character. It is enough, the end of his non-fiction novella suggests, to record the flux that runs without and within. As Quinn finally says, "The way I look at it is: It was the hand of God.' He raised his own hand, and the river viewed between his spread fingers, seemed to weave between them like a dark ribbon. 'God's work. His will.'" (147).

#### NOTES

1. Truman Capote, *Handcarved Coffins*, in *Music for Chameleons* (New York: Random House, 1980). All subsequent references are to this edition and will appear in the text in parentheses.

2. Truman Capote, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (New York: Random House, 1948); *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* (New York: Random House, 1949); *Local Color* (New York: Random House, 1950).

3. Truman Capote, *The Muses Are Heard* and "The Duke in His Domain," collected in *The Dogs Bark* (New York: Random House, 1973), 159–307; 308–353.

4. See Capote's comments to George Plimpton, "The Story Behind A Non-fiction Novel," in *Truman Capote: Conversations*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 47–68.

5. Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood* (New York: Random House, 1966), 316; 371; 375. All subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in the text in parentheses.

6. Capote, "Preface, *Music for Chameleons*, xiv.

7. *Ibid.*, xvi–xvii.

8. *Ibid.*, xviii.

9. Capote, "Lola" and "Greek Paragraphs," in *The Dogs Bark*, 129; 154.



ANN M. ALGEO

*Truman Capote's*  
In Cold Blood

By the time *In Cold Blood* was published in 1965, the issues of class and race raised by Dreiser and Wright were joined by a concern for the psychological aspects of the criminal and the use of the insanity defense in court. Hollowell, who compared *In Cold Blood* to *An American Tragedy* in its ability to describe a crime that epitomizes the age in which the crime occurred, notes the “social dislocations” of the sixties (85). Certainly in Perry Smith and Dick Hickock we see men estranged from their families and society in a way different from the experiences of Clyde and Bigger. These men are outsiders not only to the ruling class but even to their own group. Possibly this further estrangement is the reason why they commit senseless crimes, and why we search in vain for the motives for their actions.

Unfortunately, the debate about the style of Capote’s self-described “nonfiction novel” has deflected critical attention from the many fine qualities inherent in his text. In an interview in the *New York Times Book Review* in January of 1966, when *In Cold Blood* was being released, Capote stated, “It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the “nonfiction novel,” as I thought of it” (qtd. in Plimpton 2).<sup>1</sup> Capote also said that he transcribed the interviews that form the core of his narrative without the aid of on-the-scene note-taking or tape-recording and that he could achieve 95% accuracy by listening carefully and later writing

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From *The Courtroom as Forum: Homicide Trials by Dreiser, Wright, Capote, and Mailer*, pp. 75–104. © 1996 by Ann M. Algeo.

down what he had heard (Plimpton 38). As Gerald Clarke says in his biography of Capote, “. . . Truman did have a case, though it might have been better if he had let someone else make it for him” (359). For our purposes we will use Plimpton’s *New York Times Book Review* interview with Capote as a source of information about how he selected events from the actual crime on which *In Cold Blood* is based rather than as a springboard for further debate on journalism versus fiction writing. Since the bulk of the criticism on *In Cold Blood* does, however, focus on this debate, a brief overview seems appropriate.

Galloway asserts that labeling the work as to genre is to some extent irrelevant:

. . . it is worth observing that while *In Cold Blood* is certainly not a work of “fiction,” neither is it a “documentary” in the conventional sense of the word. . . . [I]t is a careful and artful selection of details, calculated to evoke a variety of moods, to establish character, to produce suspense, and to convey a number of intricately related themes. (Galloway 155–56)

Galloway goes on to say that “. . . perhaps only a novelist would have seen the events in this manner . . .” (156). But Alan Collett makes a persuasive argument that the label we choose may matter when it comes to how we evaluate the work because the same standards cannot be applied to nonfiction and fiction. “Creativity involved in the selection and arrangement of true reports will be a different sort of creativity from that involved in creating a fictional (realistic) world” (Collett 289).

If we insisted on reading *In Cold Blood* as a fictional account of real-life events we would condemn as crude precisely those examples of artistic creativity which we praise as “ironic” or “significant” when we read the novel as Capote says we should. (Collett 291)

Collett’s argument is sound, but his position does not appear to exclude an appreciation for the “art” in what Capote has created. Pizer, who uses the term “documentary narrative,” gives his definition of art, and it directly applies to what Capote is doing: “By ‘art’ I mean that the author imposes theme upon the event portrayed by means of his selection, arrangement, and emphasis of the details of his documentation and of his narrative” (Pizer “Documentary” 106).

One critical camp supports the contention that Capote created a “work of art” (Tompkins 171; Garrett 12). Galloway sees the narrative as a major work of literature “for only a writer of exceptional talent could so skillfully have directed our attention to the larger issues which rest behind the ‘facts’ of

this case" (162). Garrett goes so far as to argue that the claim of a new form called the nonfiction novel "may be blamed on the publisher and dismissed as a device" (91).

Other critics question the claim of the status of "literature" for the narrative—even while they sometimes praise the result. Diana Trilling says *In Cold Blood* is not a novel; "it is 'only' a book, a work of journalism of an exceptionally compelling kind" (254). "By his unwillingness to be implicated in his story . . . Mr. Capote is employing objectivity as a shield for evasion. This is what is resented" (Trilling 254). Trilling goes on to summarize the various categories of resentment. She asserts that some readers think Capote should have "thrown his weight to the Smith-Hickock side of the moral question"; others find Capote too sympathetic toward the murderers; some readers believe Capote's "unquestioning acceptance" of the townspeople and the authorities gives his implied assent to American society; others feel that Capote was the one writing in cold blood, "exploiting tragedy for personal gain" (Trilling 254). At least one critic is bothered by the fact that Capote is using the form to hide the weaknesses in the text:

If you accuse Capote of distortion, he can plead the novelist's license; if you point out that Perry Smith's dreams of a poisonous diamond tree defended by a snake is [sic] lifted out of mythology and worse, parlor Freud—or that godlike giant parrot is cribbed from Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*—his defense will be reportage: *the man said it*. (Yurick 158)

McAleer says, "Capote's nonfiction novel format kept him from sorting out his major theme from secondary ones"; in other words, Capote has no thesis (583). McAleer believes *In Cold Blood* pales in comparison to Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*. "*In Cold Blood*'s chief value then . . . may well be its affirmation . . . of the soundness of Dreiser's intuitions and methods" (McAleer 585). To Hollowell "Capote's role as a literary promoter is foremost" and that "His rhetoric of originality neglects to mention a whole tradition of true crime books he found it convenient to ignore . . ." (83). (It is ironic that Capote later makes the same claim of ingratitude toward predecessors about Mailer and himself [Gobel 113].) Kauffmann is especially vocal in his criticism of Capote: "What it all amounts to is the puffery of an artistically unsuccessful writer of fiction pursuing his love of the Gothic . . . into life" (Kauffmann 21).

What is important for our purposes is that Capote used a process of selection to form his narrative. Capote acknowledged this process:

"I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it. It is true that an author is more in control of

fictional characters because he can do anything he wants with them as long as they stay credible. But in the nonfiction novel one can also manipulate: if I put something in which I don't agree about I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight." (qtd. in Plimpton 38)

Capote had been searching for some time for the right subject matter for his foray into creative journalism. In November of 1959, he read a brief article in the *New York Times* captioned "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain" (Clarke 317).

... after reading the story it suddenly struck me that a crime, the study of one such, might provide the broad scope I needed to write the kind of book I wanted to write. Moreover, the human heart being what it is, murder was a theme not likely to darken and yellow with time.

"I thought about it all that November day, and part of the next; and then I said to myself: Well, why not *this* crime? The Clutter case." (qtd. in Plimpton 3)

Capote sold his idea for a story to *The New Yorker*, enlisted the help of his friend the novelist Harper Lee as a research assistant, and one month after reading the newspaper account was in Kansas (Clarke 318–19). Clarke suggests that Capote's original interest in the Clutter case was not with the murderers, who had yet to be identified and captured, but with the effect of the crime on the community (319). When he began the project, Capote had no way of knowing that it would take six years to complete, would lead to personal involvement with the murderers, and would end with his attendance at their hangings.

In his *New York Times Book Review* interview Capote tells us that "My files would almost fill a whole small room, right up to the ceiling."

"All my research. Hundreds of letters. Newspaper clippings. Court records—the court records almost fill two trunks. There were so many Federal hearings on the case. One Federal hearing was twice as long as the original court trial." (qtd. in Plimpton 43)

Capote conducted interviews with the townspeople and the authorities in charge of the case during his first visit to Kansas in December 1959. By the time Dick and Perry were arrested, Capote had finished the original article he had conceived about the reaction of a small town to a multiple murder.

He returned to Kansas, however, to see the defendants brought back for their arraignment in early January 1960 (Clarke 324).

When Perry sat down in front of the judge to be arraigned, Truman nudged Nelle [Harper Lee]. "Look, his feet don't touch the floor!" Nelle said nothing, but thought, "Oh, oh! This is the beginning of a great love affair." In fact, their relationship was more complicated than a love affair: each looked at the other and saw, or thought he saw, the man he might have been. (Clarke 326)

Capote now had a more important story than even he had imagined. Eventually he would interview and correspond with the defendants and gather a total of 4,000 pages of notes (Clarke 331).

*In Cold Blood* is the story of the deaths of the Clutters and the lives of the murderers following the crime. Part I, "The Last to See Them Alive," opens in the village of Holcomb, Kansas, and describes the events on the Clutter farm on the last day of the lives of Herbert Clutter, 48, his wife, Bonnie, 45, and their two children, Nancy, 16, and Kenyon, 15 (Capote 15–17). This plot line is alternated with chapters describing the events of the same day in the lives of the murderers, Dick Hickock, 28, and Perry Smith, 31, both former inmates of Kansas State Penitentiary. (Pizer labels this a "dual sequential narrative" ["Documentary" 113].) The two groups of characters meet that night at the Clutter farm, where Dick has been told by a former cellmate that he will find a safe filled with money (Capote 58). We do not find out exactly what happens that night until the murderers confess, but we witness the discovery of the bodies and the beginnings of the investigation of the crime by Alvin Dewey, 47, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation's representative in Garden City, Finney County (Capote 96). We also view the reaction of the community to the deaths of four members of one of its leading families. The only physical evidence of any significance is a single bloody footprint (Capote 81).

After the Clutter murders, the alternating pattern of the text continues in Part II, "Persons Unknown," as we watch Al Dewey and the townspeople in the aftermath of the crime and we travel with Dick and Perry on a cross-country odyssey. The two strands intertwine in Part III, "Answer," when Dick and Perry are arrested with the incriminating boots in their possession on December 30, 1959 in Las Vegas. The police use a typical ploy with the defendants: they suggest to each one that the other has confessed. Eventually both give statements, and what occurred in the Clutter house is revealed. There is some disagreement about who actually committed which murder—at first Perry says Dick killed the two women while Dick blames Perry for all four deaths, but Perry later claims to have killed all four people, and Dick is more than will-

ing to go along with this version (Capote 277, 287). Both versions are testified to at trial by Alvin Dewey, who heard Perry's confession. Perry's final story is that, after tying up the victims and separating the men from the women, the defendants discovered there was no money in the house. They stole only Kenyon's radio, a pair of binoculars, and about forty dollars (Capote 272, 278). But when Dick hesitated about leaving "'No witnesses,'" as he had continually bragged, Perry took over, first cutting Herb Clutter's throat, then shooting him in the head, and finally systematically shooting Kenyon, Nancy, and Bonnie in the head with Dick's twelve-gauge shotgun (Capote 49, 276–77). In Part IV, "The Corner," the nickname for the execution site, the defendants are tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. After a lengthy appeal process, they are hanged on April 14, 1965 (Capote 378–82).

This brief overview of the major events of the narrative obviously does not account for the style in which Capote conveys the information, and Capote's techniques enrich the text. It is true that Capote employs "a conventional four-part classical structure," but with a difference (Garrett 3). There are eighty-five scenes ranging in length from two paragraphs to twenty-five pages (Hollowell 72). "The narrative reads 'like a novel' largely because of the use of scene-by-scene reconstruction instead of historical narration, the ironic heightening of dialogue, and the skillful manipulation of point of view" (Hollowell 70). Pizer notes that about half of the text consists of direct quotation "in the form of monologue, dialogue, or snatches of conversation within authorial comment and summary narrative" ("Documentary" 111–12).

We gain insight into the characters through flashbacks. We learn about the Clutters, the perfect family to the casual observer but somehow flawed. Mrs. Clutter is described as "'nervous'" and she suffers from "'little spells'" that periodically require her hospitalization (Capote 17). Because of her mother's condition and the absence of her two older sisters, one married and one engaged, Nancy has to take over many of the household duties. Mr. and Mrs. Clutter sleep in separate rooms. Galloway finds:

[T]here is something almost compulsive about the Clutters' good works, their cherry-pie public spirit and unimpeachable respectability . . . not that the Clutters seem too good to be true, but that their own standards seem to place such ferocious demands on the individual, and to ask him to perform in an uncompromisingly public arena. (Galloway 158)

Trilling believes "the most interesting aspect of Mr. Capote's book as an American story lies . . . in the curiously ambiguous personality of Mr. Clutter":

One is reluctant . . . to draw so exemplary a citizen, a successful teetotaling Republican devout progressive farmer, into the circle of self-alienated Americans. Yet manifestly this was a man without connection with his inner self, living by forced intention, by conscious design, programmatically, rather than by any happy disposition of natural impulse. (Trilling 258–59)

In other words, he did all the right things but he didn't enjoy them.

Through flashbacks we learn that both Dick and Perry have been physically deformed in accidents. Dick was in a car accident in 1950. "It was as though his head had been halved like an apple, then put together a fraction off center . . . the left eye being truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue squint . . ." (Capote 43). Perry's injuries, acquired in a motorcycle accident in 1952, are more serious: ". . . his chunky, dwarfish legs, broken in five places and pitifully scarred, still pained him so severely that he had become an aspirin addict" (Capote 43). We learn that Dick comes from a farming family, has been divorced twice and fathered three sons, and has earned a living as an auto mechanic when he is not stealing (Capote 34–35, 311–14). Perry is one of four children of a father of Irish descent and a Cherokee mother. The couple performed in rodeos until the mother's drinking became debilitating, and when the parents separated the children were placed in various homes. Perry is a bedwetter who was beaten by the nuns at the orphanage for his habit. After running away, he spent some time with his father in Alaska before joining the Merchant Marines at sixteen, and later joined the army, serving in Korea. He ended up in prison for a burglary (Capote 26–27, 309–11).

Many critics note the similarity between the themes of *An American Tragedy* and *In Cold Blood*, some explicitly, like McAleer, and others implicitly. "[T]he community is outraged not so much by the murders as by the assault on the American Dream which the murders signify" (McAleer 579). "Capote represents Hickock and Smith as moral perversions of decent men brought about by the poverty, violence, and ill-luck that reached back for at least one generation" (Reed 107). Galloway asserts "one unifying theme—the metamorphosis of dream into nightmare" (162). Capote clearly delineates the difference between the classes:

The aristocracy of Finney County had snubbed the trial. "It doesn't do," announced the wife of one rich rancher, "to seem curious about that sort of thing." Nevertheless, the trial's last session found a fair segment of the local Establishment seated alongside the plainer citizenry. (339)

Capote also examines the idea of isolation or loneliness, “the strange isolation of human beings who become victims of an impersonal, often fearful agency” (Morris 177). Perry becomes “the total symbol for the exile, the alienated human being, the grotesque, the outsider, the quester after love, the sometimes sapient, sometimes innocent, sometimes evil child” (Morris 186). Christensen notes that Perry and Dick do at first form a relationship, at least in their propensity for violence. “Despite Capote’s denial of homosexual attraction between the team of murderers, here we have a chilling example of men who exert what is perhaps a fatal influence over each other in the course of their bonding” (Christensen 54). In addition to the themes that Capote shares with the other authors we have discussed, Hellmann refers to “the mythic theme of paradise lost” and “a parable of innocence destroyed,” and McAleer cites the thematic elements of violation of “the mythic Garden of the World” and “estrangement from Nature” (Hellmann 67; McAleer 575). Herb Clutter’s remark “an inch more of rain and this country would be paradise—Eden on earth” supports the views of both Hellmann and McAleer (Capote 15–24).

What makes Capote’s work different from that of Dreiser, Wright, and Mailer is that Capote attended the actual trial and took his own notes on the proceedings. He does not depend on newspaper articles or secondhand notes when he recreates the trial. Capote admitted that “the single most difficult thing in my book, technically, was to write it without ever appearing myself, and yet, at the same time, create total credibility” (qtd. in Plimpton 38). Phillip K. Tompkins has written the most comprehensive article on the issue of what went on in the legal process, although his intention was to apply journalistic standards to Capote’s text to discover if the facts were “true” (125). The trial process in *In Cold Blood* covers 61 pages, sixteen per cent of the text (Capote 283–344). This figure does not include the lengthy appeals process, which occupies the last 39 pages of the narrative. The actual trial transcript is only 515 pages long (Tompkins 127). Kauffmann alleges that the account of the trial is not “sufficiently interesting” to justify its length (19). One wonders what his opinion would be of the trial in *An American Tragedy*.

In Part IV, “The Corner,” Capote begins the trial process with an entry from Perry’s diary: “*Monday 11 January. Have a lawyer. Mr. Fleming. Old man with red tie*” (Capote 289). The arraignment has already occurred, but Capote has chosen to describe only the defendants’ entrance into the Finney County courthouse at the end of Part III. We now learn that the defendants have pled insufficient funds and the court has appointed two lawyers to represent them. Neither lawyer wants the job. Perry’s attorney, Arthur Fleming, 71, former mayor of Garden City and “a classic country lawyer more happily at home with land deeds than ill deeds,” states, “I do not desire to serve. . . . But if the court sees fit to appoint me, then of course I have no choice’” (Capote

289, 318). Dick's lawyer, forty-five-year-old Harrison Smith, a golfer and an Elk who must assume an aggressive manner in court because "really he is a mild and lenient man," is equally unenthusiastic: "Someone has to do it. And I'll do my best. Though I doubt that'll make me too popular around here" (Capote 289–90, 319). Mr. Smith appears at least as much concerned with his reputation in Garden City as with his client's best interests.

On the other hand, the county attorney, Duane West, is more enamored of the case. He is described as "an ambitious, portly young man of twenty-eight who looks forty and sometimes fifty" (Capote 290). Tompkins criticizes Capote's presentation of West because Tompkins believes that ". . . West is made to appear somewhat lower in rank than a law clerk" (Tompkins 170). Though Tompkins is correct that Capote does not tell us about West's role in the case, what Tompkins's assessment does not take into consideration is that the lawyers do not play as major a role in Capote's narrative as they do in *An American Tragedy* and *Native Son*.<sup>2</sup> Capote chooses to focus on the defendants rather than the lawyers. West, Fleming, and Smith all receive less attention than the lawyers in the other three narratives.

It is interesting that Dick, in his own version of events at trial, discusses one lawyer's trick that West uses—and reveals how effective the tactic is:

I never did think much of the Finney County Attorney and I sure liked him less after our first day in court. He kept pointing his finger at me and telling the jury how no good I was. I resented it. It wasn't so much what he was saying but how he was saying it and who he was saying it in front of.

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Every time the county attorney pointed his finger at me I wanted to hit him. (Hickock 82)

West plans to seek the death penalty because of the violence of the crime, the lack of mercy shown by the defendants, and in order to protect the public (Capote 290). West believes the death penalty is especially necessary under the circumstances considering that "in Kansas there is no such thing as life imprisonment without possibility of parole. Persons sentenced to life imprisonment actually serve, on the average, less than fifteen years" (Capote 290). West appeals to the feelings of retribution and the fears of the public in calling for the death penalty.

The state has hired Logan Green as special assistant to Duane West:

Green, a suavely tough little septuagenarian, has an imposing reputation among his peers, who admire his stagecraft—a repertoire

of actorish gifts that includes a sense of timing acute as a night-club comedian's. An expert criminal lawyer, his usual role is that of defender, but in this instance the state had retained him as a special assistant to Duane West, for it was felt that the young county attorney was too unseasoned to prosecute the case without experienced support. (Capote 339–40)

(Tompkins states that Green was retained at West's request rather than being forced on West as a partner [170].)

The judge is Roland H. Tate:

[A]s a fellow jurist once remarked, "Tate is what you might call a lawbook lawyer, he never experiments, he goes strictly by the text"; but the same critic also said of him, "If I were innocent, he's the first man I'd want on the bench; if I were guilty, the last." (Capote 301)

Capote is careful to include details about the judge that highlight his position as the archetypal "insider." He is rich, raises horses, and owns lots of land (Capote 298).

Capote's descriptions of the participants and the events in court are interspersed with the daily events of life in jail for Dick and Perry. The attorneys confer with their clients and discuss the possibility of a change of venue, the same issue raised in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (McAleeer 574). Fleming advises Perry that he is just as well off in Garden City, which is a religious community and where most of the ministers are opposed to capital punishment, including the Clutters' own minister. Fleming is practical. "Remember, all we can hope is to save your lives" (Capote 300).

The lawyers had already filed a pretrial motion shortly after the arraignment requesting a psychiatric examination for the defendants at the state hospital one hundred miles from Garden City to determine whether they were "insane, imbeciles or idiots, unable to comprehend their position and aid in their defense" (Capote 300). The motion is opposed by Logan Green, who argues that Kansas law follows the M'Naghten Rule—whether the accused knew the nature of his act and knew it was wrong—and that nothing in the Kansas statutes requires that a psychiatrist determine competency; an ordinary doctor in Garden City would do. Smith argues in response that there are lives at stake here and that the defendants "are entitled to examination by persons of training and experience" (Capote 301). The judge appoints a commission of three Garden City doctors to examine the defendants. After an hour's conversation with the defendants, the doctors rule that neither man suffers from a "mental disorder" (Capote 302). A second pretrial motion, this time for a delay of trial, is based on

two factors, first, that Dick's father, a witness, is too ill to testify (he is dying of cancer) and second, that the estate auction at the Clutter farm is scheduled to be held the day before the trial begins and advanced publicity for the auction might influence the prospective jurors. The judge denies the motion "without comment" (Capote 302–03). (It would turn out that the attorneys were correct about the attraction of the auction—over five thousand people attended [Capote 303].)

The trial process begins with jury selection on March 22, 1960. Capote notes how "self-aware" the major participants are—all four lawyers wear new suits, and even Dick looks respectable in clothes provided by his family. Only Perry is not properly dressed for the occasion; he wears a shirt borrowed from the undersheriff and jeans with the cuffs rolled up (Capote 306). Capote goes into more detail about the jury selection process than Dreiser does. We know that the jury pool is all male, that jury selection takes only four hours, that the twelve jurors and two alternates are selected from the first fifty-four questioned, that seven are rejected on preemptory challenges by the defense and three by the prosecution, that twenty are released because they either oppose capital punishment or have already formed an opinion about the case, and that the defendants are too busy writing statements for a psychiatrist who volunteered to examine them to pay much attention to jury selection. (We eventually discover that Dick was paying attention. He later wrote his own account of jury selection: "Our trial was more like a circus than anything else. It took only one day to choose the jury. The way the feeling was running around town I figured it would take at least three or four days for this. But the whole trial didn't last much longer than that" [Hickock 82].) The jury is ultimately composed of "half a dozen farmers, a pharmacist, a nursery manager, an airport employee, a well driller, two salesmen, a machinist, and the manager of Ray's Bowling Alley. They were all family men (several had five children or more), and were seriously affiliated with one or another of the local churches" (Capote 306–07). Though Capote does not fully describe the questioning of potential jurors, he does provide some examples that highlight possible biases on the part of the jurors:

During the *voir dire* examination, four of them told the court they had been personally, though not intimately, acquainted with Mr. Clutter, but upon further questioning, each said he did not feel this circumstance would hinder his ability to reach an impartial verdict. The airport employee . . . said, when asked his opinion of capital punishment, "Ordinarily I'm against it. But in this case, no"—a declaration which, to some who heard it, seemed clearly indicative of prejudice. [He] was nevertheless accepted as a juror. (Capote 307)

Presumably Capote was one “who heard it” and correctly assumed that this juror, who had already made up his mind about what kind of case this was, would be dismissed. It would seem advisable for defense counsel to challenge for cause the potential jurors who knew the Clutters, even if only slightly, especially when only fifty-four out of a panel of approximately one hundred and sixty had been questioned (Capote 306). Besides pointing out the possible bias of the jurors, a matter that can later be raised on appeal, Capote is also alerting the reader to the composition of the jury and emphasizing the position of Perry and Dick as outsiders in this community.

As the trial begins, the defendants “affected a courtroom attitude that was simultaneously uninterested and disinterested; they chewed gum and tapped their feet with languid impatience as the state summoned its first witness” (Capote 315). What is noteworthy here is not only that Capote focuses on the reactions of the defendants, as Dreiser focuses on Clyde’s reactions and Wright on Bigger’s reactions, but also that Capote fails even to mention the opening statements of the attorneys. He moves right from the defendants’ courtroom behavior to the first witnesses for the state. As stated previously, the defendants are the object of Capote’s attention, not the lawyers. What the lawyers have to say is not as important as the reactions of Perry and Dick.

Capote summarizes the testimony of all of the witnesses. In some cases we do hear brief exchanges between a witness and a lawyer, but we do not get extensive portions of question-and-answer. Testifying for the state concerning events on the morning after the murders are Nancy Ewalt and Susan Kidwell, who were first to enter the house; Nancy Ewalt’s father; Sheriff Robinson; and the coroner, Dr. Fenton. Capote’s method of summarizing testimony moves the narrative forward rapidly and makes the outcome appear inevitable. The defense waives cross-examination of each of these witnesses (Capote 315). This is probably an appropriate tactic because to question these witnesses will only emphasize the horror discovered in the house. Next to testify is Chief Investigator Rohleder, who took the crime scene photographs and identifies those photos on the stand. The prosecution offers the photos into evidence; the defense objects that the pictures are prejudicial and will inflame the jury. The judge overrules the objection, and the seventeen photographs, including pictures of the bodies, are shown to the jury. “It amazed them, it made them angry, and several of them . . . stared at the defendants with total contempt” (Capote 316). Dick’s father comments to a journalist—Capote?—that the judge is prejudiced: “Just no sense having a trial” (Capote 316). (Mr. Hickock mistakenly believes that the judge was a pallbearer at the Clutter funeral.)

The prosecution’s final witness for the day is the “mystery man” who supplied the information that led to the arrest of the defendants. Floyd Wells, Dick’s former cellmate, once told Dick about the Clutter farm and its alleged

safe. As a state's witness, he was moved from the prison for his own safety, and he is "wearing a very decent dark-blue suit which the State of Kansas had bought for the occasion—the state being concerned that its most important witness should look respectable, and consequently trustworthy" (Capote 317). Capote is illuminating a common practice: looks count in court, and most attorneys advise clients on appearance and courtroom demeanor. The advice given to the prosecution's star witness is in contrast to the lack of attention paid to Perry's courtroom attire as described earlier. Capote notes another usual procedure: that Wells has been prepared for his time on the witness stand, his testimony "perfected by pretrial rehearsal" (Capote 317). Logan Green conducts the direct examination of Wells, who says he worked as a hired hand for the Clutters and, ten years later, discussed the family with Dick when they shared a cell in prison. Wells's testimony, as that of a key witness, is partially presented by Capote in question-and-answer form. Wells says he thought there had been a safe at the Clutters':

"The next thing I knew he [Hickock] was talking about robbing Mr. Clutter. . . . He told me if he done anything like that he wouldn't leave no witnesses. . . . He told me he would probably tie them up and then rob them and then kill them." (Capote 318)

Capote is right; the state has "established premeditation of great degree" (Capote 318). During cross-examination Fleming implies that Wells should have done something if he believed Dick was serious. Wells responds that people are usually just talking in prison: "I didn't believe he'd do it." If that is so, then Fleming wants to know why Wells thought Dick had committed the crime. "Because it was done just like he said he was going to do!" (Capote 318–19). Not a very successful cross-examination. Harrison Smith fares better when he questions Wells on behalf of Dick. He attacks Wells's credibility, asking whether Wells has a nickname like "Squealer" or "Snitch," which Wells denies. He asks how many times Wells has been in jail. Then he wants to know why Wells waited several weeks before telling his story to the authorities. Smith manages to get Wells to admit that a reward of one thousand dollars had been offered by a newspaper—and Wells had seen the paper—before Wells came forward. But the defense is stymied on the issue of immunity:

"What kind of immunity did the county attorney offer you for coming up here today and testifying?"

. . . Logan Green protested: "We object to the form of the question, Your Honor. There's been no testimony about immunity to anybody." (Capote 320)

The objection is sustained, and Wells is excused. Smith, in attempting to show potential bias on Wells's part, was asking a question beyond the scope of cross-examination. In some trials the prosecutor himself raises the issue of immunity by asking the witness whether he has been promised anything in exchange for his testimony. Here that question was never asked on direct—possibly because the state did suggest that something might be done for Wells—which makes the topic of immunity “beyond the scope” of cross-examination. As Wells leaves the stand, Dick comments, “Sonofabitch. Anybody ought to hang, he ought to hang. Look at him. Gonna walk out of here and get that money and go scotfree” (Capote 320). And Capote tells us Dick is right: “. . . not long afterward Wells collected both the reward and a parole.” And, also predictably, Wells eventually ends up serving a thirty-year sentence for armed robbery in Mississippi (Capote 320).

The remaining prosecution witnesses represent law enforcement agencies. Four Special Agents from the F.B.I., who are lab technicians, testify concerning the physical evidence: “blood samples, footprints, cartridge shells, rope and tape” (Capote 321). Four Kansas Bureau of Investigation (K.B.I.) agents testify about the interviews with the defendants and their confessions. On cross-examination the defense attorneys attempt to show that the confessions were obtained through coercion. “The allegation, which was untrue, irritated the detectives into expounding very convincing denials” (Capote 321). Here the lawyers' frustration is showing; they are damned if they do nothing, but in fact there is nothing they can do. When a reporter asks Smith why he pursued this particular line of questioning he responds, “What am I supposed to do? Hell, I'm playing without any cards. But I can't just sit here like a dummy. I've got to sound off once in a while” (Capote 321).

Alvin Dewey is the state's most effective witness (Capote 321). Saving the strongest witness for last is usually a good idea because jurors tend to remember best what they hear last. Dreiser used this tactic when he had the prosecution's best evidence, Roberta's letters, read at the end of the prosecution case. Dewey testifies as to Perry's confessions because Perry ultimately refused to sign a statement. Tompkins asserts that Capote's version of the two confessions does not agree with the version published in the newspapers: “The two versions differ in many small details, but the most serious discrepancy concerns the mental state of Smith at the moment of the murder” (Tompkins 167). (Tompkins does an extensive review of the matter in his article.) Capote, focusing as he does on the defendants' reactions in court, notes that this is the first time that Dick hears that Perry told the police that Dick intended to rape Nancy until Perry stopped him. This is also when Dick learns that Perry originally stated that Dick killed the two Clutter women, but later changed his story to accept responsibility for all four deaths. Dewey says, “He told me that Hickock . . . didn't want to die

with his mother thinking he had killed any members of the Clutter family. And he said the Hickocks were good people. So why not have it that way” (Capote 322). Perry’s assertion that he was trying to spare the Hickocks is believable within the context of Capote’s complex portrait of Perry. As we have already seen with Dick’s father, Capote often records the response of those in the audience during the trial. Mrs. Hickock’s response to this testimony is to cry. She says later that it was wrong of her to hate Perry, that she prays for Dick and Perry and the Clutters (Capote 323).

The defense case takes only ninety minutes during which five witnesses testify. The defendants do not testify in their own defense, “and therefore the question of whether Hickock or Smith had been the actual executioner of the family did not arise” (Capote 328). Capote is correct that unless the defendants testify as to their roles in the crime, the issue of individual responsibility cannot be explored. Only they know the truth. But Capote should have made clear that it does not matter, from a legal standpoint, who pulled the trigger. Under the Felony-Murder Rule in effect in Kansas at the time, and in many states today, one is responsible for any death that occurs during the commission of a felony in which one participates, such as a robbery. Whether a participant pulls the trigger or not is immaterial. The purpose of the rule is to emphasize the seriousness of participation in a felony—and to encourage would-be felons to choose their friends carefully. The criminal has no opportunity after the fact to argue “Not me.” Apparently there was always disagreement over whether Dick actually killed anyone that night. Tompkins tells us that Duane West and Dewey both believed Dick had killed the women and adds: “[I]t was poor reporting to lead such a careful reader as Rebecca West [who mistakenly assumed Dick was unjustly executed since he had not actually shot anyone (113)] to the confident conclusion that Smith had committed all the Clutter murders while the principals were less than unanimous” (Tompkins 170). In addition to the lack of any method of assessing individual responsibility, it should also be noted that Dick might have fared better if the defendants had been tried separately. If Perry were willing to testify at Dick’s trial that he, Perry, had killed the Clutters, then Dick would have a chance to argue for a life sentence rather than the death penalty. He would still be found guilty, but he would have a stronger case for sparing his life.

Dick’s father, the first defense witness, does try to mitigate his son’s responsibility by asserting that Dick has never been the same since his car crash in 1950. This testimony might hold some sway over the jury except for the fact, as prosecutor Green elicits on cross, that Dick was first arrested in 1949, *before* his accident, for breaking into a drugstore. The dialogue between Green and Mr. Hickock would be amusing were it not that poor Mr. Hickock, dying of cancer, is trying to do what little is within his power to help Dick:

... now you tell us your son had a change in his attitude and conduct after 1950?"

"I would say so, yes."

"You mean that after 1950 he became a good boy?"

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"... He just didn't act like the same boy."

"You mean he *lost* his criminal tendencies?" (Capote 329)

Testifying next is Dr. W. Mitchell Jones, the psychiatrist who volunteered to examine the defendants when the court ordered a panel of local doctors, not psychiatrists, to rule on the defendants' mental condition. Under the M'Naghten Rule, he may be asked only if he has formed an opinion whether or not Dick knew the difference between right and wrong at the time of the commission of the crime. Once he answers "yes" or "no" as to having an opinion, then he is asked what that opinion is. Capote does an excellent job of describing the consequences of the M'Naghten Rule and of illuminating the clash between legal and medical definitions of insanity:

"I think that within the usual definitions Mr. Hickock did know right from wrong."

Confined as he was by the M'Naghten Rule ("the usual definitions"), a formula quite color-blind to any gradations between black and white, Dr. Jones was impotent to answer otherwise. But of course the response was a letdown for Hickock's attorney, who hopelessly asked, "Can you qualify that answer?"

It was hopeless because though Dr. Jones agreed to elaborate, the prosecution was entitled to object—and did, citing the fact that Kansas law allowed nothing more than a yes or no answer to the pertinent question. (Capote 330)

The objection is properly sustained under the law. "Much of Part IV dramatizes the premise that conventional morality and criminal law are inadequate means of judging the acts of a Perry Smith" (Pizer "Documentary" 117). Capote, however, goes outside the law to include what the doctor would have said had he been allowed to testify. For the reader this is the kind of inside information that we often crave at an actual trial but are privy to rarely. The doctor would have said that Dick shows characteristics of a severe character disorder and would have recommended that tests be done to rule out the possibility of organic brain damage resulting from his car accident (Capote 331).

The doctor's testimony—or lack thereof—ends Harrison Smith's defense case, and Fleming takes over on behalf of Perry. Three men testify as character witnesses. Joe James, a Native American with whom Perry had lived for two years when he was younger, testifies, "Perry was a likeable kid, well liked around the neighborhood—he never done one thing out of the way to my knowledge." Don Cullivan, who is an acquaintance from Perry's Army days who was contacted by Fleming to act as a character witness after not having seen Perry in nine years, is described as a "staid young Catholic, a successful engineer who had taken his degree at Harvard, a husband and the father of three children." Cullivan testifies, "During the time I knew him in the Army, Perry was a very likeable fellow" (Capote 324, 332). The prosecution objects to any further general testimony about Perry's character from both witnesses as "incompetent, irrelevant, immaterial" (Capote 332). Reverend Post, the Protestant chaplain from Kansas State Penitentiary, chooses instead to tell the story of Perry's gift to him of a portrait of Jesus Christ that now hangs on his office wall. The Reverend just happens to have photographs of that portrait with him, but Logan Green successfully objects to their admission into evidence. Capote's selection of the testimony of these witnesses suits his plan to humanize the defendants in the reader's eyes and to portray the system as dehumanizing. The more personal details these witnesses can share about the defendants, the more the jury may come to see Perry and Dick as individuals and the more difficult it may be for those jurors to sentence the men to death. The judge rules this evidence is irrelevant.

Finally, Dr. Jones testifies concerning his opinion on Perry's ability to know the difference between right and wrong. This time he has no opinion. Fleming says, "You may state to the jury why you have no opinion," but Green objects. "The man has no opinion, and that's *it*." Capote adds, "Which it was, legally speaking" (333). But that finality is overcome by Capote once again providing the reader with what the doctor would have said. The doctor, after consulting with a specialist in forensic psychiatry at the Menninger Clinic, concludes that Perry killed Mr. Clutter "under a mental eclipse, deep inside a schizophrenic darkness." Perry had "suddenly discovered" himself destroying "a key figure in some past traumatic configuration." Capote points out that Perry had come to the same conclusion himself. He had told Don Cullivan, "They [the Clutters] never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it" (Capote 338–39).

The defense rests and the closing arguments are about to begin. Once again Capote observes the audience. The "aristocracy" of Finney County are there to hear the closing argument of Logan Green and the instructions of Judge Tate, "esteemed members of their own order" (Capote 339). Lawyers from out of town have also arrived to watch Green perform. The order of presentation is

the judge's instructions on the law to the jury and then closing arguments by West, Fleming, Harrison Smith, and Green, in that order. We do not hear the judge's "level-headed" instructions. West's speech reinforces the principle of the Felony-Murder Rule: "Can there be a single doubt in your minds regarding the guilt of these defendants? No! Regardless of who pulled the trigger on Richard Eugene Hickock's shotgun, both men are equally guilty." West also calls for the death penalty "not in vengeance, but in all humbleness" (Capote 340). Fleming's speech, "described by one journalist as 'soft-shell,' amounted to a mild churchly sermon" (Capote 340). Presumably this journalist is Capote managing to inject his opinion into a "factual" account. The portion of Fleming's speech that Capote shares with us emphasizes that the body should not be destroyed because it is a temple in which the soul resides. "Harrison Smith, although he too appealed to the jurors' presumed Christianity, took as his main theme the evils of capital punishment . . ." Smith calls the death penalty "a relic of human barbarism." "All we ask is mercy. Surely life imprisonment is small mercy to ask . . ." (Capote 340). Capote tells us that not everyone was paying attention, but "Green woke them up" (340). Capote devotes the most space to Green's closing argument and tells us Green works without notes, an impressive feat. Green may perform without notes, but not without some tricks. He tells the jurors that he expected the defense attorneys to use the Bible in their arguments, "But *I* can read, too." He produces a Bible and begins to read verses:

Green fumbled, and seemed to accidentally shut the Bible, whereupon the visiting legal dignitaries grinned and nudged each other, for this was a venerable courtroom ploy—the lawyer who while reading from the Scriptures pretends to lose his place, and then remarks, as Green now did, "Never mind. I think I can quote from memory. Genesis Nine, Verse Six: 'Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed.'" (Capote 341)

But, Capote tells us, Green does not want to argue the Bible:

"Our state provides that the punishment for murder in the first degree shall be imprisonment for life or death by hanging. That is the law. You, gentlemen, are here to enforce it. And if ever there was a case in which the maximum penalty was justified, this is it." (341)

Green reminds the jurors that the motive was money: "For forty dollars' worth of loot!" Green believes giving the minimum punishment is unthinkable. He ends,

"The next time they go slaughtering it may be *your* family. I say to you," he solemnly said, staring at the panel in a manner that encompassed and challenged them all, "some of our enormous crimes only happen because once upon a time a pack of chicken-hearted jurors refused to do their duty. Now, gentlemen, I leave it to you and your consciences." (Capote 342)

When only forty minutes later the jurors return a verdict of guilty and recommend the death penalty, Dick says to Perry, "No chicken-hearted jurors they!" Their laughter is captured in a photograph published in a Kansas paper with the caption "The Last Laugh?" (Capote 344).

When the jury filed out of the courtroom not one of them would look at me. I looked each one in the face and I kept thinking, Look at me, look at me, look at me!

But none of them would. (Hickock 83)

The appeals process in the case takes five years and includes five stays of execution and three reviews by the U.S. Supreme Court (Capote 355, 369, 376–77). At one point Dick contacts the Chairman of the Legal Aid Committee of the Kansas Bar Association, who appoints an attorney to investigate Dick's claims that a change of venue should have been granted, that some jurors had indicated a presumption of guilt and others had known the victims, and that the defense attorneys were incompetent and inadequate and had not prepared a defense. The investigating attorney files a habeas corpus petition to bring these issues before the court. *Habeas corpus* is Latin for "you have the body," and the term stands for a variety of writs, the most common of which has for its purpose "to test the legality of the detention or imprisonment; not whether he is guilty or innocent" (Nolan and Nolan-Haley 709). A hearing on the habeas corpus petition is ordered, and the lawyers return to court, this time to defend themselves. After a hearing that lasts longer than the original trial, Judge Thiele's ruling is that the defendants had received "a constitutionally fair trial" (Capote 365–69). In a different appeal heard later, the opinion of a three judge federal Court of Appeals panel supports the ruling of the judge in the habeas corpus action:

"The attorneys were faced with a situation where outrageous crimes committed on innocent persons had been admitted. Under these circumstances, they would have been justified in advising that petitioners enter pleas of guilty and throw themselves on the mercy of the court. Their only hope was through some turn of fate the lives of these misguided individuals might be spared." (Capote 369)

Capote includes in the text a perceptive discussion of the right of appeal in our system. He says “even an attorney of moderate talent can postpone doomsday year after year.” He compares the process to a game of chance “first in the state courts, then through the Federal courts until the ultimate tribunal is reached—the United States Supreme Court. But even defeat there does not signify if petitioner’s counsel can discover or invent new grounds for appeal . . .” Capote describes this as “a slow cruel contest” (Capote 370). Would those convicted agree? Some, like Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*, might. Surely the families of the victims would concur in Capote’s sentiment that the process is “a slow cruel contest” during which they are forced to relive the deaths of their loved ones.

Gerald Clarke observes that Perry and Dick were concerned about the narrative Capote was writing for two reasons. First, because their appeals were based on the premise that they had not planned the murders, they did not want Capote to reveal otherwise. Second, they did not want to be memorialized as psychotic killers. Capote never told them that he had completed all of *In Cold Blood* except for the description of the executions (Clarke 346). At the end of their appeals odyssey, Dick and Perry wanted Capote to try to get them another stay. They also wanted him to spend the last day with them before they were hanged on April 14, 1965 (Clarke 353). Capote did not have the heart; he has called the executions “the most emotional experience of my creative life” (qtd. in Grobel 117). Garrett says that Capote “[wrote] around” the hangings, and he is right (Garrett 10). By now Capote had become friends with the prisoners. He spent the two days before the executions vomiting in his motel room and arrived at the prison shortly before the executions (Reed 103; Clarke 355). He was the last person to speak to the men. He said they told him good-bye and Perry said, “Good-bye. I love you and I always have” (Grobel 117). Capote accompanied the men to the gallows and cried uncontrollably when it was over (Reed 103). Capote paid for headstones for their graves (Clarke 355).

In an essay in *The Observer* on March 13, 1966, Kenneth Tynan charged that Capote could have done more to save the lives of Smith and Hickock and that he had a moral obligation toward his subjects to do so. Tynan believed, based on his own discussions with legal and psychiatric professionals, that Capote should have hired a psychiatrist to examine and confirm the prisoners’ insanity and thereby save their lives. Tynan also alleged that Capote had an interest in the deaths of Smith and Hickock because a reprieve would have altered the text and because Capote could not release the narrative until these men were executed (Tynan 441–46). Capote defended himself in *The Observer* and accused Tynan of many inaccuracies in his essay. As to the contention that Capote could not have released the book until after the executions, he pointed out that he had legal releases from Smith and Hickock and could have published when he chose.

The sole deterrent was that no one could judge with any certainty whether my book would help or hinder the case as it was being appealed through the Federal courts, and I was not willing to risk publishing anything that might have proved detrimental to Smith and Hickock's chances for a reversal. . . . ("Guts" 449)

Capote notes that "there are only *two* psychiatrists who know at firsthand anything about [the case] whatever" ("Guts" 449).

No one, not Dr. Jones, nor Dr. Satten, or any of the numerous lawyers who worked on the case . . . *ever* thought that a successful appeal could be made in Kansas courts (which abide by the McNaghten Rule) on the basis of insanity or 'diminished responsibility'. ("Guts" 450)

While Tynan faults Capote for failing to say he did not want these men to die, in this situation it might be argued that actions speak louder than words. Capote did not publish during the lives of the characters and did maintain a relationship with them up until their deaths. His five year involvement would seem to indicate at least neutral if not good intentions rather than the grasping, selfish motives Tynan imputed.

McAleer points out that critics might say that the Clutter murders were good for Capote's American Dream because he made millions on the project (580). While McAleer might be right about some of the critics, Garrett presents a fairer assessment of the reason for the success of the text: "*In Cold Blood* is classic in the sense that it is an addition to the ancient and immemorial *genre* of the tale of crime and punishment which has fascinated writers and readers for as long as there have been any" (Garrett 4). Capote is certainly working in the tradition of Dreiser. McAleer lists twenty-one parallels between Perry and Clyde as well as noting many other similarities between the texts (581–82). But there is a difference between the two works:

. . . *In Cold Blood* exemplifies the seemingly random, meaningless crime that became symptomatic of America in the sixties. For implicit in the story of the Kansas killings are larger questions about the social dislocations of the sixties and the failure of conventional morality to explain away the senseless violence we read about daily in the newspaper. (Hollowell 85)

The social framework of Dreiser's America was changing, but the outline of what was acceptable behavior was still visible and acquiesced to by a majority of the members of society. In Capote's America, the traditional markers of

family, love, and hard work are fading. Under the circumstances, an anything-goes attitude on the part of the criminal and a more desperate search for motives by the rest of us prevail. And the legal system does not allow for the thorough discussion of the psychology of the defendants that we seek. Everyone involved in the Clutter case seems to agree that Perry and Dick suffer from some mental disturbance, but the type of mental disturbance does not fall within the legal definition of “insanity” and, therefore, cannot be explored in court. Are we not back to Dreiser’s argument that the legal system is ill-equipped to decide certain types of cases?

Hollowell wrote his description of the “social dislocation,” “failure of conventional morality,” and “senseless violence” of the sixties in 1977, the year Gary Gilmore was executed and two years before the publication of Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*, also a description of a particular crime and a particular time in our history. Mailer’s depiction of a crime committed fifteen years after the Clutter killings presents an even bleaker portrait of the inability of the system to deal with someone who has spent almost half his life in prison and does not “fit” in society. In Mailer’s world there is no such thing as rehabilitation, no matter how well intentioned our efforts.

#### NOTES

1. In his *Conversations with Capote*, Lawrence Grobel writes:

Capote never claimed—as many critics thought he did—that he invented narrative journalism or, as *In Cold Blood* came to be labeled, the nonfiction novel. He *did* consider it to be a serious new literary form and he did feel he had made a major contribution toward its establishment. And he also staked the claim to have undertaken the most comprehensive and far-reaching experiment in the medium of reportage. (109)

The fact remains that in his *New York Times Book Review* interview *Capote* labels *In Cold Blood* a “nonfiction novel” and states, “It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: *the “nonfiction novel,” as I thought of it’*” (emphasis added, qtd. in Plimpton 2). One might be excused for mistaking this statement for a claim of creation.

2. Tompkins lists the following as West’s contribution to the prosecution of the case:

. . . he was involved in the investigation . . . held daily press conferences . . . prepared the brief and the trial outline for the case . . . asked the County Commissioners for permission to hire an assistant—Logan Green . . . handled much of the examination of the witnesses . . . gave a forty-five-minute closing argument . . . represented the County and the State in the appeal before the Supreme Court of Kansas. (Tompkins 170)

Tompkins is right; these activities do constitute a “significant” role.

TRENTON HICKMAN

*“The Last to See Them Alive”:  
Panopticism, the Supervisory Gaze, and  
Catharsis in Capote’s In Cold Blood*

George Plimpton’s *Truman Capote* (1997), a self-proclaimed “oral biography,” revisits Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and the author’s often flamboyant interaction with the individuals from whom he gleaned the details necessary for his famous “nonfiction novel.” One of the more vivid anecdotes in Plimpton’s book comes from Harold Nye, a Kansas Bureau of Investigation officer whom Capote interviewed, who recounts a night on the town with the author:

My wife is a very strict individual, straight as an arrow. One time in Kansas City, Truman asked us if we wanted to go out for the evening. Sure, you don’t turn him down. First, we get a cab, and just off the main street . . . he pays a hundred bucks to get us into a place above a gallery to watch what’s going on in a lesbian bar. Now, here is what it was: they were eating, tables, dancing, probably a hundred people in there, female couples doing their thing. This was horrible to my wife. She tried to turn away from it, but she didn’t say anything to Truman. We leave and he takes us over to a male gay bar. We sit down and order a drink, and it isn’t three minutes until some of these young bucks nail him, talking to him, playing with his ears, just right in front of my wife. But how the hell do you say

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anything to a man as famous as Truman Capote that you don't like what he's doing. We finally tried to excuse ourselves and leave. But Truman gets us to go on to the Jewel Box, a little theatre, and, you know, I expect there must have been thirty female impersonators in there . . . and they're damn good. I mean, they looked as good as any beautiful babes in New York. But at the end of these little skits they revealed that they were males. Now, to take this lady—and Truman knew what kind of lady she was, because he had been to my house—and subject her to this. . . . Well, his stock went down from sixty per cent down to about ten. (170–71)<sup>1</sup>

Most striking in this passage is the way in which Nye's account reveals the degree to which Capote values watching others witness a series of spectacles that he has specifically orchestrated for their shock. The jaw-dropping of the Kansans (who, despite averted eyes, gather a large amount of detail from the experience) provides a certain pleasure for Capote, and I contend that his choreography of this incident reflects a similar strategy in *In Cold Blood*. In the novel, Capote stages his story as he staged an evening for his Kansas guests, containing his characters within specific boundaries not only determined by the "history" of the actual Holcomb murders but by Capote's own desires for drama and scandal. Once contained in a novelistic structure reminiscent of Foucault's reiteration of Bentham's panopticon, Capote's characters are forced into a spectacle that offers readers of the book vicarious participation in the slaughter of an entire family from Kansas. In Capote's view, this strategy offers not only an angle into the criminal mind but a catharsis for an audience that can vent its own destructive energies through interaction with his novel rather than through violent action in the community. Understanding Capote's narrative strategy also identifies what may well be Capote's real contribution to the "nonfiction novel": the panopticon as template for fictionalizing nonfiction events in a novel.

### **Panopticism in Capote's *In Cold Blood***

When critical assessments of *In Cold Blood* appeared in 1966, reviews of the work varied widely. Whether these reviews were positive or negative, however, most failed to perceive Capote's spectacle as anything but what *New York Times* writer Conrad Knickerbocker called "a total evocation of reality" (37), debating instead the text's proper genre. Nor were initial reviewers unduly troubled by Capote's lingering, supervisory presence; indeed, Knickerbocker asserted, "not the least of the book's merits is that it manages a major moral judgment without the author's appearance once on stage" (37). Eliot Fremont-Smith felt that Capote's transmission of the story was equally "real" and transparent in its structure and motives:

Part of Capote's equipment is his carefully trained memory: he took no notes while interviewing, and nothing was taped; instead, he listened, and thereby won extraordinarily candid accounts. When "In Cold Blood" was published last fall in four installments in *The New Yorker*, it was preceded by an "Editor's Note: All quotations in this article are taken either from official records or from conversations, transcribed verbatim, between the author and the principals." (Transcribed verbatim in his head, that is.) (23)

Part of the reason critics accepted that Capote had merely recorded and represented "the facts" was Capote's own tireless promotion of the novel's merits in this regard. One reviewer suspected that Capote himself might have choreographed the outpouring of positive assessments:

The Svengali primarily responsible for this publishing phenomenon is a short, blond, rather flamboyant former employee of *The New Yorker* magazine. His name is Truman Capote. . . . This is not to say that Mr. Capote went around saying: "Be on the lookout, I am writing a great book." He didn't. But his discussions of the material that was to become the book had the effect of pebbles falling in a pool. The repercussions have led to what probably has been the greatest first-month sale of any book in history. The ripples are still moving toward a readership that is as yet undefined and apparently unlimited. (Smith F16)

These "ripples" would finally lead critics to a skepticism of Capote's method. David Guest was the first to link *In Cold Blood* with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and its conception of Bentham's Panopticon. Guest sees Capote's novel as a "prison" for killers Smith and Hickock, and argues that Capote's insistence on the factual aspect of his narrative (and his determination to erase his own narrative presence from the text) betrays his panoptic motivations. He writes,

By adopting these dissembling strategies, then, the novel, like much penal discourse, masks the exercise of power. . . . The narrator's vision, like the privileged gaze of surveillance, sees its subjects while remaining unseen. In a sense, the narrator subsumes the investigating detective, the examining psychiatrist, the sentencing judge, and the guard in the observation tower. From this lofty position, the narrator may even see more than these intermediary agents could, as when Agent Dewey doggedly pursues leads that we know are false. (123)

By recognizing that Capote “strategizes” his sight in the novel, Guest illustrates how (despite early critical pronouncements to the contrary) Capote is not only present in the novel but deeply imbricated in the “surveillance” that the novel performs.

Where Guest uses his discussion of Capote’s panopticon primarily to illustrate the American novel’s participation in the reinscription of penal authority and the perpetuation of the judicial and police power, however, I am more interested in how Capote’s panoptic configuration of the novel assures that the characters of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock are never exempt from the scrutiny of the narrator, and as a result are readily available to the reader’s gaze as well. In truth, Capote’s book is very like a Greek tragedy, since his readers know from the beginning that Smith and Hickock have in reality been apprehended, incarcerated, and executed for their crimes. Because the historical individuals on which the characters are based have lost their ability to threaten, Capote can force them into positions of submission and capitulation throughout his text. As Guest has argued, Capote is able to supervise the killers even to the point of probing their damaged psyches and to conclude that some mental dysfunction dealt Smith and Hickock the deranged hand of cards they are “forced” to play in Holcomb (111–15).

Of course, in order to reach his diagnosis of Hickock and Smith’s mental dysfunction, Capote must also exert his supervisory and panoptic forces on the Clutter family. Only by controlling and managing the Clutters’ sphere of power as well as that of the killers is Capote able to provide the environment in which Smith and Hickock will be pushed to their full criminal potential. Again, this is not difficult when viewed from a “historical” standpoint, since the dead victims of killers are even easier to stage-manage than the killers themselves. Capote draws his panoptic net tightly around the Clutter family, almost as if they might otherwise escape their murderous destiny and foil the spectacle Capote plans for his readers. This first chapter title, “The Last to See Them Alive,” highlights the significance of his super-vision of what will happen to the Clutters: not only will they be “seen” in sharpest, most intrusive detail, but these views will be the “last,” as a carefully predetermined number of minutes ticks down to their excruciating and inevitable demise. In essence, Capote’s chapter title casts the Clutters as death row prisoners in their final hours before execution, where everything is final—the final day at work, the final meal, the final date, and so on—and the Clutters are the only ones who don’t know it. As Capote noted in a 1968 interview with Eric Norden,

Here you have the Clutter family on one hand—such the perfect prototype of the good, solid, landed American gentry, as you point out—and on the other hand you have Hickock and Smith, particularly Smith, representing the dangerous psychotic element,

empty of compassion or conscience. And these two extremes mated in the act of murder. . . . Given what Perry was, and what the Clutters represented, the only possible outcome of their convergence was death. (133–34)

What Capote views as the inevitability of the Clutters' murder becomes their death sentence in his text. In order for Capote's awful calculus to succeed, he cannot let the Clutters stray far from what he would have us see as the seeming inevitability of their death. In this way, he owns both the victims and the killers of the novel, severely constraining the reader as well. One character, Bobby Rupp, is himself acutely aware of a watchful gaze during the Clutters' final night:

It was clear as day—the moon was so bright—and cold and kind of windy; a lot of tumbleweed blowing about. But that's all I saw. Only now when I think back, I think somebody must have been hiding there. Maybe down among the trees. Somebody just waiting for me to leave. (52)

### Capote's Narrative and the Supervisory Gaze

Using cinematographic terms, Guest describes Capote's "heightened narrative vision" (113), as a variety of pans, zooms, and cuts to highlight certain details. Capote's notes even employ the language of cinematography, moving from one paragraph of description to another with the phrase "Cut to" (Capote Papers, Box 7, Folder 9).<sup>2</sup> The novel's cinematographic passages often depend on the narrator's knowledge of events to come, particulars that would not likely be noticed as significant without the advantage of hindsight.

Considering the panoptic gaze controlling this text as more specifically cinematic, it is not surprising that the two Clutter women suffer a particular, voyeuristic violation. Bonnie is subject to the town's scrutiny because she has been "a psychiatric patient [for] the last half-dozen years" (7),<sup>3</sup> and must endure the doctors who examine her inside and out to determine the cause of her illness. "Misplaced vertebrae" are diagnosed as the source of her prolonged mental illness, yet the narrative calls this into question: "Was it possible—the tension, the withdrawals, the pillow-muted sobbing behind locked doors, all due to an out-of-order backbone?" (7). A skeptical voice impugns Bonnie's willingness to subject herself to these exams and pronouncements, yet adds its own intrusive judgement against her in doing so. An ultimate male gaze emanates from one of the only fixtures in Bonnie's sparse room, "a picture of Jesus walking on water" (20).

To get briefly exegetical, the miracle depicted in this scene occurs in the fourth "watch" of the night, when the disciples on the boat are supposed to

be looking for danger. They are surprised to find that rather than being the watchers, they are the watched—Jesus has been observing them from out on the dark sea, and suddenly walks within their field of vision. The scene thus includes the themes of being watched without knowing it and approached in a frightening, unexpected manner. Later, Capote zooms in on the bookmark in Bonnie's Bible: "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is" (30). Simply put, Capote leads his readers to understand that Bonnie Clutter worships a God who gazes continually from heaven and from the wall of her room, who will come unexpectedly, "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2) despite the good life this God's perpetual judgement has forced her to lead.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Bonnie knows that she is always being watched by at least *one* male; the irony, of course, is her total lack of awareness of the observations of Perry and Hickock.

If *In Cold Blood* makes Bonnie Clutter the object of multiple male gazes, it subjects her daughter Nancy not only to more intense manifestations of these same gazes but to the reader's gaze as well. It is the reader's gaze that witnesses Nancy's near-rape moments before the killers slay her in her own bed. The narrative's panoptic, supervisory gaze never allows the reader to forget that Nancy will shortly be killed, but it does allow the reader to admire her beauty first. She is "the town darling" (7), admired for her homemaking skills, her friendliness, and her physical attractiveness. She is Becky Thatcher in her school's production of *Tom Sawyer*, where Mr. Clutter says, "Just beautiful, honey—a real Southern belle," and the narrator adds, "[w]hereupon Nancy had behaved like one; curtsying in her hoop-skirted costume, she had asked if she might drive into Garden City" (8). While always playful in doing so, Nancy constantly grooms herself for the different male gazes that monitor her. In one lengthy description of her appearance, Capote writes,

Nancy was a pretty girl, lean and boyishly agile, and the prettiest things about her were her short-bobbed, shining chestnut hair (brushed a hundred strokes each morning, the same number at night) and her soap-polished complexion, still faintly freckled from last summer's sun. But it was her eyes, wide apart, darkly translucent, like ale held to the light, that made her immediately likeable, that at once announced her lack of suspicion, her considered and yet so easily triggered kindness. (19)

Where Mrs. Clutter asks, "Please, Lord, don't let anyone see me this way" (29), Nancy obviously wants to be seen.

Both Nancy's father and boyfriend vie for control of her personal life; her father disapproves of Bobby Rupp's Catholicism and attempts to disrupt the couple's ties. Meanwhile, Bobby later recalls for investigators the last

time he saw her. Nancy was wearing “an I.D. bracelet I gave her last January for her sixteenth birthday—with her name on one side and mine on the other,” and laments that the ring she was wearing “wasn’t my ring—*our* ring” (51). Later he pointedly asserts, “I believe she was about ready to wear our ring again” (51).

Herb Clutter and Bobby Rupp are not the only males who supervise Nancy, however. In preparation to offer her up to Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, Capote’s narrative male gaze transgresses all boundaries, moving into her bedroom, which he calls “the smallest, most personal room in the house” (55). Nancy’s bedroom is not spartan like her mother’s, but “girl-ish” and “frothy,” painted in “pink or blue or white” (55–56). Where Mrs. Clutter has Jesus staring at her from the wall, Nancy has Bobby Rupp’s picture—actually, many pictures of him—watching her. In fact, Nancy’s favorite picture of Bobby shows him gazing at her on an afternoon they went on a picnic together (56). From here, Capote’s masculine narrator enters into a description of Nancy’s “beauty routine,” which he describes as

a cleansing, creaming ritual, which on Saturday nights included washing her hair. Tonight, having dried and brushed her hair and bound it in a gauzy bandanna, she set out the clothes she intended to wear to church the next morning: nylons, black pumps, a red velveteen dress—her prettiest, which she herself had made. It was the dress in which she was to be buried. (56)

Capote thus turns the “beauty routine” into the “ritual” that leads to Nancy’s final two appearances in the novel: at the murder and at her own funeral. Though she does not know it yet, she readies herself to be admired by Perry and Dick, who Capote and the reader know will be gazing at her momentarily, and for the mourners at her funeral, who will be the ones to gaze at her lifeless body in its “prettiest” dress.

Capote makes sure that his narrator leafs through Nancy’s diary as well, examining her most private thoughts. This intrusion takes Capote’s panoptic surveillance to another level, allowing the reader to monitor not only Nancy’s varied handwriting (57) but her most personal “dramas” and insecurities. Capote’s “entry” into Nancy’s diary completes the process of consumption that he begins with his first description of her—having consumed Nancy’s physical attractiveness, the reader now partakes of those lines she intended to be kept secret, even from Bobby Rupp.

The collective weight of these supervisory male gazes stage-manages the many dimensions of these female characters’ lives. Having considered these scopophilic and panoptic presences, however, we should also recognize that separating Capote’s gaze from the narrator’s gaze takes Capote’s claims

to fact-based reportage at face value. What should be made of Capote's presence in these gazes, if anything?

Significantly, the distance between Truman Capote, the cosmopolitan gay writer, and his "objective" (i.e., heterosexualized, male) narrator narrows most not when managing and situating the female characters within *In Cold Blood* but when choreographing his depiction of Perry Smith. While finding Dick Hickock to be a cold, manipulative figure, Capote's narrator characterizes Perry Smith in sympathetic, nurturing, stereotypically "feminine" terms. For example, the narrator "reports" that Perry has feet that "would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady's dancing slippers" (15) and "small and calloused but girlish hands" (119). Dick, who refers to Perry throughout the novel as "honey," "beauty" and "baby," finally decides that Perry's "weepy womanly eyes" and his "nagging, whispering voice" make Perry "like a wife that must be got rid of" (214–15). In fact, the narrative characterizes Perry not just in stereotypically feminine terms but through phrases reminiscent of the traditional, reserved, small-town wife: we read of the "mother" in Perry (16) and how he was "little old big hearted Perry" (207) whose personal squeamishness makes him "'ashamed' to take off his trousers" (119). It is Perry who wants Dick to be the "totally masculine" (124) counterpoint to his implied effeminacy, and who finds "the planning of the menu" for the dinner he eats with Cullivan in jail to "concern him more than the outcome of his trial" (289).

In other words, the narrator allows the reader to gaze at the aspects of Perry Smith and to hear those comments of Dick Hickock's that would effeminize Perry in the reader's eyes and make him vulnerable, even pitiable. The narrator wants to obscure this direction and manipulation of Perry Smith as a character, however, so he allows the reader to hear Perry's surprise that the "queens" in the prison and elsewhere "wouldn't leave me alone" (133–34). That way, Perry's ambiguous sexuality is first a preexisting phenomenon and only secondarily a creation of the panoptic gaze.

Capote pointedly enters the narrative in these characterizations by attempting to mitigate Perry's "unwomanly" participation in the bloody crime, thus "entering" a plea on his behalf. Capote records Dewey's assessment that "he found it possible to look at the man beside him [Perry Smith] without anger—with, rather, a measure of sympathy—for Perry Smith's life had been no bed of roses but pitiful, an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another" (246). Clearly, Dewey wants Perry executed for his crimes—Capote's text says exactly that—but not before he makes moves to identify with Perry's sociological and emotional history. Elsewhere Capote offers eight pages of psychological exegesis that blame Perry's problems on the events and environment of his early years (296–302). Close reading reveals that none of this information is admitted into actual courtroom testimony. If Capote is reporting just the facts, then why is this material here?

Clearly, Capote feels some degree of personal interest in the depiction of Perry Smith that he does not feel for the depictions of Dick Hickock and other characters. This does not invalidate the “male” gaze that circumscribes the female characters in the novel; rather, it selectively adapts the panoptic forces of the male gaze to manage and ameliorate Perry Smith’s effeminized existence within the text. Likely, this was one of Capote’s goals from the start. Early in his handwritten notes of the trial, Capote speaks of “Perry, poor Perry,” betraying a developing emotional investment in a softer, more humane view of this “womanly” man turned hard by circumstances (Capote Papers, Box 7, Folder 4).

### Capote’s Catharsis through Voyeurism

As the killers eliminate each member of the Clutter family, one of the most tense moments surrounds the near-rape of Nancy Clutter. When George Plimpton asked Truman Capote, “What turned them [Perry and Dick] back to the Clutter house after they’d almost decided to give up on the job?” Capote replied,

Oh, Dick was always quite frank about that. I mean after it was all over. When they set out for the house that night, Dick was determined, before he even went, that if the girl, Nancy, was there he was going to rape her. It wouldn’t have been an act of the moment—he had been thinking about it for weeks. He told me that was one of the main reasons he was so determined to go back after they thought, you know for a moment, they wouldn’t go. Because he’d been thinking about raping the girl for weeks and weeks. (“Story” 58–59)

This rape attempt takes center stage in the Clutters’ final moments, eclipsing Dick’s desire to find the supposed safe that initially leads them to the Clutter farm. Since Capote feels more sympathetic to Perry than to Dick, *In Cold Blood* permits Perry to narrate his version of the encounter, incriminating Dick and portraying himself as a person of some moral compunction. Yet Perry, like the other males in the story, makes Nancy an object of his intrusive gaze:

She was all dressed, like she’d been awake some while. I mean, she had on socks and slippers, and a kimono, and her hair was wrapped in a bandanna. She was trying to smile. She said, “Good grief, what is this? Some kind of joke?” I don’t guess she thought it was much of a joke, though. Not after Dick opened the bathroom door and shoved her in. . . . (240)

A few minutes later, when the Clutters are tied up, Perry heightens the reader's concern about what Dick might do to Nancy, saying,

I was worried about that myself. I suspected Dick was plotting something, something I wouldn't stand for. When I finished tying Mrs. Clutter, sure enough, I found he'd taken the girl to her bedroom. She was in the bed, and he was sitting on the edge of it talking to her. I stopped that; I told him to go look for the safe while I tied her up. After he'd gone, I roped her feet together and tied her hands behind her back. Then I pulled up the covers, tucked her in till just her head showed . . . I asked Nancy if she had a boy friend [sic]. She said yes, she did. She was trying hard to act casual and friendly. I really liked her. She was really nice. A very pretty girl, and not spoiled or anything. (242)

Thus Perry takes measures to prevent Dick from gazing at Nancy's body (by covering her up and tucking her in "till just her head showed"), but first views her in terms of her beauty and sexuality—"I asked if she had a boy friend . . . a very pretty girl." Nancy is, after all, one accustomed to being looked at; by "trying hard to act casual and friendly," she merely perpetuates the sort of relationship she has had with men throughout the book, and possibly throughout her life. The fact that Perry is won over by Nancy's affability and beauty probably saves her from being raped, since it is Perry who staves off Dick in the end with a threat of violence.

Beyond offering Perry Smith the opportunity to redeem some aspect of his miserable self in the eyes of the reader, why would Capote include so many of these details about a rape that ultimately didn't happen? Capote opined in one interview that allowing the reader to witness such details had, in his view at least, an ameliorative effect on them because it offered readers a "healthy form of release" that would "serve as a tranquilizer for the libido" (Norden 138). Capote, whose problematic line of thinking implies that the reader participates in the scene either by empathizing with the desire to be looked at and dominated or to gaze at and dominate, sees such passages as having a role in alleviating the sorts of pressures that might drive someone into a pathological state if not released. Whatever one may think about the validity of Capote's theory—which certainly had the luxury of not having to account for more recent evidence linking sexual predation to the viewing of pornography and other sexually-explicit materials—it accords dramatically with what Aristotle might posit about the Greek-style tragedy that Capote plays out in *In Cold Blood*: this "release" seems at some level to be merely Capote's transformation of the Aristotelian concept of catharsis, which contends that an audience

may purge itself of antisocial impulses by being taken through the depiction of tragedy within the confines of the play.

Even if such a catharsis actually occurs, though, where is Capote in this transaction? His role as choreographer for the catharsis that he alleges simultaneously places him in a position not unlike the one he assumed in his night with the conservative Nyes aghast in Kansas City, for Capote produces a narrative that prods the reader to grapple with “unthinkable” acts of sexual power and then watches their reaction. If the depiction ever crosses the line, it is Capote who has crossed it. He is the one who has the final pleasure of sitting back to watch to see if a nation of readers will participate in the final, terrible moments of Nancy Clutter's life and be willing (or even anxious) to keep reading the book. The audience's catharsis still happens within the arena of Capote's panopticon and, having staged the details that lead to their reactions, he takes ownership of the readers' emotional response to the horrors that Dick and Perry have produced.

### **Capote, *In Cold Blood*, and the Nonfiction Novel**

*In Cold Blood* exercises several sorts of power. First, it positions the Clutters and their killers within a limited environment in which they are fated to meet and from which none can escape. Within, their movements are precisely observed and catalogued, their every minute accounted for. Second, this supervisory gaze is a gendered one. As a manifestation of the male gaze, it singles out Bonnie and Nancy for special surveillance, objectification, and exploitation, and seeks to effeminize Perry Smith even as it seeks to explain the psychosociological causes of his crime. As the male gaze of Capote's panoptically-constructed novel pervades the most personal aspects of these women's lives (their bodies, medical histories and diagnoses, and even diaries) as well as the confidential medical diagnoses of Perry Smith, the reader's participation becomes more invasive. Finally, Capote's panoptic control reaches a critical point in Nancy's near-rape, where he draws readers to the scene and allegedly “purges” them of their own pathological tendencies through a pseudo-Aristotelian catharsis. By the time the murders are finished and the details of the killings completely confessed, Capote has made the reader complicitous in all of the major power structures that he has built into the novel. How, then, does this relate to Capote's alleged invention of the “nonfiction novel”?

Shortly after Capote's novel appeared in print, Eliot Fremont-Smith lamented that “the author is now concerned that ‘*In Cold Blood*’ be taken as an example of a new literary form, ‘the nonfiction novel.’” He continues,

This has caused and will cause a good deal of myopic squabbling about just what a novel is and what a “nonfiction novel” can

possibly be that superb, sensitive, perceptive and stunning reportage isn't. It is too bad, because this very fine work raises questions and offers insights that are far more important and, God knows, more interesting than technical debates over the definition of a new or possibly not new literary form. (23)

Fremont-Smith's assessment proved correct, as critic after critic—and most importantly, Capote himself—felt compelled to raise the issue of what the “nonfiction novel” might be, whether or not what Capote was doing was “true crime,” mere journalism, or some other type of writing altogether. George Garrett, who agreed the text might well become the “classic,” still pointed out that with respect to genre it was nothing new (81, 90–91). Yet Capote's careful assembly of the panopticon of *In Cold Blood* could well be argued as his most significant contribution to the development of the so-called nonfiction novel. The interviews show that Capote worries constantly about his role in the innovation of the genre, and evidence his particular concern about how readers might see Lillian Ross's *Picture* as the true originator of the form (rather than those authors that Garrett suggests—Cummings, Hemingway, and others). Ross's novel, which Capote calls “brilliant” but diminishes as “at least a nonfiction novella” (qtd. in Plimpton 197), does display in its behind-the-scenes reportage of the making of John Huston's film of *The Red Badge of Courage* a certain attention to the secret life of its “characters,” and certainly creates a narrative arc that would tacitly acknowledge the author's awareness of how the narrative must end. What seems absent from Ross's treatment, though, is the careful, consistent supervisory gaze upon the characters that figures so prominently into the development of Capote's narrative, a much smaller investment in coaching her readers to understand the portent of certain signifiers along a narrow range of responses and in observing her readers' stages of shock and surprise at the introduction of particular details into the narrative at carefully-chosen points. Put differently, Capote inserts himself into the “nonfiction” of his text in ways that might seem imperceptible to the casual reader but that lure the reader into certain, almost inescapable responses to the text. Capote imprisons the reader along with the Clutters and the convicts. If Capote purports to tell the “truth” in his “nonfiction” account of the Clutter murders and the subsequent trial and execution of the murderers, then he does not aim for the “truth” to set his readers free.

It is perhaps this aspect of the novel that led Capote to criticize Norman Mailer so extensively for *The Executioner's Song*, which Capote alleged had stolen all its ideas from *In Cold Blood* without according him the credit he deserved. “Of course I had read *In Cold Blood* and had obviously taken it into account,” Mailer said. “But Truman didn't invent the form” (qtd.

in Plimpton 214). Perhaps, though, Capote had innovated the panoptic approach to the true-crime variety of the nonfiction novel, which Mailer's later novel would in turn owe to Capote's work. While others may have been the first to dabble in the nonfiction novel, Capote would arguably be the first to bend it to his will so as to capture and control the reader through its peculiar style of panoptic narration.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the employees of The New York Public Library's Manuscripts and Archives Division for granting me access to the Truman Capote Papers. Their help was invaluable to me as I completed this project.

1. As one might imagine, Nye never forgives Capote for this night of indiscretion. Indeed, it is Nye who, only a few pages later in Plimpton's book, accuses Capote of having bribed a prison guard to look the other way while Capote shared an illicit tryst with Perry Smith during that condemned man's final days in prison (*Truman Capote* 188–89).

2. Capote's notes reveal that he shared this cinematographic orientation with Perry Smith, who also wanted to think of Capote's emergent narrative in terms of a film, even asking Capote at one point, "was there anyone from the cinema world there" to see him (Capote Papers, Box 7, Folder 10).

3. Capote's notes even include the revelation from Kathryn Sughrue, director of the 4-H Club in Finney County at the time the Clutters were murdered, that her "first thought" was that "Mrs. Clutter had gone berserk and killed them all" (and Capote adds, "a conclusion that many people, women at least, seemed to have at first jumped at") (Capote Papers, Box 7, Folder 8).

4. Capote's notes betray his ironic perception of the frequent placement of pictures of Christ on the walls of the Clutter home. When describing in his personal notes one such picture in the Clutters' master bedroom, Capote writes, "Guess who looking down at city of Jerusalem on wall?" (Capote Papers, Box 7, Folder 13).

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MARSHALL BRUCE GENTRY

*He Would Have Been a Good Man:  
Compassion and Meanness in  
Truman Capote and Flannery O'Connor*

Flannery O'Connor's critics have occasionally noted similarities between O'Connor and Truman Capote. Usually they contrast them in terms of their writing styles and theological assumptions and then, as a rule, find Capote lacking in the comparison. I think the connections are so numerous and interesting that we may learn about O'Connor through Capote. Both writers were capable of impressive meanness and compassion toward both literary characters and real people. Moreover, there are important similarities between O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and Capote's 1965 nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood* (a study of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock's murder of the Clutter family in Kansas in 1959), and between Capote's "Handcarved Coffins" and O'Connor's "The River." Capote's novel about a mass murder is, among other things, a tribute to O'Connor; I say that despite the extent to which "Handcarved Coffins" may seem to recant part of that tribute. An examination of Capote's borrowings from O'Connor's fiction indicates his sometimes grudging respect for the power of her work, from which he probably acquired increased compassion toward the meanness in criminals, as shown in *In Cold Blood*. Capote seems unsure at times of what to do with his own meanness, for he directs some of it at O'Connor in "Handcarved Coffins." This analysis also suggests we should reconsider O'Connor's treatment of criminality and the extent to which O'Connor may

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have meant it when she said she admired her Misfit. O'Connor's compassion for criminals is greater than Capote's, in part because O'Connor has a better understanding of how the expression of meanness is an essential element of compassion. I believe that O'Connor's fascinating struggle with how to treat The Misfit leaves open the possibility of his goodness and that O'Connor is ultimately compassionate toward him.

The relationship between Truman Capote and Flannery O'Connor was strained, and if one judges by their published comments, one concludes that the strain existed primarily because of O'Connor. Capote, famous for his sarcastic comments, apparently had a high opinion of O'Connor. He told Pati Hill in an interview that O'Connor was "one of the younger writers who seem to know that style exists," adding, somewhat patronizingly, "she has some fine moments, that girl" (Capote 1957, 29). He has also been quoted as saying "Flannery O'Connor had a certain genius" (qtd. in Grobel 36). O'Connor's level of enthusiasm for Capote was considerably lower. In a letter to Betty Hester dated December 8, 1955, O'Connor wrote, "Mr. Truman Capote makes me plumb sick" (*HB* 121). Why would O'Connor react with such meanness toward Capote? Ted R. Spivey argues that O'Connor's distaste for Capote has to do with "her revulsion at the frankly sexual in literature" (Spivey 31). Spivey believes that O'Connor also envied Capote's success (Spivey 82). After all, Capote was only about six months older than O'Connor, and perhaps O'Connor was troubled to see another southerner so readily accepted by a northern literary establishment. Spivey suggests that her "fanatical denunciations" actually show she was "caught up unconsciously in some of [his] views" (Spivey 53).

Capote himself discouraged investigations of his connections to other writers. Peter G. Christensen complains that "Capote pretended to be above questions of literary influence." Christensen adds, "he bristled when it was suggested that he borrowed" (Christensen 221–22). Nevertheless, Capote did borrow from O'Connor. Helen Garson suggests Capote takes from O'Connor the name Hulga for a character in his last, unfinished novel, *Answered Prayers* (Garson 70), and she sees connections between Capote's "Handcarved Coffins" and two O'Connor stories, "Greenleaf" and "The River" (Garson 26). His most significant borrowings appear in a work Capote claimed was nonfiction, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. Why would Capote borrow from O'Connor for this book? A practical connection, though perhaps Capote did not know it at the time, is that both writers were inspired by newspaper crime reports, but more significantly, he knew O'Connor's fiction had the psychological and mythic depth his work needed. Capote was insecure about needing to be inspired by another writer, but I believe his goal was to learn from O'Connor, not to plagiarize her.

O'Connor might have been on Capote's mind because they each had a story in the second edition of an important textbook, *The House of Fiction*, edited by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, which was published in 1960 as Capote was starting work on *In Cold Blood*. O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" appears next to Capote's "The Headless Hawk" in the anthology, and the two stories undergo comparison by the editors. "Commentary on Capote and O'Connor" ends with the significant observation that Capote's stories lack "the theological framework" of O'Connor's, in part because "there is in his stories no one like 'The Misfit,' with his crisp, dogmatic explanation of why he is compelled to commit murder" (Gordon 386). I know of no reason to believe Capote was reading O'Connor's works while he worked on *In Cold Blood* (1959–65), but Capote would surely have been reminded of O'Connor's works when she died, eight months before the executions of Hickock and Smith in 1965. Many of the final pages of Capote's book were written following the executions.<sup>1</sup>

Several critics have noted significant borrowings from "A Good Man" for *In Cold Blood*. Jon Tuttle has noted two. First, citing the similarities between O'Connor's grandmother and Mrs. Bonnie Clutter, who both suffer moments of mental instability and who both are the last members of their families to be shot, Tuttle suggests Capote borrowed a speech O'Connor gives the grandmother as she is about to be killed (Tuttle 193–94). The grandmother insists, "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people!" Then she adds, "I know you're a good man at heart. I can just look at you and tell" (*CW* 147). In *In Cold Blood* words similar to Mrs. Clutter's are reported by Perry Smith: "she felt I was a decent young man, I'm *sure* you are, she says, and made me promise I wouldn't let Dick hurt anybody" (Capote 1965, 242). The second borrowing Tuttle sees is of The Misfit's words about how one ought to live if Jesus did not do what he said he did: "it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness" (*CW* 152).<sup>2</sup> *In Cold Blood* attributes similar sentiments to York and Latham, two killers on death row with Hickock and Smith: "They shared at least one firm opinion: the world was hateful, and everybody in it would be better off dead. 'It's a rotten world,' Latham said. 'There's no answer to it but meanness. That's all anybody understands—meanness. Burn down the man's barn—he'll understand that. Poison his dog. Kill him'" (Capote 1965, 323). Tuttle believes that Capote ignores the religious significance of The Misfit's speeches (Tuttle 194), though there is certainly plenty of talk about religion in *In Cold Blood*.<sup>3</sup> Another significant borrowing, noted by David Guest, has to do with passages in which The Misfit and Dick Hickock describe their varied experiences. Here is The Misfit:

"I was a gospel singer for a while," The Misfit said. "I been most everything. Been in the arm service, both land and sea, at home and abroad, been twice married, been an undertaker, been with the railroads, plowed Mother Earth, been in a tornado, seen a man burnt alive oncet," and he looked up at the children's mother and the little girl who were sitting close together, their faces white and their eyes glassy; "I even seen a woman flogged." (*CW* 149)

And here is the passage from *In Cold Blood* in which Capote uses The Misfit's syntax and rhythm as Dick Hickock demonstrates he is more experienced than another killer:

I've walked a lot of mean streets. I've seen a white man flogged. I've watched babies born. I've seen a girl, and her no more than fourteen, take on three guys at the same time and give them all their money's worth. Fell off a ship once five miles out to sea. Swam five miles with my life passing before me with every stroke. Once I shook hands with President Truman in the lobby of the Hotel Muehlebach. Harry S. Truman. When I was working for the hospital, driving an ambulance, I saw every side of life there is—things that would make a dog vomit. (Capote 1965, 333)

Among the many other similarities between O'Connor's "A Good Man" and Capote's *In Cold Blood* are the extreme foreshadowing, the premise of an edenic American landscape violated by an invader, the similarities between the murdered families, the similarities between the killers, revelations of mistrust among members of an apparently normal and complacent American community, the satirizing of average Americans, skepticism about the ability of the legal and penal systems to understand the mysteries of the human heart, the suggestion of a motive for murder in a dysfunctional child-parent relationship, the significance of religion to criminals who consciously deny its relevance, killers who wander the countryside aimlessly but who know there are only two paths one can take, and heavy use of animal imagery—especially in the form of cats, parrots, and snakes. Perry Smith's fantasy of a parrot that defeats a snake (Capote 1965, 92–93) is uncannily similar to the ending of "A Good Man," where The Misfit, wearing a parrot shirt, shoots the grandmother at the moment when she appears snakelike (*CW* 152). One sometimes wonders whether Capote's killers patterned their lives after the fiction of Flannery O'Connor.<sup>4</sup>

The most interesting similarity between *In Cold Blood* and "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the one that brings up fresh questions about O'Connor, is that surrounding both works we find instances of the authors' admiration

for their murderous characters. Just as O'Connor tried to discover ways in which her Misfit could in a profound sense be a good man, throughout *In Cold Blood* Capote searches for the soul of a poet within Perry Smith. In real life Truman Capote was helpful to both Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, assisting them with their appeals and stays of execution and even buying their tombstones. And he befriended the murderers as he interviewed them for his book. Alvin Dewey—the primary detective in the Clutter case and a major character in *In Cold Blood*—told George Plimpton that Capote “saw himself in Perry Smith . . . in their childhood.” Joe Fox went further: “He adored Perry” (qtd. in Plimpton 173–74). Harold Nye went furthest, speculating that Capote and Perry Smith “had become lovers in the penitentiary” (qtd. in Plimpton 188). And yet, when the time came to turn all his work into a book, Capote refused to let his emotional involvement get in the way of his art. Ned Rorem told Plimpton that Capote was finally eager to see Hickock and Smith die, and Rorem quotes Capote as once saying that *In Cold Blood* “can’t be published until they’re executed, so I can hardly wait” (qtd. in Plimpton 300). It is the nature of Plimpton’s work that things are sometimes reported fourthhand: Kathleen Tynan told Plimpton that Capote, upon hearing that Hickock and Smith would be executed, said to Kenneth Tynan, “I’m beside myself! Beside myself! Beside myself with joy!” (qtd. in Plimpton 215–16). Of course, Capote could be hiding his true feelings, but clearly there is a limit to Capote’s friendship.

The most significant debate has to do with whether *In Cold Blood* is sufficiently fair to Perry Smith. The book does claim to be fair, even compassionate. The book’s epigraph, from François Villon’s “Ballade des pendus” (Ballad of the Hanged), surely works to emphasize the similarities between Capote and the two murderers. Villon’s poem was written while the fifteenth-century French criminal and poet was himself in danger of being hanged (Bonner xxii–xxiii), and the speaker in Villon’s poem is one of the criminals already hanged. Surely Capote could see himself in Villon, an outsider who desired a general amnesty.<sup>5</sup>

One could defend *In Cold Blood* as being fair to Perry even while it labels him as unlike other humans. The primary theme of all of Capote’s work up to and including *In Cold Blood* has been described by William L. Nance as “acceptance of the unconventional, of the misfit in others and in oneself,” an interpretation Nance says Capote personally endorsed (Nance 220–21). Or one could argue that Capote is fair because he tries to prove that Smith is actually like everyone else, including his victims. This may be Capote’s goal in pointing out that, when the surrounding community learns that the Clutter family has been killed, some at first consider Mrs. Clutter responsible (Capote 1965, 61, 70). According to George R. Creeger’s study of animal imagery in *In Cold Blood*, Capote shows that conventional people label crimi-

nals as animals rather than as humans in order to hide from themselves their own capacity for violence against fellow humans (Creeger 6). This argument implies that *In Cold Blood* actually shows everyone to be essentially the same in that we are all capable of violence. As Nance points out, the fictional final scene in *In Cold Blood* equates all the book's "dreamer[s] of unfulfilled dreams," all the book's "victims," so it is no stretch to say the ending compares Perry Smith and the murdered daughter, Nancy Clutter (Nance 210). It is also easy to compare Perry with Mrs. Clutter in their habits of collecting things, for they both have sentimental attachments to possessions that others see as having little value. Another version of this defense of Capote is that he proves that average Americans made Perry a killer; David Galloway claims that what happens in *In Cold Blood* is "not so much murder as suicide: in a real sense America was both killer and victim, turning the deferred-payment shotgun against herself" (Galloway 161).

The opposing argument is that *In Cold Blood* proves that Smith and Hickock really are different from the rest of us, less than human, and therefore undeserving of our sympathy. The insanity defense that Capote promotes for pages could be a concession of this major point. Even Capote's title, which could be a nod to O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, may constitute a betrayal of Hickock and Smith, since most readers will think the title refers to the killers' being cold-blooded rather than to, say, a cold-blooded American legal system. David Guest makes the amazing argument that O'Connor's Misfit is Capote's "model psychopath" and that Capote was not therefore as inclined to defend Smith and Hickock as he claimed to be (Guest 129–30). Another interesting charge against Capote is that, within the book, he never takes an explicit stand on Perry's behalf. The peculiar insistence on objectivity and near invisibility in the narration of *In Cold Blood*, a stylistic choice Capote often insisted was crucial to his book's success, can be considered a cop-out. As Guest claims, "Capote's narrator is both omniscient and impotent" (Guest 109). I can agree with Guest that Capote's choice of narrator forced him into a weaker presentation of a case on the murderers' behalf, but at the same time, I can testify, based on years of teaching *In Cold Blood*, that the book does open many students' eyes to the case against capital punishment. Here, however, it is not necessary to reach a conclusion about whether Capote did the right thing. What is clear is that O'Connor helped Capote write a great book in that he took from her lessons in seeing the potential good in a bad person, in putting aside meanness for the sake of compassion.

I hope it is already apparent that the issues raised by Capote's book are issues worth raising in O'Connor's works. But before I shift from Capote, it is worth noting that he wrote another "nonfiction" piece about murder, "Handcarved Coffins," which clearly alludes to O'Connor's "The River," a story that combines drowning and baptism. While Jack De Bellis speculates

that *In Cold Blood* was Capote's revenge on the South and "a way of release from his psychological bondage to the South" (De Bellis 535), a better case can be made that it is in "Handcarved Coffins," published in 1980, that Capote most forcefully pushes O'Connor away. I should begin by clarifying that I do not consider "Handcarved Coffins" to be nonfiction; even Gerald Clarke, who generously accepts most of *In Cold Blood* as "uncompromising realism" of a basically accurate sort, sees "Handcarved Coffins" as "mostly fictional" (Clarke 359). Clarke says, "The idea for *Handcarved Coffins* came from Al Dewey" (Clarke 516), but most of the crimes in "Handcarved Coffins" are so cartoonish as to be almost beside the point.<sup>6</sup>

Although he clearly considered "Handcarved Coffins" similar to *In Cold Blood*, Capote's focus in the story, in contrast to his nearly invisible presence in *In Cold Blood*, is on himself as an active character and narrator imagining the criminal's motives. Capote becomes aware that Robert Hawley Quinn is killing people because his friend Jake Pepper, a detective, introduces Capote to the case. When Jake's fiancée, Adelaide Mason, drowns or is drowned, Capote becomes the superior detective, probably because he bears none of Pepper's guilt over failing to save Adelaide. Robert Siegle is correct in suggesting that in "Handcarved Coffins" Capote discovers the truth about the killer "by identifying him with a character in his own private psychodrama" and thus the process of creating fiction is demonstrated to be the way to produce nonfiction (Siegle 445–46).

The central symbol in "Handcarved Coffins" is the Blue River, which probably provides the motive for the murders. Capote's story equates the killer Quinn with the Reverend Bobby Joe Snow, who forcibly baptized the young Truman. It is no secret that Capote hates the reverend. The most important O'Connor connection here, which Helen Garson has noted but which nobody has analyzed, is the character Marylee Connor. Flannery O'Connor's first name was Mary. The sister of Adelaide, Connor seems unable to stomach discussions of murder when she first appears, but she is the one able to figure out that her sister's life is being threatened (Capote 1980, 89), and we later realize that Connor denies that Quinn is a murderer. Detective Jake Pepper, perhaps unfairly, explains that she is "sweet but not too bright" (Capote 1980, 102). She is with Adelaide at the Blue River, reading as Adelaide drowns, and she is sure Quinn was not involved (Capote 1980, 124–25). She finally moves to Florida, mails Capote a picture of Adelaide holding a cat (Capote 1980, 136), and gets a job as a receptionist for a circus. This character in a story with a baptism scene reminiscent of "The River" is surely meant to comment on O'Connor. Jake Pepper takes a swipe at all "female literature" (Capote 1980, 94), but Capote knows better than to endorse Pepper on that point. If he is rejecting O'Connor here, it is because Capote objects to her writing about baptism in a way that simply strikes too

close to home for him.<sup>7</sup> The major accusation that “Handcarved Coffins” makes against O’Connor is that she seems too comfortable around a murderer—too inclined to see a good man in one. It is as if Capote were complaining that O’Connor made him too compassionate toward Perry Smith.

According to Jack Hicks, the river in “Handcarved Coffins” carries significant symbolism for Capote’s career: “The Blue River is a metaphor for the author’s desire for historical/mythic continuity, his hope for a revived narrative flow. It is first a source of life. . . . But it is soon treacherous . . . and finally demonic and death-dealing, a mirror in which to see his own forced, infernal baptism forty years earlier. To be born ritually into this world, Capote implies, is to be dragged in unwillingly, to be ceremonially drowned, inundated first beneath the waters of a hell-on-earth” (Hicks 172–73). It is no stretch to apply Hicks’s comment to Capote’s true feelings about O’Connor. Perhaps he has to reject the inspiration he took from her in order to declare his personal and artistic independence. Hicks reads the final scene of “Handcarved Coffins” as showing that Capote refuses to join the probable murderer Quinn when invited into the middle of the Blue River, because Capote’s “own sense of power grows, out of his knowledge that historical, literary, and literal rivers are all poisoned, and out of the desire not to be submerged” (Hicks 176) by the man whom Capote imagines as a substitute for the preacher who baptized him. If the story is read this way, at the end of it Capote frees himself from several oppressive ghosts. If freedom is Capote’s goal in this story, he may be thinking of O’Connor as another authority figure he is ready to rebel against. In other words, one might be tempted to say that in “Handcarved Coffins” Capote, as a sort of O’Connoresque Misfit, feels he is confronting the fact that he is one of O’Connor’s own children, and thus he must symbolically shoot her. And Capote as Misfit might even experience a bit of an O’Connoresque religious insight at the end of “Handcarved Coffins.” Robert Siegle sees Capote becoming one with the murderer in the work’s final references to acts of God (Siegle 449–50), in the claim that everything is ultimately mysterious: Quinn says, with intentionally ambiguous pronouns, “The way I look at it is: it was the hand of God” (Capote 1980, 146).

Of course, if Capote finally has some appreciation of Quinn, a man he hated, then the character Marylee Connor/O’Connor might be right after all in finding something of value in Quinn. And what Capote ends up demonstrating in “Handcarved Coffins” is that, as he pronounces his rejection of O’Connor, he seems closer to her spirit than he was in *In Cold Blood*. While *In Cold Blood* attempts an objective compassion that is ultimately fragile, “Handcarved Coffins,” for all its possible artistic faults, brings Capote closer to his murderer (and to O’Connor) because Capote’s meanness is not masked.

So what do all of these speculations about Capote's uses of and opinions about O'Connor teach us about her? I hope I have indicated enough of the wealth of connections between the two of them to suggest that we may learn something about O'Connor through Capote. The primary issue raised here is how well, how justly and compassionately, O'Connor treats her Misfit. I believe that O'Connor, fascinated as she had to be in order to create them, rarely went all the way in endorsing the voices of her misfit characters and misfit narrators. I have a renewed sense of her struggle to affirm her own "meanness"—her unswerving insistence on following her own path—and I have an increased appreciation for the times when her misfit voice is allowed to speak. O'Connor was finally able to endorse meanness, not as a place to stop, but as a stage in a process, a stage one might revisit repeatedly.

Of course, there are moments in real life when O'Connor identified with The Misfit. For example, writing to Betty Hester on November 10, 1955, O'Connor reported that after a woman who saw her on crutches exclaimed, "Bless you, Darling!" and obliquely tried to remind O'Connor that "the lame shall enter first," O'Connor "felt exactly like the Misfit" (*CW* 969). But the primary issue is what she did in her fiction, and O'Connor seems to have been quite conflicted about her Misfit. In "On Her Own Work," O'Connor makes some comments about the grandmother and The Misfit that suggest the complexities in how she regards both of them. Many of O'Connor's comments here seem intended to prove that the grandmother's moment of grace is the key to the story. And yet notice how indirectly and tentatively O'Connor can go about making claims for the grandmother: she says, "I think the unprejudiced reader will feel that the Grandmother has a special kind of triumph in this story which instinctively we do not allow to someone altogether bad," but O'Connor makes this claim only after admitting "that the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for the Misfit's, nor is her capacity for grace equal to his" (*MM* 111).

O'Connor could be quite harsh toward The Misfit; in a letter to Andrew Lytle dated February 4, 1960, she seems to equate The Misfit and Satan, writing that the grandmother's "moment of grace excites the devil to frenzy" (*CW* 1121). On the other hand, in a letter dated October 6, 1959, O'Connor told John Hawkes that "I can fancy a character like The Misfit being redeemable" (*CW* 1108). And two pages after O'Connor calls The Misfit "altogether bad" in "On Her Own Work," she amazingly reverses herself: "I don't want to equate The Misfit with the devil." O'Connor tries to explain herself by adding, "I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become" (*MM* 112–13).<sup>8</sup> O'Connor immediately adds, "But that's another story." Of course one can conclude O'Connor is

claiming that she did not really make *The Misfit* redeemable, but when one compares O'Connor with Capote, one is led to ask why O'Connor seems to have left *The Misfit's* potential only partially investigated. There is something about *The Misfit* that is crucial to the power of O'Connor's fiction. Did she abandon him in a manner at all comparable to what might be interpreted as Capote's abandonment of Perry Smith? Capote might reasonably have worked to get Smith a life in prison, where he might have developed some of his talents or might have rediscovered his affection for his religious friend Willie-Jay. What could O'Connor do (or what did she do) for her potential prophet, *The Misfit*, that would be the right thing? I will discuss five possible answers, some of which overlap.

First, O'Connor could prove that *The Misfit* is something other than human, that other rules apply to him. Josephine Hendin argues that *The Misfit* is finally shown to be an animal like Pitty Sing, the cat he picks up at the story's end (Hendin 151), and although Hendin probably does not want *The Misfit* to be good, one could probably adapt her argument and argue that it is enough for O'Connor to show that *The Misfit* is a good, even prophetic animal. I do not think O'Connor did, and I do not think this is good strategy. *The Misfit* is altogether human.

Or, O'Connor could make *The Misfit* good in that he puts his independence first, totally rejecting the grandmother's attempted influence. Those who see *The Misfit* taking over the story through the force of his fascinating personality and having the final word, in a meaningful sense, may prefer this view. This strategy would also probably be the most straightforward one, but there is reason to doubt whether O'Connor used it. I have argued elsewhere that *The Misfit* suffers a crucial failure of courage, hypocritically refusing to live up to his own principles (Gentry 108–12).

A third way that O'Connor could make *The Misfit* good is that we could see him starting to change into a good man. When *The Misfit* tells henchman Bobby Lee to "Shut up" after Bobby Lee says that killing is "fun," and when *The Misfit* adds, "It's no real pleasure in life" (*CW* 153), he may be starting to suffer the kind of "pain" that O'Connor said could change him. Laura Mandell Zaidman proposes another version of this argument; she claims that as O'Connor revised the story, she transformed the grandmother "from a woman desperately in need of God's grace to a medium of grace for *The Misfit*" (Zaidman 43) and that when *The Misfit* acceptingly touches Pitty Sing, "the reader considers the possibility, however remote, of *The Misfit's* becoming a good man by the end of his life" (Zaidman 50). I do not believe that this action makes it absolutely clear that *The Misfit* is on his way to a new life. Picking up a cat is the sort of false kindness he has exhibited throughout the story, and his final statement of his own misery can be read as a sign that he will become worse, not better, after the story ends.

Furthermore, it may be a bad sign that he recommends silence to Bobby Lee—not to mention that he seems to lapse into silence himself—immediately after he has agreed that the reason the grandmother could “have been a good woman” was that “she was a talker” (*CW* 153).<sup>9</sup> As much as O'Connor loved her Misfit, in the final version of the story, she identified more with the grandmother's normality than with The Misfit's profound meanness. I have argued elsewhere that the narrator of “A Good Man” becomes good by dropping a tone of meanness in the course of telling the story (Gentry 37–39), but perhaps giving up one's meanness causes the same problems that Capote encountered when he retreated into the narratorial objectivity of *In Cold Blood*.

Fourth, O'Connor could make The Misfit good by making him similar to everyone else in the story who exhibits some goodness. I am interested in the other ways the story breaks down distinctions between The Misfit and the grandmother, although I still see O'Connor as identifying with the more conventional and less interesting grandmother. Critics continue to uncover similarities between The Misfit and the grandmother. For example, J. Peter Dyson's study of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in relation to *The Mikado* emphasizes the sense in which The Misfit and the grandmother take on the paradoxically combined role of judge and executioner from the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta (Dyson 144). Frederick Asals also suggests a way to see the grandmother as a bit of a Misfit. Asals perceptively notes that when the grandmother lets the cat loose, what we see is “her visceral acknowledgement of her *own* failure” (Asals 20), her rejection of herself before The Misfit gets around to rejecting her.

Finally, when O'Connor wrote that The Misfit could become a prophet, she added, “But that's another story.” The best argument I can make that O'Connor granted The Misfit justice is that she wrote about him in other guises. But what is striking is the struggle she went through to endorse his potential. One could say that O'Connor finds value in a murderous protagonist in both of her novels or perhaps in Thomas in “The Comforts of Home,” but all of these characters lose their personalities as they become good. The exception might be Enoch Emery, but O'Connor drops his story even more abruptly than she drops The Misfit. In reexamining “The River,” the story that apparently bothered Capote so much, one could interpret Harry/Bevel Ashfield as a good little Misfit, rejecting his parents, Mrs. Connin, and Mr. Paradise, as he grabs what he wants. Perhaps it is significant that “The River” immediately follows “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in O'Connor's first story collection. But Harry/Bevel cannot survive the experience, so he may fall short of being the model Misfit.

One can find spots in O'Connor's fiction where she did justice to the mean voice of the misfit. One is in the narrative voice of “The Lame Shall

Enter First,” the story that provoked O’Connor to write to John Hawkes on February 6, 1962, “In this one, I’ll admit that the devil’s voice is my own” (*CW* 1157). I can easily imagine a version of *The Misfit* as the narrator of that story. There are other O’Connor stories in which the narrator’s voice never drops its tone of satirical meanness, notably “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” in which the narrator rips apart Gen. George Poker Sash and the Old South. Another spot is in a character that some critics equate with O’Connor herself: the unnamed little girl in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the mean child who, at the end of the story, starts to pray “Hep me not to be so mean” (*CW* 208), but who then gets an answer to her prayer from the sideshow hermaphrodite, who tells her, using ambiguous pronouns, that her meanness is good, just as the hermaphrodite’s “freakishness” is good. The hermaphrodite says “I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be” (*CW* 209). The little girl learns to affirm her own meanness, and at her best, O’Connor did too.

In Truman Capote, O’Connor had a disciple who, first, profitably misunderstood her. *In Cold Blood* was a compassionate book in which meanness had little value. In “Handcarved Coffins,” as Capote expressed his anger toward his misfit and his resentment of O’Connor (in part for her being too compassionate), he revealed the value he found in his misfit, in O’Connor, and in meanness. Rereading “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in the light of Capote, we see more of the value of meanness. In the passages cited earlier about *The Misfit*’s varied experiences, which Capote transformed into the experiences of Dick Hickock, I think we can see Capote reversing O’Connor’s effect. Dick Hickock is the ultimate loser, at a dead end no matter how much he brags. *The Misfit*, in contrast, shows us that he is fond of changing, so that even his final change, his sudden claim that life has “no real pleasure” (*CW* 153), can leave open the strong possibility that *The Misfit* will continue to change.

When I think of *The Misfit*’s struggle toward goodness as an ongoing process with value assigned to various forms of his meanness, it is easier to conclude that O’Connor is compassionately searching to discover a way to find in him a good man. When O’Connor said “But that’s another story” in discussing *The Misfit*’s transformation into a prophet, I think she was referring to other stories she did write. In “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” she makes use of what may seem like meanness, the inclination to shoot *The Misfit* every minute of his life. Her compassion is evident in her refusal to excuse him as simply being crazy or an animal, in her analysis of his excuses, in her dramatizations of the opportunities for change that he lets slip by, and in her suggested denials of his pride in uniqueness. O’Connor’s most compassionate act toward *The Misfit* is to leave him alive and wandering, disgusted with himself, still “aloose from the . . . Pen” (*CW* 137), not yet

forced or willing to shut up. The fact that O'Connor leaves us with the creepy image of The Misfit holding that cat indicates that O'Connor always saw a function for meanness.

#### NOTES

1. Not all of the O'Connor connections in *In Cold Blood* have to do with intentional borrowing or with borrowing specifically from "A Good Man." Melvin J. Friedman notes that "the Kansas Capote writes about is not significantly different from Flannery O'Connor country" (Friedman 168). Friedman sees an "O'Connor reminder in *In Cold Blood* . . . when we are told . . . that Perry Smith's sister Fern changed her name to Joy" (Capote 1965, 185). This sounds like an inversion of the name change in "Good Country People." Friedman also suggests that "Willie-Jay, in *In Cold Blood*, whose name Capote admits he has invented, resembles in many ways O'Connor's 'Bible Belt' preachers, both in name (think of Onnie Jay Holy in *Wise Blood*) and in evangelical manner." Still, Friedman concludes "that the connections which involve *In Cold Blood* are largely fortuitous" (Friedman 167–68).

2. One might also compare this speech by The Misfit, about there being only two paths from which to choose, to Perry Smith's thoughts about his situation as *In Cold Blood* opens: either he will meet up with his religious friend, Willie-Jay, or he will join Dick Hickock's plan to commit a crime (Capote 1965, 45).

3. Capote once opined about mass murderers, "They all believe in God" (qtd. in Grobel 126).

4. One also wonders what Capote might have said if confronted with all these similarities and the specific borrowings. I suspect he would reply that what he did is far from plagiarism, and that in two places in *In Cold Blood* he criticizes those who commit plagiarism. When Perry Smith learns that a copycat killer in Florida has duplicated the Clutter murders, he says he "wouldn't be surprised" to learn the killer was "a lunatic" (Capote 1965, 200). And late in *In Cold Blood*, we learn that the poem handed to Dick Hickock by the unredeemable Lowell Lee Andrews on his way to being executed is actually a plagiarism of Gray's "Elegy" (Capote 1965, 332). It is this passage that precedes Hickock's borrowed speech about his varied experiences.

5. Here is Anthony Bonner's translation of the beginning of the first stanza of Villon's poem, also called "XIV—Villon's Epitaph":

Brother men who after us live on,  
harden not your hearts against us,  
for if you have some pity on us poor men,  
the sooner God will show you mercy.

This is the end of the epigraph for *In Cold Blood*; here is the rest of the first stanza:

You see us, five, six, strung up here:  
as for our flesh, which we have fed too well,  
already it has been devoured and is rotten,  
and we, the bones, now turn to dust and ashes.  
Let no one laugh at all our miseries,  
but pray to God that He absolve us all. (Villon 163)

6. John Hersey considers “Handcarved Coffins” to be “a gobbet of commercial trash” and uses a quotation from Flannery O’Connor to argue that one must not mix fiction and nonfiction (Hersey 1–3). Several other critics have been more positively disposed toward “Handcarved Coffins.”

7. John C. Waldmeir says the river in “Handcarved Coffins” contributes to “the theological complexity” of *Music for Chameleons*, the collection in which it appears, so it is probably not safe to conclude that Capote rejects religion in “Handcarved Coffins.” Waldmeir sees the story “dramatizing all that is at stake in the ritual of baptism, the complex and dangerous exchange between life and death that Saint Paul described a[s] ‘dying to Christ’” (Waldmeir 165).

8. Capote described for Plimpton his goals in writing *In Cold Blood* in a manner reminiscent of O’Connor’s statement about the grandmother’s effect on The Misfit: “I’ve always thought of [*In Cold Blood*] as being like something reduced to a seed. Instead of presenting the reader with a full plant, with all the foliage, a seed is planted in the soil of his mind” (qtd. in Plimpton 203).

9. When one considers the extreme extent to which “absolute silence” was insisted upon in O’Connor’s first Catholic elementary school, St. Vincent’s in Savannah (Cash 14), the value for O’Connor of being able to be “a talker” becomes even more apparent.

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THOMAS FAHY

*“Some Unheard-of Thing”:  
Freaks, Families, and Coming of Age  
in Carson McCullers and Truman Capote*

Even though sexually ambiguous freaks played with questions of authenticity (“Is it a man or a woman?”), they never explicitly challenged accepted gender roles. Bearded ladies were presented as the embodiment of Victorian womanhood, dressing elegantly and claiming to be devoted wives. Hermaphrodites, or half-and-halves, appeared to be divided in two (with a male right side and a female left side), clearly displaying characteristics of each gender. Like most freak exhibits, bearded ladies and hermaphrodites reinforced the idea that difference was visible, that ambiguity could not go undetected.

As homosexuality became a more visible part of American culture in the early twentieth century, however, these bizarre images of “aberrant” sexuality became less popular. Many people started to see homosexuality as a threat to both the family and democracy, making these types of exhibits a dangerous validation of nonheterosexual desire and behavior. Even though these performers were being cast as freaks, they were undermining tenuous binaries between male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and right and wrong. They were suggesting possibilities that mainstream America wanted to suppress.

Like wounded World War I veterans and injured workers during the Depression, queer bodies in the 1940s and 1950s suggested that something had gone wrong in America. Many assumed that homosexuality could be

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From *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote*, pp. 109–126, 164–170. © 2006 by Thomas Fahy.

seen on the body, relying on “signs” such as male effeminacy, cross-dressing, and tomboyish behavior in women to reinforce prejudices. But just as African Americans could pass as whites, homosexuals could pass as heterosexuals. The body was rarely a reliable indicator of sexual preference, and this ambiguity only intensified efforts to see same-sex desire as freakish. Freak shows may have occupied the margins of popular culture by the 1940s, but for more than a hundred years, this entertainment had given people a language for seemingly deviant behaviors and bodies. Sideshows, in other words, had helped make the idea of homosexuality and/or bisexuality freakish. Writers Carson McCullers and Truman Capote explore the implications of this connection by using the freak show as a central metaphor in their coming-of-age fiction. For adult characters, freaks represent the social marginalization that comes with a nonheterosexual lifestyle, but sexually conflicted teenagers feel an affinity for these performers. Freaks possess a freedom that they don’t.

This chapter focuses on the ways that Carson McCullers’s play *The Member of the Wedding* (1950) and Truman Capote’s novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) use freakishness to criticize homophobia. On the threshold of young adulthood and faced with making choices about their own sexual desires, protagonists Frankie Addams and Joel Knox associate their conflicted feelings about heterosexual norms with sexually ambiguous freaks. Scholarship has recently begun exploring the intersections between freak discourse and queer theory,<sup>1</sup> and I would like to apply these methodologies to McCullers’s dramatic adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding*, arguing that significant differences between the play and the novel enhance her thematic use of freak shows. In many respects, the theater allows McCullers to stage a kind of freak show—putting the unusual bodies of her characters on display and challenging audiences (who are already participating in a viewer/performer dynamic) to reevaluate social attitudes about normality. Capote goes even further than McCullers in presenting homosexuality as a viable option, and he makes a more explicit critique of marriage and compulsory heterosexuality. For both authors, freakishness not only reflects contemporary anxieties about sexuality and marriage, but it also provides a tool for condemning social imperatives that try to enforce desire. By linking freak shows with the repressive sexual climate in America, McCullers and Capote capture some of the more destructive aspects of intolerance and ultimately suggest the need for alternatives.

### **Homosexuality and the American Family**

The freak is not merely the despised Other—but the Other without community, without family. Given the increased visibility of homosexuality by the late 1940s, sexually ambiguous freaks were an unwelcome, visible threat to compulsory heterosexuality. They challenged the idealized place

of marriage and the family in American society, not by offering a more positive alternative (few would want to trade places with those onstage) but by suggesting other sexual possibilities.

Although poverty during the Great Depression brought many families together, increasing the number of two- and three-generation families under one roof,<sup>2</sup> this dependence on extended family, as well as unemployment, also emasculated many men. George Chauncey explains in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1840–1940* that “as many men lost their jobs, their status as breadwinners, and their sense of mastery of their own futures, the central tenets undergirding their gender status were threatened. . . . [As a result] lesbians and gay men began to seem more dangerous in this context” (353–354). This threat inspired greater restrictions on public expressions of homosexuality; in New York, for example, the repeal of Prohibition became a tool for an increased surveillance of and crackdown on homosexuality.<sup>3</sup> These efforts to criminalize homosexuality—based on stereotypes about “gay” behavior—certainly reflected anxieties about sexual passing.<sup>4</sup> But this persecution would be stalled by the military and social demands of U.S. involvement in the war.

World War II destabilized the family—separating large numbers of men who either volunteered or were conscripted and women who worked as part of the labor force for the war effort: “It uprooted tens of millions of American men and women, many of them young, and deposited them in a variety of non-familial, often sex-segregated environments” (D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 23). This separation of families not only gave women new levels of economic and social freedom, but same-sex working environments also opened up greater possibilities for expressing and experiencing homosexuality. “The unusual conditions of a mobilized society allowed homosexual desire to be expressed more easily in action. For many gay Americans, World War II created something of a nationwide coming out experience” (24). These increased opportunities to explore sexuality did not last long after the war, however, and a new, more insidious assault on homosexuality began.

The social instability of the war years sparked efforts to define stability and security more closely through the family. By the 1950s the heterosexual family—with its implicit whiteness and stabilized gender roles—embodied the financial and social successes of postwar America.<sup>5</sup> After Alfred Kinsey published his reports on American sexuality in 1948 and 1953, however, homosexuality was perceived as much more pervasive and dangerous than previously thought. Kinsey’s best-selling study, which was based on individual interviews with over 10,000 white Americans, revealed data that “disputed the common assumption that all adults were permanently and exclusively either homosexual or heterosexual and revealed instead a fluidity that belied medical theories about fixed orientations” (D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 35). Not

surprisingly, this report intensified anti-homosexual sentiment and helped establish homophobia as part of McCarthy's anticommunist persecution in the 1950s. More specifically, since heterosexuality was integral to America's image of itself, marriage was viewed as evidence that one was not a communist: "Anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition. The FBI and other government agencies instituted unprecedented state intrusion into private life under the guise of investigating subversives. . . . Some men and women entered loveless marriages in order to forestall attacks about real or suspected homosexuality or lesbianism" (Coontz 33). The family had become a much-needed symbol for political and social conformity.

This brief overview of anti-homosexual policy and social attitudes about the family in America can help us understand representations of "freakish" sexuality in popular forms of entertainment. Hollywood films in the 1930s, for example, followed a production code that prohibited references to homosexuality.<sup>6</sup> This type of injunction may also explain, in part, the popular decline of freak shows that featured sexually ambiguous exhibits. While Hollywood adapted to the social pressures of homophobia, freak shows continued to play with gender boundaries, showcasing bearded ladies and hermaphrodites who held a traditional place in these troupes. The incompatibility of these exhibits with contemporary sentiment (particularly attitudes that equated homosexuality with effeminate behavior and lesbianism with masculine behavior) made these performers particularly off putting—giving many people another reason to stay away from the sideshow.

### Members of the Freak Show in Carson McCullers

By 1950 Carson McCullers successfully adapted her 1946 novel, *The Member of the Wedding*, for the theater.<sup>7</sup> An immensely popular and critical success, this play opened in New York on January 5, 1950 and closed the following year after 501 performances. In addition to grossing \$1,112,000, *The Member of the Wedding* was also awarded the New York Drama Critic's Award and the Theater Club's gold medal for best American play that year, and many contemporary critics believed that McCullers would have won the Pulitzer if the work had not been an adaptation.<sup>8</sup> I want to argue that in adapting this work McCullers made significant changes between novel and play to capitalize on the ways a staged production could enact the dynamics of a freak show. This is not entirely surprising given McCullers's fascination with freak shows as a young girl:

"Let's skip the cotton candy and hot dogs and save our dimes for the Rubber man and all the freak shows this year. The Pin Head, the Cigarette Man, the Lady with the Lizard Skin." . . .  
Lula Carson Smith viewed once more with terror and fascination

the midway freaks. . . . The child craved eye contact with these strange withdrawn creatures who sometimes stared at her sullenly or smiled and crooked a finger beckoningly. Yet she dared only to steal oblique glances, fearful of a mesmeric union. (Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 1)

Many years later McCullers would revisit these images in her writing, and her play, *The Member of the Wedding*, would specifically use freak shows to present the nuclear family as a questionable antidote for unconventional behaviors and desires.

The marriage at the heart of *The Member of the Wedding* both defines and shapes twelve-year-old Frankie Addams' struggles to reconcile her conflicted sexual desires with her idealized notions about the family. Impatient with long summer afternoons filled with card games in the dilapidated kitchen of her father's house, Frankie wants to escape the smallness of this world. In Act I, she meets Jarvis's fiancée, Janice, and decides to run away with them after the wedding: "I know that the bride and my brother are the 'we' of me. So I'm going with them, joining with the wedding" (52). Her hopes that their marriage will somehow give her a sense of belonging begin to break down in Act II. Before the wedding, Frankie gets an orange dress for the ceremony and begins telling people in the town that she will be leaving—as if leaving will provide an escape from her tall, lanky body (which Janice assures her is not too big). Frankie's behavior worries Berenice, the family cook and surrogate mother-figure who decides to tell Frankie about her own obsession with marriage. After a happy, five-year marriage to Ludie Freeman, whose most distinguishing physical characteristic was a mangled and grotesque thumb, she married a series of abusive and unreliable men (Jamie Beale and Henry Johnson) in an attempt to recapture her first love<sup>9</sup>: "What I did was marry off little pieces of Ludie whenever I come across them. It was just my misfortune they all turned out to be the wrong pieces. My intention was to repeat me and Ludie" (79). Berenice uses this story to warn Frankie against doing the same thing with marriage—not to fall in love with an ideal or "some unheard-of thing" (80). Because Frankie feels alienated from her family (her mother died during childbirth, her father is aloof and mostly absent, and her brother has been stationed in Alaska for the war), she fantasizes about the possibilities that marriage offers for companionship, beauty, stability, and family.

Act III begins when the wedding has just finished, and Frankie tries to leave with her brother and sister-in-law. When the couple refuse to let her come, she storms out of the house with a suitcase and her father's pistol. She gets only as far as the alley behind her father's store (where she briefly contemplates suicide) before returning home. Four months pass between

Scenes Two and Three. John Henry has died from spinal meningitis; Honey, Berenice's foster-brother, has hanged himself after his arrest; Mr. Addams and Frankie are moving to the suburbs to live with John Henry's parents; and Frankie has become friends with Mary Littlejohn. This relationship, like her friendship with Evelyn Owen before the play begins, temporarily assuages her desire to find belonging through marriage.

In many ways, the staging of the play enacts a type of sanitized freak show—one in which the audience is insulated from the anxiety of looking. Since theatergoers remain in the dark, a safe distance from the gaze of the performer, the drama effectively removes one of the increasingly unpopular dimensions of freak shows—the reciprocated gaze. The fixed setting, the Addams' "ugly" kitchen, also enhances the freakishness of the characters by preventing the audience from seeing an actual freak show; they only hear descriptions of one from Frankie. As a result, the audience is invited to see those on stage as standing in for the freaks who are repeatedly invoked through language. Just as freak shows relied on the juxtaposition of extremes to construct a performer as freakish, *The Member of the Wedding* relies on this convention to make the bodies of Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry seem more extraordinary.

When juxtaposed with John Henry's smallness (Frankie literally calls him a "midget") and Berenice's stout black body, Frankie's height, pale-white skin, boyish clothes, and short haircut accentuate her physical freakishness—to the point where she fears becoming a freak: "I am so worried about being so tall. . . . If I keep on growing like this until I'm twenty-one, I figure I will be nearly ten feet tall. . . . Do you think I will grow into a freak?" (28, 30). There is also a performative dimension to Frankie's freakishness. She makes her body appear disproportional by twisting and wrapping her legs around a small kitchen chair to get comfortable, and she acts out her frustration through verbal and physical abuse, yelling at John Henry and Berenice, and "[banging] her forehead on the table. Her fists are clenched and she is sobbing" (40). Her explosive behavior, however, is not over; she immediately threatens to throw a knife in front of Berenice: "*Frankie aims the knife carefully at the closed door to the bedroom and throws it. The knife does not stick into the wall*" (41). Like a failed magic trick, the knife falls to the ground; it is no longer a threatening symbol, nor an impressive act.

The spectacle preceding this moment taps into several traditional freak show conventions as well. After rummaging through Berenice's purse early in Act I, John Henry pulls out her blue glass eye, and she proceeds to place it into her socket—a scene that is absent from the novel (24–25). The stage directions indicate that: "[*Berenice takes off her patch, turns away, and inserts the glass eye*]" (25). Removing the patch draws attention to her damaged body, and turning away to insert it plays with the audience's curiosity to "see" more. Given McCullers's fascination with freak shows, this stage direction

is more than a practical solution for the actor playing Berenice, who could have simply worn a patch throughout the play. Instead, McCullers uses the type of game-playing typical of freak shows to generate dramatic tension and momentum and, most likely, to allay criticisms that her novel lacked "a sense of drama."<sup>10</sup> This scene with Berenice's eye is both disturbing and compelling to watch, and like most freak show acts, it invites questions that remain unanswered—most obviously, how did she lose her eye? Furthermore, its blue color, which Frankie feels is out of place on an African-American woman, alludes to the types of ploys that sideshows used to exoticize race.<sup>11</sup>

McCullers's theatrical version does not engage with questions of race as convincingly as does her novel;<sup>12</sup> instead, it primarily focuses on questions of belonging and alienation as they relate to family and sexuality. The strange ensemble on stage—the tall, boyish Frankie, cousin John Henry's sickly small body, and the disabled Berenice—represent a kind of anti-American family (one without the white parents and siblings). Together, these unusual bodies and their abusive interactions suggest that Frankie's confusion stems from not having a more traditional home. She is preoccupied, for example, with her father's aloofness and her brother's disinterest in her: "I wrote you so many letters, Jarvis, and you never, never would answer me" (5). The image of this trio clearly contrasts Jarvis's marriage as well, which symbolizes all of the beauty and potential of the nuclear family to be: "They are so beautiful. . . . They were the prettiest people I ever saw" (12, 13).

Frankie's body and age (being two years younger than the local girls who don't select her as a member of their club) exclude her from feeling accepted by those around her, and she worries that her unusual body will also prevent her from ever getting married—from achieving the social ideal ("some unheard-of thing") of the American family. Berenice explains to her that "the whole idea of a club is that there are members who are included and the non-members who are not included" (22)—a truth that alludes to her own social standing as an African-American woman. The play makes it clear that those who belong are white and heterosexual. And marriage can provide a greater degree of social acceptance for those who fit into these categories.

Because Berenice equates marriage with comfort and sexual certainty, she uses sexually ambiguous figures, such as Lily Mae Jenkins, a local man who "turned into a girl" because he fell in love with another man (57), to reinforce heterosexual imperatives for Frankie. Interestingly, Berenice's racial marginalization has not made her bitter and resentful like her foster-brother Honey. Her own disenfranchisement as an African American only seems to heighten her desire to protect Frankie from being stigmatized for being different. As a white girl, Frankie has access to freedom and power that Berenice and Honey do not, but Berenice warns her that rejecting heterosexuality will jeopardize the social acceptance that marriage and family offer.<sup>13</sup>

Several scholars have recently argued that McCullers internalized contemporary attitudes about sexual inversion, believing herself to be a “sexual invert.”<sup>14</sup> Along the same lines, we can interpret her remarriage to ex-husband James Reeves McCullers in 1945 as another example of her acceptance of certain social norms about marriage. Consider the autobiographical elements of her only other play, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957), in which the characters continually struggle (but fail) to achieve the ideal American family. The protagonist, Mollie Lovejoy, is torn between her love for her ex-husband Phillip (whom she has married twice) and her new tenant John Tucker. Despite her painful past with Phillip and his suicide in Act III, she associates “family” with happiness and love, as do her son and John, who declares: “I am going to marry your mother! . . . And I am going to build that house, I told you about” (156). The house, which they dream about throughout the play, symbolizes their ongoing quest to achieve some version of the nuclear family. This powerful drive for marriage and family also appears in *The Member of the Wedding* as a force that restricts the possibilities of homosexual and bisexual desire. Still naive about sex, Frankie links her romanticized notion of marriage to a sense of belonging, not sexual behavior; as a matter of fact, the idea of sex frightens and repulses her: “[Other girls] were telling nasty lies about married people” (22). She also reacts vehemently when Berenice suggests that she “make out” with a boy:

BERENICE: Yep, I have come to the conclusion that what you ought to be thinking about is a beau. A nice little white beau.

FRANKIE: I don't want any beau. What would I do with one? . . .

BERENICE: . . . How 'bout that little old Barney next door?

FRANKIE: Barney MacKean! That nasty Barney!

BERENICE: Certainly! You could make out with him until somebody better comes along. He would do. . . .

FRANKIE: Yonder's Barney now with Helen Fletcher. They are going to the alley behind the Wests' garage. They do something bad back there. I don't know what it is.

BERENICE: If you don't know what it is, how do you know it is bad?

FRANKIE: I just know it. I think maybe they look at each other and peepee or something. They don't let anybody watch them. (58–59)

For Berenice, making out with a boy is not about love and romance but social acceptance, and she believes that Frankie's aversion to heterosexual behavior can be overcome by going through the motions with Barney.

Torn between her refusal to accept this option and her hope that marriage will provide some sense of belonging, however, Frankie recalls her feelings of alienation at freak shows. Though she fears heterosexual behavior, she is more frightened of the possibility that her body may exclude her from the type of community and sense of belonging embodied in marriage: "I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding. Those freaks. . . . at the fair" (28–29); "Do you think I will grow into a freak?" (30). Though the novel further magnifies Frankie's isolation by revealing her odd sense of community with these freaks—"She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you" (17)—both Frankie *and* Berenice share their experiences with freak shows in the play. While the novel has Frankie describe the hermaphrodite, the play relies on Berenice to interpret sexual ambiguity. This narrative shift situates Berenice as the authority figure on sexuality—a guardian of heterosexual imperatives who teaches her "children" how to respond to such images: "That little old squeezed-looking midget in them little trick evening clothes. And that giant with the hang-jaw face and them huge loose hands. And that morphidite! Half man-half woman. With that tiger skin on one side and that spangled skirt on the other" (29). Though Berenice says that the freaks "give [her] the creeps" (29), she never points to the act of looking as a problem; it is only the image of the hermaphrodite that disturbs her. Berenice's response, therefore, reinforces the link between freakishness and nonheterosexual expression.

Despite this adult-sanctioned perspective on sexuality, Frankie's relationships with girls are her only source of contentment. The play is framed by her friendships with two girls—Evelyn Owen (32), who has moved away before the play begins, and Mary Littlejohn, whom she befriends at the end of the narrative. Mary's clear heterosexual desires do not offer Frankie much opportunity to experience alternate forms of sexual expression. Instead, she imitates Mary's desires in contradiction to her previous attitudes about Barney. Unlike her earlier reference to him as "that nasty Barney!" (58), she tells Berenice in Act III that "Barney puts me in mind of a Greek god. . . . Mary remarked that Barney reminded her of a Greek god" (116). Though many critics have seen hope in Frankie's friendship at the end of the story, little has changed for her. The only townspeople who have broken with heterosexual norms have been marginalized; they are made invisible both on stage and outside the context of the play. And even though Frankie is shocked that she has never seen Lily Mae, Berenice isn't. She understands that the town has kept her hidden from the children. Like the sexual exhibits of freak shows, the implications of her visibility are too dangerous for pubescent children on the verge of making choices about

their own sexual identity: Normative behavior and desires were at stake; the American family was at stake.<sup>15</sup>

### Other Choices: Truman Capote and Same-Sex Desire

While Frankie still clings to marriage as an ideal, as something to aspire to, Joel in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* has no models for heterosexual happiness. Families don't seem to work—parents separate, couples stay in loveless marriages, and children want to run away. But the failure of marriage does not make his burgeoning homosexuality an unproblematic choice. Even though Capote presents same-sex desire as the “right” lifestyle for some (an option McCullers remains equivocal about), a powerful nostalgia for the traditional family still grips the narrator, making homosexuality a problematic choice. The strange setting of the novel—populated by unusual bodies and the deformed casualties of heterosexual love—suggests that homosexuality is only possible in such a place. In this way, Capote's narrative struggles to balance its critique of heterosexual imperatives and its ambivalence about the place of homosexuality in contemporary America.

By his teenage years, Truman Capote claims to have accepted his sexuality: “I always had a marked homosexual preference, and I never had any guilt about it at all. As time goes on, you finally settle down on one side or another, homosexual or heterosexual. And I was homosexual” (qtd. in Clarke 63). Homosexuality, however, does not explicitly appear in his later fiction. As Peter Christensen argues, works like *In Cold Blood* and “A Diamond Guitar” do not present homosexuality as a positive alternative: “Capote is unable at a later date to imagine a story in which the love of two adult men would lead to mutual salvation or even help” (63). He may have been untroubled by his own sexuality, but his fiction suggests that he was ambivalent about its place in art. Though recent queer scholarship reads the role of homosexuality in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* positively,<sup>16</sup> the central metaphor of freakishness captures some of these tensions about homosexuality in this early work,<sup>17</sup> linking them to the narrator's idealizations about family and masculinity.

*Other Voices, Other Rooms* is the coming-of-age story of thirteen-year-old Joel Harrison Knox. After his mother dies, Joel comes to live with his estranged father at his stepmother's dilapidated mansion in Skully's Landing. After passing through Noon City, a town filled with an array of deformed people, he finally arrives and meets his stepmother Amy and effeminate cousin Randolph. Like Frankie, Joel wants to belong and to feel loved. But ultimately it is his encounter with freakishness that helps him accept his own sexual desires. The novel culminates in his decision to be with the reclusive, gay Randolph, and the ongoing association between homosexuality and freak shows in the text presents queer desire as a distorted form of the new American family.

Capote frames the novel with two freak shows that feature both extraordinary bodies and sexually ambiguous figures, reinforcing the narrator's initial interpretation of homosexuality as freakish. By seeing Noon City and Skully's Landing in terms of a freak show, Joel mimics mainstream social attitudes about homosexuality and hints at his own struggles with desire. When he first meets Idabel Thompkins, for example, she is described as a wild, feisty troublemaker whose tomboyish behavior makes her a freak in the eyes of the town: "Well, it wasn't no revelation to me cause I always knew she was a freak, no ma'am, never saw that Idabel Thompkins in a dress yet" (21). Not only does her resistance to social expectations about female identity make her freakish, but her body is also somewhat grotesque. In an attempt to ridicule her, Florabel, her twin sister, tells Joel that "her thumbnail won't grow the least bit: it's all lumpy and black. . . . Now me, I couldn't stand to have such a nasty old . . . show him your hand, sister. . . . It don't pay to treat Idabel like she was a human being" (34). At first Joel sees Idabel and the other people in the community as strange because he wants to feel normal—to "go away to a school where everybody was like everybody else" (110–111). Still afraid of his homosexuality, he worries that deviating from the norm will make him freakish like those who live around his father's house. He later uses his relationship with Idabel as a testing ground for his own masculinity and conflicted desires. When he tries to kiss her, she wrestles him to the ground, and on their journey to Cloud City, she must kill the snake that terrifies him. Like Frankie Addams, Joel fails to fit into expected gender roles and desires. He is only going through the motions.

Idabel's masculine traits make her a type of freak, explicitly linking her with other sexually ambiguous figures in the text. Zoo, the granddaughter of Jesus Fever who works at the Sansom mansion, tells him the story of Randolph's mother Angela Lee: "Honey, a mighty peculiar thing happened to that old lady, happen just before she die: she grew a beard; it just commence pouring out her face, real sure enough hair; a yeller color, it was, and strong as wire. Me, I used to shave her, and her paralyzed from head to toe, her skin like a dead man's" (124). Her inadvertent transformation into a bearded lady becomes an image for aberrant sexuality, suggesting that Randolph's flamboyant homosexuality was somehow being manifested on his mother's aging body. Randolph is not merely gay; he cross-dresses, becoming a "queer lady" who gazes out an upstairs window and wears hair like "a wig of a character from history: a towering pale pompadour with fat dribbling curls" (67). His homosexuality, like Idabel's, is visible on the body, which makes it less threatening to people like the shopkeeper Miss Roberta, the town barber, and society more broadly. Being able to "see" homosexuality leaves the categories of normal/abnormal and self/freak intact, enabling the townspeople to see their own damaged bodies (like the "bandy-legged, little

one-armed man glowering at him from the doorway of a barbershop” and Miss Roberta’s dark-fuzzy arms, hairy wart, dirty fingernails, and enormous breasts) as normal.<sup>18</sup>

In order to perceive himself as normal (i.e., heterosexual), Joel sees Skully’s Landing and its inhabitants as a type of carnival sideshow. Amy and Randolph, for example, “were fused like Siamese twins: they seemed a kind of freak animal, half-man half-woman” (120). And Jesus Fever has a face “like a withered apple, and almost destroyed; his polished forehead shone as though a purple light gleamed under the skin; his sickle-curved posture made him look as though his back were broken: a sad little brokeback dwarf crippled with age” (29). As a matter of fact, the bodies of almost every character in the novel are marked and deformed in some way—with one notable exception, Joel. Throughout this *bildungsroman*, Joel actually sees his own body transform into something freakish. When he first looks into the mirrors at his father’s house, he sees a distorted version of himself. “The stairs sloped down to the circular chamber he remembered from the night, and here a full-length mirror caught his reflection bluely; it was like the comedy mirrors in carnival houses; he swayed shapelessly in its distorted depth” (50). Later, before Joel sees Randolph dressed as a woman for the first time, his reflected image is linked with sexual identity; at this moment, he is frightened, as if facing something he is not yet ready to see:

He swished the lavender curtains apart, and moved into the bleak light filling the barren, polished chamber towards his image floating on the watery-surfaced looking glass; his formless reflected face was wide-lipped and one-eyed, as if it were a heat-softened wax effigy; the lips were a gauzy line, the eyes a glaring bubble. “Miss Amy . . . anybody” (63–64).

Still wanting to define himself as normal in terms of heterosexual masculinity, Joel realizes that this freakish reflection and Randolph’s effeminacy challenge his notions of gender identity and sexuality.

Anxiously waiting to see his father, Joel hopes he will be a model for heterosexual manhood, fantasizing about rebuilding some sort of “normal” family with him. But he fears that his own effeminate body (“He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; . . . and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes” [4]) will disappoint his father: “And his father thought: that runt is an imposter; my son would be taller and stronger and handsomer and smarter-looking. Suppose he’d told Miss Amy: give the little faker something to eat and send him on his way” (51–52). He assumes his father will be a strong, manly figure; instead, Ed Sansom is paralyzed and completely dependent on others: “The eyes were a teary grey; they watched Joel with a kind of dumb

glitter, and soon, as if to acknowledge him, they closed in a solemn double wink, and turned . . . so that he saw them only as part of a head, a shaved head lying with invalid looseness on unsanitary pillows" (121). Sansom had already failed as a father, abandoning Joel and his mother thirteen years earlier, and now he fails as a model for masculinity. "If only he'd never seen Mr. Sansom! Then he could have gone on picturing him as looking this and that wonderful way, as talking in a kind of strong voice, as being really his father. Certainly this Mr. Sansom was not his father" (171). Just as the town associates homosexuality with freakishness, Joel equates disability with weakness, femininity, and even his own conflicted sexual desires. No longer able to see his father as a model for what a man "should" be, he rejects any familial connection with him.

Though this failed image of masculinity brings Joel closer to accepting his own homosexuality, it is ultimately Randolph's and Idabel's ability to find love by rejecting traditional heterosexual relationships that offers Joel another model for happiness. Before meeting Pepe, Randolph's marriage to Dolores was strained by her repeated fantasies about killing him. She keeps a dream book/diary, in which she writes about Randolph "fleeing before her, or hiding in the shadow," and "she'd murdered in Madrid a lover she called L., and [Randolph] knew . . . that when she found R. . . she would kill him, too" (144). Ironically, her affair with a bullfighter, Pepe Alvarez, kills their marriage, for it awakens Randolph's homosexuality. Randolph's passionate sexual relationship with Pepe is his first experience with true love. As he recalls to Joel, "Strange how long it takes us to discover ourselves; . . . The brain may take advice, but not the heart, and love, having no geography, knows no boundaries: weight and sink it deep, no matter, it will rise and find the surface: and why not? Any love is natural and beautiful that lies within a person's nature; only hypocrites would hold a man responsible for what he loves" (147). Randolph and Dolores' relationship with Pepe forges a new family—"always now they were together, Dolores, Pepe, Ed, and I. . . . Grotesque quadruplets" (149). This grotesque family doesn't last either—Pepe and Dolores run off together, Randolph shoots Ed in a delusional rage, and his cousin Amy—to feel needed—marries the invalid Ed. In the end, Randolph is left sending letters for Pepe around the world, care of the postmaster: "Oh, I know that I will never have an answer. But it gives me something to believe in. And that is peace" (154).<sup>19</sup> Peace, however, is what Randolph hopes to offer Joel, giving him a model for accepting his own sexuality regardless of what others say. But Randolph's effeminacy and reclusiveness continue to make Joel uncomfortable, and it is only through his relationship to Idabel that he sees same-sex desire as a viable option for himself.

Idabel not only rejects stereotypically feminine behavior, but she also finds happiness in her infatuation for another woman, a sideshow performer.

Frustrated with the ways the town labels her a freak, Idabel convinces Joel to run away with the traveling circus, and there she meets Miss Wisteria: “At the 10 cents Tent, they saw [her.] . . . They did not quite believe she was a midget, though Miss Wisteria herself claimed to be twenty-five years old” (191). Idabel’s excited interest in Miss Wisteria gradually becomes clear to Joel: “Then a queer thing happened: Idabel, borrowing the lipstick, painted an awkward clownish line across her mouth, and Miss Wisteria, clapping her little hands, shrieked with a kind of sassy pleasure. . . . But as she continued to fawn over tiny yellow-haired Miss Wisteria it came to him that Idabel was in love” (192–193). Ironically, Miss Wisteria attributes Idabel’s behavior to freakishness: “‘Poor child, is it that she believes she is a freak, too?’” (195). But Idabel’s happiness opens Joel up to the possibility of same-sex love. In the last lines of the novel, he goes to Randolph who, dressed as a woman, beckons him to his room. Looking at Randolph, he gains a new sense of self: “I am Joel, we are the same people” (227). As these words suggest, Capote validates homosexual desires in ways that McCullers does not, but we are still left wondering to what extent Joel has come into his own. A teenager being seduced by an older man is far from ideal, and this choice does not seem better than the family life he had with Aunt Ellen. However, this experience has enabled Joel to shake off the specter of the American family and the heterosexual imperatives it reinforces, suggesting that the freakish is preferable to the normal as long as it allows people to love and desire whom they want.

### **Closing the Curtain: Love Without Boundaries**

Perhaps Randolph best articulates the message of these texts when he tells Joel that love is without boundaries: “Any love is natural and beautiful that lies within a person’s nature; only hypocrites would hold a man responsible for what he loves” (147). It is the hypocrisy of political and social practices that promote exclusion based on sexual identity that fuels *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms* and arguably *The Member of the Wedding*. In the 1940s and 1950s, the American Dream was so closely linked with images of the nuclear family that homosexuality was considered dangerous. Gay culture threatened society by challenging many of the ideas it held sacred—particularly the importance of raising children in a heterosexual environment. The queer body, therefore, had to be vilified. It had to be seen as a kind of freakish spectacle—an unattractive alternative to heterosexual life. Capote and McCullers use this intersection between freakishness and same-sex desire as central metaphors in their coming-of-age fiction to criticize the debilitating impact of heterosexual imperatives on everyone, regardless of sexual preferences. By choosing young adults poised to make their own choices about sexuality, heterosexual imperatives

have an insidious overtone. They make sexuality an issue of social control, a way of preserving white, middle-class hierarchies.

This tradition would continue in the following decade in stories such as Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," which uses a sexually ambiguous freak as a catalyst for the protagonist's sexual awakening. The narrator's cousins Susan and Joanne enjoy seeing all the freaks except "the you-know-what" (92). This unspeakable exhibit is a hermaphrodite whose tent was "divided in two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women. The freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women, but everyone could hear" (92). While listening to this description, the young narrator "felt every muscle strained as if she were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself" (93). Susan quickly explains that "it was a man and woman both." O'Connor does not explicitly deal with same-sex desire in this story, but she does attack social repression in the form of religion. Organized religion forces the girls to conform and wear identical uniforms at the convent. She juxtaposes this practice with the freak who claims "this is the way [God] wanted me to be" (96). In this setting, conformity is clearly freakish, for it promotes an artificial purity. Since difference threatens the control that religion has over these young children, local preachers have the freak show closed: "Some preachers from town gone out and inspected it and got the police to shut it down" (96). Like McCullers's and Capote's freaks, this exhibit offers an outlet for thinking about sex and sexual desire—desire the Church wants to regulate under the banner of morality.

In all of these works, the freak violates sexual norms that seem to threaten society. It represents possibilities that are dangerous and exciting, restricting and freeing. But its place in the sideshow is an image for the costs of difference, for the costs of not being like everyone else. Though Capote most explicitly presents homosexuality as a viable choice for young adults, the freakishness in his novel, like McCullers's work, speaks to the power of the social prejudices. These writings portray America as a place with clearly defined boundaries, a place willing to marginalize its own from some unheard-of thing.

#### NOTES

1. Shelly Tremain, editor of a special issue of *DSQ: Disability Studies Quarterly*, discusses the crucial need for scholars to incorporate sexual orientation and sexual identity into the analysis of disability studies. Successfully bringing together these methods, Rachel Adams has done the only substantial reading of McCullers's fiction that links queer theory with the use of freaks. She is interested in the intersection of these concepts with biography (McCullers's bisexuality) and American consumerism in the 1940s. Though she situates her argument in some of the social and economic concerns of the 1940s, she primarily focuses on the cultural implications of

McCullers's language, particularly the use of "queer" and "freak"—a fruitful and important way of bringing together the methodologies of queer theory and disability studies. She also sees the use of freak shows in *The Member of the Wedding* and *Clock Without Hands* as an innovative inversion of the audience-freak dynamic in this entertainment. "In McCullers fiction, freak shows fail to cement the distinction between deviance and normality, instead calling the viewers' own normality into question through their identification with the bodies onstage, which remind them of their own lonely, uncomfortable experiences of embodiment" ("A Mixture of Delicious and Freak" 557). Adams does not, however, examine McCullers's dramatic works and does not consider ambiguous sexuality as a force contributing to the decline of freak shows in the 1940s.

2. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 8–22.

3. See Chapter 12 of Chauncey's *Gay New York*.

4. Like the "signs" whites used to identify racial passing, heterosexual society tried to identify homosexuality based on "effeminate looks and behavior." John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman give an example of a World War II naval officer noticing "eye contact" that first alerted him to the presence of other gay men in the service" (*Intimate Matters* 289). See also Jonathan Ned Katz's *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*

5. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, and Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*.

6. As Kirstin Ringelberg argues in her essay "His Girl Friday (and Every Day): Brilliant Women Put to Poor Use," the Production Code, which was established by Will Hays in 1930 to circumvent costly lawsuits about indecency, "put a tight leash on behaviors and plots deemed either immoral or amoral, particularly in terms of violence and sexuality. Violent or strongly sexual characters or stories could be shown, but only if the end result was condemned as unacceptable. . . . The free-wheeling ladies of the pre-Code era were explicitly banned, as the Code stated clearly that, 'Out of a regard for the sanctity of marriage and the home, the triangle, that is, the love of a third party for one already married, needs careful handling. The treatment should not throw sympathy against marriage as an institution.' If marriage was to be idealized and the final or constant goal of the characters, then there was little room for the type of freedom real women were experiencing in the 1930s to be shown in film" (93). The same was certainly true for homosexuality. It was perceived as a threat to the sanctity of marriage and, therefore, had no place in Hollywood films. For more information on the Production Code, see Leonard J. Leff's *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*.

7. When the play opened at the Walnut Theater in Philadelphia, it ran for four hours, and cuts were needed before it could be presented to a Broadway audience: "Carson had a great deal to say about the cuts. It was *her* play they were getting ready to operate on, and after her last experience with a script doctor, she was zealous in guarding her offspring" (V. Carr, *The Lonely Hunter*, 339).

8. See Virginia Spencer Carr's *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*, 330–351.

9. At the end of the novel, she is also planning to marry T. T. Williams, whom she considers an honest and good man.

10. Biographer Virginia Carr points out that McCullers was inspired to write an adaptation, in part, because of "Edmund Wilson's remarks that *The Member of*

*the Wedding* was static and lacked a sense of drama” (274). Visually, this “freakish” behavior certainly intensifies the drama.

11. For more on the role of race in this work, see Thadious M. Davis’s “Erasing the ‘We of Me’ and Rewriting the Racial Script: Carson McCullers’s Two *Member[s] of the Wedding*,” and Rachel Adams’ “‘A Mixture of Delicious and Freak’: The *Queer Fiction* of Carson McCullers.”

12. Davis argues that McCullers, for commercial reasons, diluted her treatment of race in this dramatic adaptation by relying on conventional stereotypes in portraying African Americans.

13. A connection between race and homosexuality can be found in many of the works discussed in this study. Consider the presence of lesbianism and race in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, homosexuality in Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* (1922) [the sexual overtones of David’s and Claude’s relationship and the gay German soldiers in the town of Beaufort], and the role of bisexuality, homosexuality, and ethnicity in Hemingway’s *Winner Take Nothing* (1933), specifically “The Sea Change” and “The Mother of a Queen.”

Fitzgerald also does a similar thing in *Tender Is the Night*, in part, by placing homosexuality and racial difference into the same category of otherness; both represent similar threats to white, heterosexist norms and values. In a note written in the late 1930s, Fitzgerald makes an explicit connection between his anti-Semitism and homophobia: “. . . two of my half dozen best men in History are Jews. But why do they have to be so damned conceited. That minority conceit—*like fairies*. They go ostrich about their faults—magnify their virtues which anyone is willing to grant in the first place” (qtd. in Donaldson 184; my emphasis). This conflation of ethnicity and sexuality doesn’t present morality as the primary objection to homosexuality; instead, visibility is the culprit. Jews and homosexuals are too public about their virtues and successes for Fitzgerald. In other words, because difference is not silent, it infringes on white heterosexual culture by offering plausible alternatives.

In “F. Scott Fitzgerald: Homosexuality and the Genesis of *Tender Is the Night*,” Angus P. Collins argues that Fitzgerald’s attack on homosexuality reflects anxieties about his own same-sex desires: “Fitzgerald in these years appears to have suspected that he himself was the true homosexual in his choice of vocation” (171); as a result, “significant progress on *Tender Is the Night* was possible only when Fitzgerald had mastered any suspicions of himself as emasculate artist and had returned to a view of his art compatible with sexual as well as more self-endorsement” (170). Surprisingly, Collins only reads the scenes involving homosexuality from earlier versions of the novel. He does not discuss these moments in the published text. Similarly, Felipe Smith’s “The Figure on the Bed” looks briefly at Fitzgerald’s ridicule of homosexuals in the Melarky drafts of *Tender Is the Night* and his anxiety about lesbianism in *The Crack-Up*. Most other scholars have gone no further than to identify certain characters as gay, and Milton Stern sidesteps the issue of homosexuality by problematically equating male homosexuality with womanhood and praising Fitzgerald’s supposedly “antisexist” commentary.

[Pardo Real’s] boy has become a “girl,” the “Queen of Chili.” . . . Real too calls in the doctors to clean up the mess of a daddy’s “girl” he has made. . . . In sum, although Fitzgerald, as a product of his time and place, was trapped within homophobic and sexist stereotypes, he uses

those very stereotypes to create a breathtaking multifarious antisexist motif. (*Tender Is the Night*, 41).

Cuidad Real, however, is not a woman, and his homosexuality was not created by his father's cruel treatment. Pardo's actions—"I made Francisco strip to the waist and lashed him with a whip" (242)—seem rooted more in concerns about his own sexual identity. Eve Sedgwick's discussion of coming out in *Epistemology in the Closet* can be applied effectively to this scene: "the double-edged scene of gay coming out . . . results partly from the fact that the erotic identity of the person who receives the disclosure is apt also to be implicated in, hence perturbed by it" (81). Pardo's excessive attempts to "cure" his son (beating him, sending him to brothels, giving him medication, and enlisting Dick's help to change him) clearly reflect this type of fear about his own sexual identity.

14. Lori Kenschaft explains that "[Havelock Ellis's] theories of sexual inversion define homoerotic desire as an individual pathological flaw. To the extent that McCullers accepted this model, which she largely did, her vision of the nature of homoeroticism remained that of a soul 'mean of countenance and grotesque in form'" (227). Kenschaft's "Homoerotics and Human Connections: Reading Carson McCullers 'As a Lesbian'" also briefly links her portraits of freakishness to these feelings of sexual inversion.

15. Freak shows were central metaphors throughout McCullers's fiction. Her novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943), for example, deals with masochistic and transgressive love, linking both desire with dangerous abnormality and freakishness with anxieties about sexuality. It tells the story of Miss Amelia's strange romance with the dwarfish hunchback, Cousin Lymon. Her enormous height (over six feet) links their marriage to staged freak-show pairings. Their seemingly happy relationship is shattered when Amelia's ex-husband, Marvin Macy, returns after being released from prison. Lymon is immediately attracted to Macy, even though he torments him and everyone else in town. As his desire for Macy grows so does his disgust for Amelia. He begins insulting her in public, imitating "her awkward long-legged walk; he crossed his eyes and aped her gestures in a way that made her appear to be a freak" (245). And at the boxing match between Amelia and Macy, Lymon attacks her as soon as she starts choking her opponent: "He landed on the broad strong back of Miss Amelia and clutched at her neck with his clawed little fingers" (250). Unlike Capote's more explicit treatment of homosexual desire in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, the extent of the intimacy between these men is unclear, and McCullers's text suggests it was probably one-sided. After Lymon and Macy abandon Miss Amelia, for example, "there were rumors that Marvin Macy used him to climb into windows and steal, and other rumors that Marvin Macy had sold him to a side show" (252). Regardless, like McCullers's reluctance to see lesbianism as an option for Frankie, happiness is not found in homosexual relationships (or heterosexual relationships) in this story, and, as we will see, Capote is much more willing to present same-sex desire as fulfilling. It is also interesting to note that Edward Albee adapted this novel for the theater in 1963, suggesting that he too recognized the visible interest audiences would have in images of freakishness.

16. For example, see William White Tison Pugh's "Boundless Hearts in a Nightmare World: Queer Sentimentalism and Southern Gothicism in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*."

17. Freakishness also seems to be integral to the main characters of *In Cold Blood* (1965). Capote not only suggests a homosexual relationship between the

killers Dick and Perry, but he also presents the men as deformed, using their bodies to reinforce cold-hearted cruelty of this crime throughout the novel. Dick's face, for example, is described as being "composed of mismatching parts. It was as though his head had been halved like an apple, then put together a fraction off center. . . . His eyes [were] not only situated at uneven levels but of uneven size, the left eye truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue squint" (29). And Perry's body has been damaged in a motorcycle accident, "his chunky, dwarfish legs, broken in five places and pitifully scarred" (30). His skin is also marked by ornate tattoos: "While he had fewer tattoos than his companion, they were more elaborate—not the self-inflicted work of an amateur but epics of the art contrived by Honolulu and Yokohama masters" (30). The freak shows were also part of Capote's fiction before the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Specifically, "A Tree of Night" (1945) tells the story of a young college girl who meets two traveling performers who make a living with a sideshow act—"Lazarus: The Man Who Is Buried Alive, A Miracle, See for Yourself, Adults, 25c—Children 10c."

18. Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night* interprets gender and sexuality in the similar way; he insists that homosexuality can be seen on the body. For Dick, one must be either homosexual or heterosexual because the possibility of bisexuality has the potential to erode existing hierarchies that privilege heterosexuality. When he meets Ciudad Real, for example, Dick suppresses his own attraction to him by interpreting same-sex desire as antithetical to masculinity. Instinctively, Dick appreciates Ciudad's charm, youthful vitality, and physical attractiveness: "The boy . . . was about twenty, handsome, and alert" (242); this attraction is not entirely surprising. As Sedgwick explains in *Epistemology of the Closet*, "it is instead the most natural thing in the world that people of the same gender . . . people whose economic, institutional, emotional, physical needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should bond together also on the axis of sexual desire" (87). Dick, however, rejects this desire because acknowledging it would compromise his identity as a heterosexual. Admitting his attraction to men (as well as women) would be a kind of hybridity, so he subsequently interprets homosexual desire as repugnant: "There was some manliness in the boy, perverted into an active resistance to his father. But he had that typically roguish look in his eyes that homosexuals assume in discussing the subject" (243). Dick must also view Ciudad's desires as a perverse act of youthful rebellion in order to see them as harmful on a social or national level. He tells Ciudad that remaining a homosexual won't leave him the "time or energy for any other decent or social act. If you want to face the world, you'll have to begin by controlling your sensuality—and, first of all, the drinking that provokes it" (243). Dick presents homosexuality here as a force that threatens the moral decency of middle-class society.

Dick's public rejection of homosexuality is an attempt to assert both his heterosexual identity and his hope that the problem of homosexuality and bisexual desire can be remedied in some way. While Dick is talking "pleasantly" with Ciudad, Royal Dumphry, another homosexual character, appears, and Dick thinks, "'My God, I've stirred up a nest!'" (243–244). Fearing that the appearance of accepting homosexuality will somehow suggest he condones it, Dick "[continues] a crab-like retreat toward the nearest door" (244). Dumphry, however, does get the opportunity to tell him that "'I've never forgotten that evening in the garden. . . . To me it's one of the finest memories in my life, one of the happiest ones. I've always thought of it as the most civilized gathering of people that I

have ever known'" (244). This declaration suggests that Dumphy's sexuality has excluded him from acceptance in most heterosexual communities. Ironically, Dick only tolerated Dumphy's and Campion's sexuality at the garden party because they either masked or repressed it: "Mr. Royal Dumphy, his girl's comeliness less startling in the pleasure world of evening. . . . [And] Campion [managed] somehow to restrain his most blatant effeminacy" (32-33). Dick was willing to "accept" them when the other guests could possibly mistake them for heterosexuals. But Dumphy and Campion only pass in a limited sense. Dick is never unclear about their homosexuality; as a matter of fact, he relies on it to define his sense of self. Their effeminacy is juxtaposed with Dick's masculinity at the party in ways that enhance his sexual appeal for Rosemary. This need for difference, while fearing its power to destroy existing cultural norms, once again highlights the threat of homosexuality and ambiguity in the novel.

19. The ways in which Capote depicts both Randolph's anguish over lost love and his association with freaks has a number of similarities with Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1937). All of the characters in *Nightwood* who fall in love with the bisexual Robin Vote become tragically lost and isolated figures. Not surprisingly, most of them, including Robin herself, are associated with circus and sideshow performers. Before meeting Robin, Felix feels "alone, apart and single" (10). This isolation, as well as his obsession with old European aristocracy, makes him feel a certain kinship with freaks: "Early in life, Felix had insinuated himself into the pageantry of the circus and the theatre. In some way they linked his emotions to the higher and unattainable pageantry of kings and queens. The more amiable actresses of Prague, Vienna, Hungary, Germany, France and Italy, the acrobats and the sword-swallowers, had at one time or another allowed him their dressing rooms—sham salons in which he aped his heart. Here he had neither to be capable nor alien. He became for a little while a part of their splendid and reeking falsification" (11). Felix not only finds community with these performers, but by giving himself the title of "Baron," he participates in the humbug of such performers. Felix doesn't want to distinguish between fantasy and reality. And the illusory world of the circus makes this possible. Even his friend Frau Mann is described as someone who has fused with her costume: "The stuff of her tights was no longer a covering, it was herself; the span of the tightly stitched crotch was so much her own flesh that she was as unsexed as a doll" (13).

Throughout the novel, Robin continually crosses accepted boundaries: she rejects the traditional expectations of wife and mother, leaving her only child with Felix; she has affairs with women and men; and at the end of the novel, she emulates the behavior of a dog. Her association with freak shows can, therefore, be seen as another example of crossing boundaries—in this case the line between viewer and spectacle, self and other. At the end of the novel, Nora—Robin's second lover in the text and someone who worked with the Denckman circus (53)—has been shattered by Robin's departure. Much like Randolph's heartbreak in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Nora's behavior has become self-destructive. In an attempt to console Nora, her father, Dr. O'Connor, literally compares Robin to a freak show performer: "Robin was outside the 'human type'—a wild thing caught in a woman's skin, monstrously alone, monstrously vain; like the paralyzed man in Coney Island (take away a man's conformity and you take away his remedy) who had to lie on his back in a box, but the box was lined with velvet, his fingers jeweled with stones, and suspended over him where he could never take his eyes off, a sky-blue mounted mirror, for he wanted

to enjoy his own ‘difference’” (146). The doctor sees Robin as too enamored with her own difference to be faithful to anyone. At the same time, this is just one more interpretation of the most illusive character in the text. Barnes, true to her character, doesn’t give the reader enough information to really know Robin.

This analysis of Robin’s inaccessibility resonates with Robin Blyn’s reading of the novel. “Like the circus freaks that people its text, *Nightwood*’s surface is a display of language that denies entrance to its readers. As so many critics have noted, the body of *Nightwood* is, like the bodies of Nikka and Frau Mann, impenetrable, a surface composition exorbitant with detail that refuses to explain, a closed body which poses every penetration of its surface as violation” (148). Blyn goes on to read Barnes’s use of language and characterization in terms of the freak show spiel and tableau. The narrator’s use of language, for example, “blurs its scientific discourse with personal biography and mythological allusion, and it confuses biological and cultural determinism in classic freak show fashion” (150).



NICK NUTTALL

*Cold-Blooded Journalism:  
Truman Capote and the Non-Fiction Novel*

Truman Streckfus Persons was born on 30 September 1924 in New Orleans. His parents, Lillie Mae and Archulus 'Arch' Persons, divorced when he was six and his mother sent him to Monroeville, Alabama, where he was raised by her relatives. Eventually, in 1933, he moved to New York to live with his mother and her new husband Joseph Capote. In 1935 his stepfather renamed him Truman García Capote. An undistinguished student despite a supposed IQ of 215, Capote left school aged 17 and began working as a copyboy for the *New Yorker* magazine. He left the magazine under a cloud in 1944 and devoted the rest of his life to writing. Capote's first published work was a short story entitled 'Miriam' for *Mademoiselle* fashion magazine in 1942. It won an O'Henry Award for Best First-Published Story. His first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, was published in 1948 to great acclaim—staying on the *New York Times's* bestseller list for nine weeks. *The Grass Harp* (1951) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958) were followed by his most famous book, *In Cold Blood*. This 'non-fiction' novel was serialized in the *New Yorker* in 1965 and became the publishing sensation of 1966. Capote also produced two collections of short stories, some travel writing and a collection of reportage, *Music for Chameleons* (1980), which included 'Handcarved Coffins: A Nonfiction Account of an American Crime', first published in Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. Apart from

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the unfinished *Answered Prayers*, however, he wrote no more fiction. He died in Los Angeles of liver disease and 'drug intoxication' in August 1984, one month short of his sixtieth birthday. Hollywood's treatment of *In Cold Blood*, the movie *Capote*, starring Philip Seymour Hoffman, appeared in 2005 to critical acclaim.

### Blowin' in the Wind

*In Cold Blood* has assumed iconic status not only in the world of literature, where it has always been marketed as the work of a novelist, but also in the world of journalism where it has been hailed, by Tom Wolfe among others, as the harbinger of the New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s (Wolfe 1990: 41). Wolfe's account of the New Journalism in Part One of his eponymous volume implied with little sense of irony that the post-World War Two American novel, far from heralding a new 'golden age', was caught between the twin poles of neo-fabulism and pulp fiction. Neo-fabulism was Wolfe's term for 'a puzzling sort of fiction' in which 'characters have no background, no personal history, are identified with no social class, ethnic group or even nationality, and . . . often speak, if they speak at all, in short and rather mechanical sentences that, again, betray no specific background' (ibid.: 56).

Pulp fiction was the equivalent of 'finding gold or striking oil, through which an American could, overnight, in a flash, utterly transform his destiny' (ibid.: 20). In 1966, the year *In Cold Blood* was published, these twin poles might best be exemplified by, on the one hand, Thomas Pynchon's reality-disconnection tour de force *The Crying of Lot 49*, and on the other hand Jacqueline Susann's raunchy extravaganza *Valley of the Dolls*, a tale with little literary or other merit that ended up as the second biggest-selling novel of all time. This 'retrograde state of contemporary fiction' convinced Wolfe that 'the most important literature being written in America today is in non-fiction, in the form that has been tagged, however ungracefully, the New Journalism' (ibid.: Preface).

However, Wolfe's Genesis moment, together with his suggestion of a new form of journalism, raises as many questions as it answers. Even the most enlightened reader is still entitled to ask, what exactly is the New Journalism? If it is a new genre of writing, what are its characteristics? The vexed question of genre, therefore, cannot be evaded or sidestepped if New Journalism is to claim its place in the 'Pantheon' as surely as Wolfe believed it should. Genres provide significant reference points in a culture that enable readers to identify, choose and interpret a text. Non-fictional forms, however, often resist the tight embrace of genre and to that extent *In Cold Blood* conforms to the stereotype. Its subject matter is typical crime story genre and Capote produces the suspense required of the genre by delaying the account of the main event (the actual murders) until the third part of the

book. Capote himself invariably referred to it as reportage, as he noted in his Preface to *Music for Chameleons* (1981: xvi): ‘Actually, in all my reportage, I had tried to keep myself as invisible as possible.’ Yet its structure or form also suggests biography or even the nineteenth-century episodic novel. Such genre confusions are also apparent in the sheer number of terms used to describe what for simplicity’s sake is here called the New Journalism.

### **But What on Earth Is New Journalism?**

Capote himself said in an interview with the *New York Times* (Plimpton 1998: 197): ‘It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the “non-fiction novel,” as I thought of it.’ John Hellmann, in *Fables of Fact*, called literary journalism a genre of fiction (1981: 21). Buzz Pounds (2006), along with other current scholars, termed it literary non-fiction. In short, this taxonomical uncertainty offers few clues to identifying New Journalism in genre terms. And the ever-present ‘empiricist dilemma’, as proposed by Andrew Tudor (cited in Gledhill and Williams 2000: 223) has to be confronted. In other words, if we want to understand what a piece of New Journalism writing is, we must look at certain kinds of journalism. But how do we know which kinds of journalism to look at until we know what a piece of New Journalism writing is? To disentangle this conundrum and understand the complexity of New Journalism in genre terms we need first to examine what is sometimes described as the cultural consensus—those texts loosely agreed upon as examples of a journalism distinct from and atypical of the mainstream. It should then be possible to create a set of criteria from first principles or identify pre-existing criteria that can plausibly define this loosely-agreed-upon canon, being careful to reject the inappropriate or incongruous.

### **Man of Constant Sorrow**

Perhaps the most readily understood genre distinction is that between fiction and non-fiction. The first is clearly novel territory whilst journalism is one of the most significant examples of the second. When Truman Capote first considered eliding these genres by writing a non-fiction novel, there was no ‘cultural consensus’ he could call on and, therefore, no pre-existing criteria to guide him in relation to form, style or subject matter. To that extent, as noted by Tom Wolfe (1990: 52), Capote was a pioneer. And he was never under any illusion about the difficulty of his task. Interviewed by George Plimpton for the *New York Times Book Review* in January 1966, he said:

When I first formed my theories concerning the non-fiction novel, many people with whom I discussed the matter were unsympathetic. They felt that what I proposed, a narrative form that employed all

the techniques of fictional art, but was nevertheless immaculately factual, was little more than a literary solution for fatigued novelists suffering from ‘failure of the imagination’. (Plimpton 1998: 198)

This lack of sympathy was further aggravated by Capote’s perennial problem of finding a suitable topic. As he explained in the same interview: ‘The difficulty was to choose a promising subject . . . you want to be reasonably certain that the material will not soon “date”. The content of much journalism so swiftly does, which is another of the medium’s deterrents’ (ibid.).

Capote goes on to relate how he found the story: ‘One morning in November 1959, while flicking through the *New York Times*, I encountered on a deep inside page, this headline: “Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain”’ (ibid.). Curiously, for a writer who boasted of his ability to remember without using notes or tape recorder, he had offered a different explanation a fortnight earlier in an interview with Harry Gilroy, of the *New York Times* (1965): ‘Then one day I read in the *New York Times* a two-paragraph story under the headline “Eisenhower Appointee Slain”. Either way, Capote realized that a crime might provide the scale and scope he was looking for and that ‘moreover, the human heart being what it is, murder was a theme not likely to darken and yellow with time’ (ibid.: 199).

### Simple Twist of Fate

*In Cold Blood* tells the story of the murder of a wealthy wheat farmer, Herbert Clutter, his wife Bonnie and the two youngest of their four children, Kenyon, 15, and Nancy, 16. They were found at their farmhouse in the village of Holcomb, Kansas. All four had been bound and gagged and then shot at close range. Herbert Clutter’s throat had been cut. There were no signs of a struggle. Nothing had been stolen. According to the Sheriff, Earl Robinson, it appeared to be the work of a psychopathic killer. When Capote read about the murders the culprit was still at large. However, he wasn’t interested in the murders as such. At one point he even told Alvin Dewey, supervising investigator for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation: ‘It really doesn’t make any difference to me if the case is ever solved or not’ (Clarke 1988: 321). What Capote wanted to discover was the effect of the killings on such an isolated community, its inhabitants and the family itself. The *New Yorker* commissioned a shortish piece from him on this basis. But within a couple of weeks of Capote’s arrival in Kansas, two suspects had been arrested in Las Vegas. The two men, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, subsequently confessed to the murders.

The arrests and confessions significantly altered the angle and theme of Capote’s projected story. Neither the two killers nor the reasons for their crime could now be ignored. Capote soon realized that the article he origi-

nally envisaged would be inadequate. But he also worried 'that he might be writing too much for the *New Yorker* to digest' (ibid.: 332). He had no idea that the finished 'novel' would be his longest, running to almost 350 pages. Through extensive interviews with both Hickock and Smith he explored their childhoods and their lives up to the moment of the killings. These stories provided a powerful counterpoint to the lives of the Clutter family and their friends. He discovered that the motive for the crime was robbery and that the Clutters' fate had turned on a single piece of flawed information given to Dick Hickock by a fellow inmate in Lansing jail.

Floyd Wells was a drifter and odd-job man who had once worked on the Clutters' farm for about a year. Wells met Hickock when they were both in Lansing, Wells for robbery and Hickock for passing dud cheques. Wells talked about the wealthy farmer he had once worked for and how Clutter had told him it sometimes cost him \$10,000 a week to run the farm. Hickock asked Wells where the farm was, how to get there, how old the children were, did Mr Clutter keep a safe? Wells wasn't sure on the last point but told Hickock he believed there was a safe on the premises. The Clutter family's fate was sealed. When Hickock was released he teamed up with another old cellmate, Perry Smith, bought a twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun, and in Hickock's 1949 black Chevrolet sedan they drove the 400 miles to Holcomb. Capote structured the story into four parts:

1. The Last to See Them Alive
2. Persons Unknown
3. Answer
4. The Corner

Part One offers the reader a counterpoint between the lives of the Clutters and those of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith in the days leading up to the murders. Largely descriptive, it ends with the killings themselves but gives no details apart from the immediate reaction of the Clutters' friends and neighbours.

Part Two continues this format, following by turns the developing police investigation and its effects on the people of Holcomb, and then Dick and Perry driving to Mexico after Dick passes a series of bad cheques to obtain funds. Capote here plants the first seeds of doubt about whether they left any clues. Perry is reading a story in the Kansas City *Star* headlined: 'Clues are few in Slaying of 4'. Perry doubts the truth of the story: 'Anyway, I don't believe it. Neither do you. Own up, Dick. Be honest. You don't believe this no-clue stuff?' (Capote 1966: 97). This section contains Perry Smith's biography and concludes with the two killers returning to California hoping to hitch a ride to Las Vegas.

Part Three introduces Floyd Wells in his role as *deus ex machina*. He hears the story of the Clutter murders on the radio while still in prison and eventually tells the warden all about Hickock. This section also contains Dick Hickock's biography. The two killers meanwhile drive a stolen car to Las Vegas and Perry visits the post office to pick up a large cardboard box he had posted from Mexico. Capote lists the contents: 'suntans, denim pants, worn shirts, underwear, and two pairs of steel-buckled boots' (ibid.: 217). This list, in the best traditions of crime fiction, gives the reader the other important clue to Dick and Perry's eventual downfall.

The stolen car leads to their arrest and after two days of interrogation in separate rooms Dick is shown their boots and pictures of the matching footprints taken in the Clutters' basement. Dick confesses: 'It was Perry. I couldn't stop him. He killed them all' (ibid.: 232). This section concludes with Perry telling the police what happened on the night of 15 November 1959. This is the first time the reader is confronted with the bald facts of the killings. Both men are driven in convoy to Garden City and the county jail.

Part Four covers the trial, their conviction on four counts of first-degree murder, the pronouncement of the death penalty and their execution. This section spans a period of five years and during that time Capote carried out extensive interviews with both men, especially Perry Smith. Three appeals were lodged with the Supreme Court. The third was denied in January 1965. The hangings were slated for 18 February but at the last minute were postponed until 14 April. Capote spoke to both men and accompanied them to 'the corner', the shed where the gallows was situated. Dick Hickock was hanged first. Capote later wrote (Clarke 1988: 355): 'I was there. I stayed with Perry to the end. He was calm and very brave. It was a terrible experience and I will never get over it.'

### **All I Really Want to Do**

Capote honed his non-fiction teeth on an earlier piece of reportage for the *New Yorker*. Published as 'The Muses are Heard' (1956), it chronicled a trip to the Soviet Union by the Everyman Opera. They toured with Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and Capote went along to record the whole thing. He was aware, therefore, of the journalistic conventions he would have to acknowledge when beginning his *magnum opus* and he set out his journalistic credentials in the Acknowledgements at the beginning of *In Cold Blood*: 'All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned.' One significant difference between the two texts, however, is that Capote is ever-present in 'Muses'. It is an 'I' story. He soon realized that this approach would not work with *In Cold Blood*.

From a technical point, the greatest difficulty I'd had in writing *In Cold Blood* was leaving myself completely out of it. Ordinarily, the reporter has to use himself as a character, an eye-witness observer, in order to retain credibility. But I felt that it was essential to the seemingly detached tone of that book that the author should be absent. (Capote 1981: xv–xvi)

In some respects, as we shall see, he was moving in the opposite direction to the general thrust of the New Journalism that came later. As Buzz Pounds notes (2006: 2): 'The transition from object to subject in literary non-fiction has been a development of the "New Journalism" of the 1960s which has put less emphasis on the object of study, the thing or event, and has focused on the "subject" who is presenting.'

Although there was nothing intrinsic to the form or subject matter that demanded such a transition, journalists began to grasp that as soon as they intruded into an event to the extent that the New Journalism demanded they inevitably became a part of the action. It would be less than truthful, therefore, to ignore that participation. In Joe Eszterhas's 1972 piece for *Rolling Stone* magazine, 'Charlie Simpson's Apocalypse', he told the story of Charles Simpson who ran amok in Harrisonville, Missouri, killing three people and then blowing his own head off. Eszterhas wrote in the third person until the last few pages where he changed standpoint to the first person. The clue here is in the first sentence of the 'I' narrative (Wolfe 1990: 180): 'I got into Harrisonville about two weeks after the shooting.' If New Journalism claimed to be an encounter with the truth then Eszterhas had a duty to make it clear he was not a witness to the events he had described so vividly. Here the first-person narrative is a temporal device that maintains his journalistic integrity.

### I Don't Believe You

Joan Didion's seminal collection of twenty essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968), consists mostly of first-person viewpoint stories. Indeed, one of the three sections is headed 'Personals'. The few third-person narratives deal with what might be termed more traditional journalism subjects—crime and celebrity interviews. Although she writes extensively about people like Howard Hughes, John Wayne and Joan Baez, it is invariably from a Didion-centred perspective. As she confirmed in a *Paris Review* interview (Gourevitch 2006: 497): 'I can't ask anything. Once in a while if I'm forced into it I will conduct an interview . . .'. There is an engaging diffidence to her prose which at times has the reader wondering if, indeed, she did interview her subjects. And then slowly it dawns that the person she is always interviewing is herself.

Compare this with Capote's almost obsessive interest in the interview as a means of revealing character. For example, he spent three years on and off talking to Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. And as he noted in his *New York Times* interview (Plimpton 1998: 200): 'I suppose if I used just 20 per cent of the material I put together over those years of interviewing, I'd still have a book two thousand pages long.' Didion's subjective focus is at once softer and at times less forgiving than that of Capote and many of her other contemporaries: 'My only advantage as a reporter is that I am so physically small, so temperamentally unobtrusive, and so neurotically inarticulate that people tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests' (Didion 2001: xiii).

Didion's shy defiance is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the journalism of Hunter S. Thompson. 'Gonzo' journalism was his take on the New Journalism and he made the 'I' story his territory. His first book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1966), was pretty much standard journalism. Apart from one important factor: Thompson became part of the action. For a year he rode with the Angels, went home with the Angels, chronicled the sex lives of the Angels. There was no pretence here at traditional journalism's objectivity. His fiercely subjective style reached parts of society no other journalist reached. This was the era of flower power and the 'Summer of Love'. The establishment press had no clue how to report Black Panther rallies, Grateful Dead concerts, Beat writers' happenings or Hell's Angels' burn-ups. The first printing of *Hell's Angels* sold out within days of publication, the book going on to make the best-seller list of 1967.

Three years later Thompson penned 'The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved' for *Scanlan's Monthly* (June 1970). This story was by-lined: 'Written under duress by Hunter S. Thompson' and 'Sketched with eyebrow pencil and lipstick by Ralph Steadman' (Thompson 2000: 295). Thompson made it clear that he needed more time to hone the piece and complained about his treatment by *Scanlan's* editor in a letter to his agent Lynn Nesbit (ibid.: 300):

I was locked in that stinking hotel room with a head full of pills & no sleep for 6 days, working at top speed & messengers grabbing each page out of the typewriter just as soon as I finished it. No carbon, no rewrite, no time to even look back on what I'd written earlier.

But the tight deadline was the catalyst he needed to produce what many believe to be the first piece of true gonzo journalism. In its book incarnation it is fifteen pages long. Only on page nine is there any mention of the Kentucky Derby itself. Thompson spends seven lines on the race. The

remaining pages are a disjointed and querulous account of the types of people who frequented the Derby, mixed with descriptions of drinking, fighting, chaos and hangover. Ultimately, Thompson trying to get the story is the story. Capote's fabled pinpoint accuracy is ditched in favour of a kind of atmospheric authenticity which does not rely on the accumulation of facts so much as the accumulation of feelings, emotions, sensations. Who is to say that one is more 'truthful' than the other?

Yet friends and enemies alike have consistently questioned Capote's own adherence to the truth in his non-fiction writing. One friend, John Richardson, noted: 'Truman had absolutely no respect for the truth' (Plimpton 1998: 308). Another, Joanne Carson, ex-wife of legendary presenter of the *Tonight Show* Johnny Carson, explained: 'In Truman's mind, he doesn't lie, he makes things the way they *should* have been' (ibid.: 304). (Much the same could be said of Thompson's own journalism.) The ending of *In Cold Blood* was perhaps the most blatant piece of Capote fabrication. He agonized over whether to conclude with the executions or provide a more upbeat ending. He chose the latter. The chance encounter between 'Alvin Dewey and Susan Kidwell, Nancy Clutter's best friend, in the tree-shaded Garden City cemetery' (Clarke 1988: 359) is pure invention. It clearly suits the demands of a fictional narrative, providing a sense of life carrying on, bringing us full circle, back to the place where the story began, rather than the requirements of a piece of journalism that it stick to the facts.

This mischievous exploitation of 'truth' and the apotheosis of the 'I' story—the inconsequential nature of its subject matter, the focus on the journalist and his exploits at the expense of everything else, the mindscape so unfamiliar as to make questions of fact or fable not only unnecessary but irrelevant—is Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, published in 1971. From its famous opening riff—'We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold'—to its Jack Kerouac-inspired tape transcript towards the end, Thompson here grabbed the New Journalism torch lit by Capote with *In Cold Blood*, blew the neat petrol of gonzo over it and produced yet another new form—subjective, hot, lethal, subversive.

It was this muscular style, Thompson believed, which set him apart from the 'prissiness' of rivals like Tom Wolfe. Weingarten records Thompson saying in a 1971 essay (2005: 117): 'Wolfe's problem . . . is that he's too crusty to participate in his stories.' Thompson was always adamant, however, as Capote was of *In Cold Blood*, that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was more than anything a non-fiction novel (Thompson 2003: 188). Yet in *The Great Shark Hunt* he also described gonzo as 'a style of "reporting" based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism—and the best journalists have always known this' (Thompson 1980: 114).

### I Shall Be Released

Norman Mailer staked his claim to be among the 'best' journalists with his 1968 'homage' to *In Cold Blood*, *The Armies of the Night*. It would probably not have been written, and certainly not in the way it was, without Capote's pioneering work. From that moment Mailer's name became inextricably linked with that of Capote, whom he memorably described as 'a ballsy little guy, and . . . the most perfect writer of my generation, he writes the best sentences word for word, rhythm upon rhythm' (Clarke 1988: 314–15). Mailer's own view of journalism was somewhat ambivalent however. In an *Esquire* interview (June 1960) he said: 'Once a newspaper touches a story, the facts are lost forever, even to the protagonists.'

Mailer preferred his journalism long. *Armies* is the story of the 'citizen-army' protest march on the Pentagon in October 1967 against the Vietnam war. Mailer took part and was arrested. Although Capote worried about leaving himself completely out of *In Cold Blood*, he quickly understood that a first-person viewpoint would strike a false note in a story where he could not have been present during most of the action. Mailer, on the other hand, had no such problem. But even so, perhaps unconsciously acknowledging the primacy of Capote's text, he shied away from a straightforward 'I' narrative. Instead, he used the unusual device of becoming a character in the story but not the 'I' character. Mailer is the protagonist produced by Mailer the omniscient narrator. It is a subtle way of disguising the subjective reality of autobiography as the objective truth of biography. He could study his own reactions free from egotism and self-censorship. The following exchange, for example, takes place after he is arrested (Mailer 1968: 140):

When Mailer gave his name, the man with the clipboard acted as if he had never heard of him, or at least pretended never to have heard of him. 'How do you spell it?'

'M.A.I.L.L.E.R.'

'Why were you arrested Mr. Miller?'

'For transgressing a police line as a protest against the war in Vietnam.'

This is a sort of halfway house along the object-to-subject transition noted earlier. For Mailer, like Capote, understood the seductive embrace of the 'I' story; the ease with which information could be manipulated, suppressed or exaggerated; the ways a writer could, if he wished, disguise his lack of candour. But Mailer was unable to expiate himself completely from his text, for as Joyce Carol Oates noted in her 1973 *Critic* essay on 'The Art of Norman Mailer', he was 'a "self" in search of an author' (Oates 1973: 1).

The tradition of journalistic objectivity was imbued in Capote through his writing for the *New Yorker* and he was aware of the subtle difference between telling a story as best remembered and one that was made up. Mailer, too, acknowledged the significance of objectivity. In his afterword to *The Executioner's Song*, the story of Gary Gilmore, a career criminal who killed a motel manager and a petrol station employee in Utah in 1976, and was executed by firing squad (1979: 1051), he wrote: 'This book does its best to be a factual account of the activities of Gary Gilmore . . . and the story is as accurate as one can make it.' Here too, though, Mailer seemed obstinately shy of using the first-person 'I' and sheltered behind the vaguely anonymous 'one'.

So far as Capote was concerned, objectivity was part of accuracy and accuracy was so important to him that he asked Sandy Campbell, a fact-checker at the *New Yorker*, to go with him to Kansas to check the correctness of all his information. Campbell 'verified such things as dates and distances. Sandy said that he had worked with many *New Yorker* writers . . . but Truman was the most accurate' (Clarke 1988: 351). Yet Capote never took notes or used a tape recorder. He believed they inhibited candour and he trained his memory so he did not need them:

Twelve years ago I began to train myself for the purpose of this sort of book, to transcribe conversation without using a tape recorder. I did it by having a friend read passages from a book, and then later I'd write them down to see how close I could come to the original . . . I could get within 95 per cent of absolute accuracy, which is as close as you need. (Plimpton 1998: 202)

### **You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine**

Part One of Wolfe's *The New Journalism* is an extended essay that attempts to place the New Journalism in a historical context but more importantly acknowledges the fictive qualities of the writing by suggesting that it shares four distinct characteristics or techniques with fiction writing, or at least the 'realistic novel' kind of fiction writing espoused by Wolfe himself (1990: 46–50). These four characteristics are scene-by-scene construction, realistic dialogue, third-person point of view, and the recording of people's 'status life'. They provide a useful marker for gauging how well Capote fulfilled his aim of producing what was essentially an oxymoron, the non-fiction novel. And by extension their role as identifiers of the New Journalism as a genre can also be evaluated.

### **Scene-by-Scene Construction**

Wolfe contrasted scene-by-scene construction with 'sheer historical narrative' (see *ibid.*: 46). This first stylistic device takes the story forward moment

by moment, gives it immediacy and, therefore, maximizes reader involvement. The other delays forward momentum by introducing background detail—the contextualization of character and place that provides the rich cultural and social mix of a novel. *In Cold Blood* quite clearly uses scene-by-scene development, but Capote was suddenly confronted with the problem, once the killers had been caught, of how to incorporate their stories into what until then had been a straightforward linear narrative. He solved this not by giving the reader ‘historical narrative’ but by using flashback to fill in the detail of the killers’ lives—not as genealogy (third-person narrative) but as lived experience (first-person recollection). Thus he juxtaposes scenes involving Dick and Perry with those of the police, the Clutters, and the community of Holcomb. We experience the killers’ road journey to Mexico and then to Florida as well as their ‘life’ journey. These scenes are not strictly chronological. They are often contemporaneous or use flashback for dramatic impact. One scene comments on another and this cause-and-effect see-saw maintains the forward thrust of the narrative.

### Realistic Dialogue

*In Cold Blood* uses dialogue lightly. As Capote was not present during many of the scenes he chronicles, he is clearly reticent about quoting those who were and he never intrudes himself as a character. However, much of the most riveting dialogue takes place when Capote obviously was not present, for example when Dick and Perry are on the road. They hitch a lift from a Mr Bell with the aim of killing him and stealing his car. Dick tells a joke for Bell’s benefit (Capote 1966: 177):

‘Here’s a riddle. The riddle is: What’s the similarity between a trip to the bathroom and a trip to the cemetery?’ He grinned.  
 ‘Give up?’  
 ‘Give up.’  
 ‘When you gotta go, you gotta go!’  
 Mr Bell barked.  
 ‘Hey, Perry, pass me a match.’

Unknown to Bell, Dick’s match command was the cue for Perry, sitting in the back, to hit Bell over the head with a ‘handkerchief-wrapped rock’. Even so, many critics questioned the authenticity of Capote’s use of dialogue. In his *New York Times Book Review* interview, George Plimpton attempted to clarify the issue. Capote’s response was typical:

They ask, ‘How can you reconstruct the conversation of a dead girl, Nancy Clutter, without fictionalizing?’ If they read the

book carefully, they can see readily enough how it's done. It's a silly question. Each time Nancy appears in the narrative, there are witnesses to what she is saying and doing—phone calls, conversations, being overheard. (Plimpton 1998: 207–8)

Clearly, the journalistic convention of corroboration was important to him and he was assiduous with regard to both the numbers of people he interviewed and the time he spent with each, often speaking to someone on two or three occasions in a single day (Capote 1966: Acknowledgements; Clarke 1988: 322).

### **Third-Person Point of View**

Wolfe makes the point that a first-person viewpoint is limiting for a journalist since he can bring the reader inside the mind of only one character—himself—a point of view that often proves 'irrelevant to the story and irritating to the reader' (1990: 47). Capote had already decided that a third-person narrative was essential to maintain the detachment he felt essential for his story's integrity. And he also discovered that a longer, more complex piece of writing than his 'Muses' would soon begin to disintegrate under the subjective weight of an omnipresent 'I' character.

### **The Recording of People's 'Status Life'**

This involves noting such things as people's habits, gestures, manners; styles of clothing, furniture, travel, eating; ways of relating to children, workmates, bosses, inferiors; and other clues to a person's 'status'. Wolfe believed these 'status' clues provided the pure authenticity that brought characters to life. Capote used this element most tellingly to point up the differences in social status between Dick and Perry and the Clutters. Early on in the story Capote invites us to observe the Clutters' relative wealth: 'One of these barns was a mammoth Quonset hut; it brimmed with grain—Westland sorghum—and one of them housed a dark, pungent hill of milo grain worth considerable money—a hundred thousand dollars' (Capote 1966: 22). Contrast this with the list of Perry's possessions as discovered by Agent Nye in a Las Vegas boarding house: 'One dirty pillow, "souvenir of Honolulu"; one pink baby blanket; one pair khaki trousers; one aluminium pan with pancake turner' (ibid.: 181). Or the meal Perry and Dick contemplate on their way to Holcomb: 'The travellers stopped for dinner at a restaurant in Great Bend. Perry, down to his last fifteen dollars, was ready to settle for root beer and a sandwich' (ibid.: 63). Arguably these status details give the reader a greater insight into character, and at the same time attest to the veracity of that insight, than any amount of generic description.

### **Restless Farewell: Populating the Domestic, Domesticating the Popular**

These four devices clearly characterize New Journalism writing as defined by Tom Wolfe. Yet it is more difficult to ascertain their validity as a set of criteria by which all New Journalism can be identified. It would, indeed, be crass to expect or demand their inclusion as a requirement of the genre or their absence as confirmation of exclusion. For example, Robert Boynton in *The New New Journalism*, whilst acknowledging Wolfe's contribution, offers a more fluid and process-driven analysis of the way in which the genre has developed (2005: xiii):

What Wolfe didn't anticipate was that a new generation of journalists would build upon (and ultimately surpass) his reporting methods, lengthening and deepening their involvement with characters to the point at which the public/private divide essentially disappeared. Wolfe went inside his characters' heads; the New New Journalists become part of their lives.

This becoming 'part of their lives' is one of the reasons for probably the most significant departure from Wolfe's four devices—the transition from his third-person to a first-person point of view. This is especially true of shorter New Journalism writing. Of the twenty-three stories in Wolfe's *The New Journalism* anthology, two-thirds are third-person point of view. In Sims and Kramer's *Literary Journalism* collection, published twenty-two years later in 1995, only two of the fifteen stories are third-person accounts, Calvin Trillin's 'First Family of Astoria' and Tracy Kidder's 'Memory'. Whilst this is obviously a crude statistical analysis, it is perhaps indicative of the trend towards first-person narrative in later New Journalism. And to that extent Hunter S. Thompson might be seen as its true progenitor rather than Truman Capote and Norman Mailer.

Yet Capote's assertion in the Preface to *Music for Chameleons* (1980) that when writing reportage he tried to keep himself as invisible as possible might seem at odds with the most celebrated piece in that collection, 'Handcarved Coffins: A Nonfiction Account of an American Crime'. This was written from a first-person viewpoint and he alternated between straight first-person narrative and dialogue presented in simple film script format, identifying himself as TC. The story is about a series of seemingly unconnected murders in an unnamed town in the American mid-West. It was, perhaps, a belated attempt by Capote to revive his fortunes by revisiting the formula of the non-fiction novel. Yet the story suffers from the inherent tension caused by Capote's desire to be 'in' the story on the one hand (the first-person viewpoint) and his equal desire for concealment (the film script format) on the other.

Despite this, much of the best book-length New Journalism, with the notable exception of Michael Herr's 1977 account of his experiences as a Vietnam war correspondent in *Despatches* and the work of Hunter S. Thompson, followed Capote's lead and used the third-person viewpoint, from Gay Talese's *Honor Thy Father* (1972) and Jane Kramer's *The Last Cowboy* (1977) to Mailer's 1980 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Executioner's Song*.

Equally important as form is subject matter. Here Wolfe acknowledged the deficiencies of his four devices with reference to the 'higher accomplishments of the great fiction writers' (1990: 49): character creation, psychological depth, a sense of history, the great themes of literature, etc. He placed responsibility for these squarely at the door of each writer: 'It depends upon the writer's experience and intellect, his insights, the quality of his emotions, his ability to see into others, his "genius"' (ibid.). And an important part of this 'genius' was the favouring of the quotidian as subject matter—New Journalists determinedly becoming part of their subjects' lives. Gruesome murders and murderers, large-scale protests, high-profile sports events, political scandals, famous people—these became the exception rather than the rule. The grand political gesture of the protest march is replaced by a story of the urban poor. The unique persona of the mass murderer is traded for the journalism of everyday misdemeanour. The walk towards destiny is exchanged for a stroll in the park. New Journalism has populated the domestic and domesticated the popular.

This concern with routine events at times belies the quality of the writing and the attention to detail of the typical New Journalist. But at the same time it has vastly expanded the range of topics considered worthy of journalistic attention. Perhaps the last word should go to Michael Lewis, one of the New New Journalists identified by Robert Boynton as having 'revived the tradition of American literary journalism' (2005: xxx). Lewis is the author of a number of books, including *Liar's Poker* (1989), an exposé of his time on Wall Street in the 1980s, and writes for *The New Republic* and the online magazine *Slate*. Interviewed by Boynton for *The New New Journalism*, Lewis said: 'Whereas journalists once felt humbled by the novel, we now live in an age in which the *novelist* lives in a state of anxiety about nonfiction' (Boynton 2005: xii). No doubt Truman Capote would have approved.

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## *Chronology*

- 1924 Born Truman Streckfus Persons on September 30 in New Orleans, son of Lillie Mae (later Nina) Faulk Persons and Arch Persons.
- 1927 Sent to live with an elderly uncle and three elderly women in rural Alabama.
- 1931 Parents divorce.
- 1932 Mother marries Joseph Capote.
- 1935 Joseph adopts Truman.
- 1939 Attends boarding schools in New York; then attends Greenwich High School in Greenwich, Connecticut.
- 1942 Begins work at *The New Yorker* magazine.
- 1944–1948 Publishes short stories in various magazines. Wins two O. Henry Awards. Publishes *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in January 1948.
- 1949 Publishes *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*.
- 1950 Publishes *Local Color*.
- 1951 Publishes *The Grass Harp*.
- 1952 Theatrical version of *The Grass Harp* opens on Broadway.
- 1954 Mother commits suicide in January. In Italy for filming of his script *Beat the Devil*. Theatrical version of “A House of Flowers” opens on Broadway in December.

- 1956 *The Muses Are Heard* is published.
- 1958 *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is published.
- 1959 *Observations* is published, containing photos by Richard Avedon and commentary by Capote. Begins research for *In Cold Blood*.
- 1963 *The Selected Writings of Truman Capote* is published.
- 1966 *In Cold Blood* and *A Christmas Memory* are published.
- 1967 *In Cold Blood*, the film version, is released.
- 1968 Publishes *The Thanksgiving Visitor*.
- 1971 Operated on for cancer.
- 1973 Publishes *The Dogs Bark: Public People and Private Places*.
- 1977 Biological father dies.
- 1980 Publishes *Music for Chameleons*.
- 1982 Stepfather, Joseph Capote, dies.
- 1983 Publishes *One Christmas*.
- 1984 Dies on August 25 in Los Angeles.
- 1985 *Three* is published.
- 1987 *Answered Prayers: The Unfinished Novel* is published.

## Contributors

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