

TRUMAN CAPOTE'S IN COLD BLOOD - WRITING
A NONFICTION NOVEL,
CREATING MEANING OUT OF FACTS

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The violent social change of the 1960s, and the exhaustion of certain forms of fiction that have dominated the novel since World War II, have created new opportunities for writers.

The dominant mood of America in the 1960s was apocalyptic. Throughout the decade, the events reported daily by newspapers and magazines documented the vast changes in every sector of life straining imagination to the point of incredulity. Gradually, everyday "reality" became more fantastic than the fictional visions of even the best novelists. Events that seemed beyond the wildest fantasies became a part of everyday reality when the presidential motorcade was fired upon in Dallas in 1963. This was a time when the novelist was confronted with two dilemmas: Firstly, how to find a form more closely reconciled with the modified nature of reality in America than the traditional realistic novel; and, secondly, how to secure and maintain an audience (Hollowell 14). Consequently, the emergence of a new trend, the New Journalism or the nonfiction form, its growing significance and popularity was inevitable.

Truman Capote defined *In Cold Blood*¹ as a "nonfiction novel" and his literary aspirations went far beyond "mere" journalism.

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His long pursuit of the Clutter case, leading him to Holcomb, Kansas and finally to a close relationship with the murderers, began with the aesthetic premise that journalism could be raised to the level of art.

According to him, this could be achieved by combining a) carefully recorded dialogue; b) psychological depth; and c) novelistic form with what he called "the realities of journalism".

Many people with whom he discussed the theories concerning the nonfiction novel, according to Capote, "a narrative form that employed all the techniques of fictional art but was nevertheless immaculately factual,"² (Malin 26) viewed it as the "failure of imagination."

The first requirement in producing a "nonfiction novel," in Capote's opinion, is to choose a promising subject that will not soon "date". He discarded a number of ideas after doing a certain amount of preliminary work. In fact, in November 1959, in *The New York Times*, he came across a heading: "Wealthy Farmer, Three of Family Slain", which ran as follows:

Holcomb, Kan., No. 15 (UPI) - A wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged.

The father, 48-year-old Herbert W. Clutter, was found in the basement with his son, Kenyon, 15. His wife, Bonnie, 45, and a daughter, Nancy, 16, were in their beds.

There were no signs of a struggle, and nothing had been stolen. The telephone lines had been cut.

"This is apparently the case of a psychopathic killer," Sheriff Earl Robinson said.

Mr. Clutter was founder of the Kansas Wheat Growers Association. In 1954 President Eisenhower appointed him to the Federal Farm Credit Board, but he never lived in Washington.

The board represents the twelve farm credit districts in the country. Clutter served from December, 1953, until April, 1957. He declined a reappointment.

He was also a local member of the Agriculture Department's Price Stabilization Board and was active with the Great Plains Wheat Growers Association.

The Clutter farm and ranch cover almost 1,000 acres in one of the richest wheat areas.

Mr. Clutter, his wife and daughter were clad in pajamas. The boy was wearing blue jeans and a T-shirt.

The bodies were discovered by two of Nancy's classmates, Susan Kidwell and Nancy Ewalt.

Sheriff Robinson said the last reported communication with Mr. Clutter took place last night about 9.30 p.m., when the victim called Gerald Van Vleet, his business partner, who lives nearby. Mr. Van Vleet said the conversation had concerned the farm and ranch.

Two daughters were away. They are Beverly, a student at Kansas University, and Mrs. Donald G. Jarchow of Mount Carroll, III (Malin 11).

This brief story of a few paragraphs stating the facts served as a seed planted in Capote's mind to produce a 384-page work of art following six years of meticulous research and study.

In his *Fact and Fiction* John Hollowell states that there were three crucial elements on which Capote based his argument for a "new art form": (1) the timelessness of the theme; (2) the unfamiliarity of the setting, and (3) the large cast of characters that would allow him to tell the story from a variety of points of view, and in fact, *In Cold Blood* follows this formula closely.

As stated earlier, in order to achieve the "first essential," the subject chosen should not be so immediate and typical that it would be outdated by the time it was published. The senselessness and brutality of these murders that were committed for less than hundred dollars in cash and goods, distinguishes them from similar crimes which are more easily explained and accepted.

The lack of a rational or acceptable motive for these murders and the viciousness with which they were carried out makes them grotesque and nearly ritualistic.

Since the murders violate something larger and more fundamental than the individual lives of the Clutter family: the American ideal archetype, this dimension helps to create the timeless quality (Smart 77).

Secondly, the setting of the crime --Holcomb, Kansas-- is unfamiliar to the majority of the readers although it is stereotypical "middle America." Also the murder site, a prosperous wheat farm built from Herb Clutter's hard work helps to create the timelessness of Capote's subject matter because it strikes the very heart of the American middle class archetype. Finally, to tell his story, Capote uses several narrative viewpoints, most of them secondary. In the section entitled "The Last to See Them Alive," (76-82), Larry Hendricks presents the first coherent account of the discovery of the brutal murder of the Clutter family. The three major narrative perspectives are those of the two murderers Perry Smith and Richard Hickock and of their determined pursuer Alvin Dewey from the Kansas bureau of investigation.

The novel opens with the omniscient point of view: "The village of Holcomb stands on the wheat plains of Western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'," (13) and ends with the perspective of Alvin Dewey. The three narrative points of view are at opposite ends in the novel: Smith and Hickock opposing Alvin Dewey, the representative of law and order, who is exhausted but finally victorious. The myth of justice of the American West, that justice will always prevail, as a part of a shared American reality, is affirmed once again.

Until the point when Smith and Hickock are arrested by Dewey and his men, the narrative progresses along two parallel lines: one level concerning Smith and Hickock alternate; with a second narrative level about the events and the personalities in Holcomb and detective Dewey. The careful arrangement by the author is obvious almost throughout the book. For example, on page 26, Herb Clutter allows a group of pheasant hunters from Oklahoma on his land, then heads for home, "unaware that it (today) would be his last." In the very next chapter the section begins with the words, "Like Mr. Clutter, the young man (Perry Smith) breakfasting in the cafe called the Little Jewel never drank coffee."

The omniscient narrator provides the reader a simultaneity of action available to none of the characters except to himself. Another instance involves Herbert Clutter's brother, who, voicing the paranoia which has crept into the lives of Holcomb's citizens, says to a reporter shortly after the funeral:

When this is cleared up, I'll wager whoever did it (the murders) was someone within ten miles of where we now stand. (105)

The next section on Smith and Hickock begins with:

Approximately four hundred miles east of where Arthur Clutter then stood, two young men (Smith and Hickock) were sharing a boot in the Eagle Buffet, a Kansas City Diner. (106)

Nearly every section is juxtaposed with the preceding one in order to underscore the arrangement and coincidence between them. The narrator creates a certain irony by consciously structuring and arranging these random almost accidental events; He supplies the symmetry and form. The way Capote establishes connection also reveals his subjective feeling about the world he presents. He manipulates some of the melodramatic contrasts and ironies by his selective juxtapositions. For example, while Perry is hunched up with pain in a toilet, the narrator moves straight to Nancy Clutter's bedroom dominated by pink, blue or white and a prominent pink and white Teddy bear. It is Capote who provides the atmospheric detail. He could not record all of the criminals. However, he selected the scenes and dialogues with the most effective dramatic appeal. Capote's skill to exploit the hidden meanings of significant moments contributes to the narrative impact of the book. He carefully gives the conversations of close friends of the Clutters, the detectives and the criminals themselves. So a comment made innocently by a neighbor or a casual remark made by an investigator acquires meanings within the context of the murders that were not evident in the original context.

On the day before Herbert Clutter's death a neighbor praises him for his impromptu speech at a local club by saying "I can't imagine you afraid. No matter what happened, you'd talk your way

out of it" (49). Originally made in the flow of everyday life, this comment gains a hidden meaning in light of the murder that is to take place soon.

Capote uses dialogue for ironic effect. The irony found in the book is not the production of the writer's imagination; it is an empirical irony. In recording the last day of Mr. Clutter, Capote mentions his conversation with Mr. Johnson, the insurance man and quotes his remark: "Why, Herb, you're a *young* man. Forty-eight. And from the looks of you, from what the medical reports tell us, we're likely to have you around a couple of weeks more" (61). Yet, that very day turns out to be the very day Mr. Clutter dies.

Although not apparent to the speakers, Capote presents hidden meanings through which he establishes a silent alliance between the narrator and the reader throughout. Even such a detail as the admonition embroidered on Mrs. Clutter's silk bookmark between the pages of her Bible carries a further meaning; it is foreshadowing the terrible end for it reads: "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is" (42).

Therefore, because of his careful choice and artful arrangement, Capote's "narrative *read* more like a novel than a historical account" (Hollowell 63). In an interview Capote tries to clarify his choice and arrangement of material:

It's a question of selection you wouldn't get anywhere if it wasn't for that... I make my comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it (Malin 32).

Although Capote, the invisible author, is the all-seer and allknower, he pays special attention so as not to intrude. Despite his own interest in the case, he was present at the execution, Capote never interfered for he believes:

My feeling is that for the nonfiction novel form to be entirely successful, the author should not appear in the work. Ideally... 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 (Malin 32).

Thus, the choice of third person, omniscient narrator promotes objectivity. Capote shapes the reader's perception of the criminals by using various spokesmen-Holcomb's postmistress, chief detective Alvin Dewey, Hickock and Smith themselves - to avoid direct authorial comment. By presenting the events through as many eyes as possible, his skilled manipulation of point of view gives the effect of complexity. Nevertheless, in his attempt for impartiality and balance, Capote's view point is hinted at even in the arrangement of dialogues as in the trial where two reporters express their views on the criminals and reveal the double meaning of the title of the book. The first reporter expresses sympathy for Perry's "rotten life". However, the second reporter opposes him by saying: "Many a man can match sob stories with that little bastard. Me included Maybe I drink too much but I sure as hell never killed four people in cold blood." The second reporter answers: "Yeah, and how about hanging the bastard? That's pretty goddamn cold - blooded too" (343). In similar scenes through the book Capote makes clear the cold-blooded nature of society's demand for the death penalty.

Instead of the historical or chronological summary common to history and journalism, Capote used the "scenic" construction of the novel in the organization of *In Cold Blood*. The book is made up of eighty-six individual scenes that range from two paragraphs to twenty-eighty-six individual scenes that range from two paragraphs to twenty-five pages, which in turn are grouped under four different headings. "The Last to See Them Alive," is the first section in which the Clutters are introduced from the viewpoint of the townspeople. In the second section, "Persons Unknown," Capote deals with the fear and hysteria instigated by the crime among the citizens of Holcomb. The third section "Answer," is predominated by the perspective of the chief detective Alvin Dewey. The final section, "The Corner," which is named for Kansas State Penitentiary's death row, depicts the murderers directly through their recollections about the crime and their conversations with other condemned criminals.

By constructing the last day in the life of the Clutters, Capote gives a kind of summary of the respectable surface of American life. The prosperous farmer, Mr. Clutter, "eminent Republican and

church leader," intolerant teetotaler, surveys his land, helps a neighbor, takes out an insurance policy. Nancy his pretty, popular daughter, having acted in *Tom Sawyer* the night before, teaches a neighbor youngster to bake cherry pie "her special way," works on bridesmaids' dresses for her sister's wedding, completes her chores, watches TV with her boy-friend and family. Her brother Kenyon works in his carpentry den, gives the last touches to the hope chest he has made for his sister as a wedding gift and does some gardening. Life for them all is "organized," just as their surroundings are "so tended and cared for." Nevertheless, the happiness of the Clutter family, as it turns out, is skin-deep. During a conversation with the neighbor's daughter, Mrs. Clutter reveals her deeply troubled mind. Beyond the walls of their citadel she has nervous attacks and sleeps apart from her husband. She is an alien unable to conform with the stiff-necked culture surrounding her. Husband and wife follow two different paths: his is "a public route, a march of satisfying conquests," but hers "a private one that eventually (winds) through hospital corridors." However, there is also a hint that Mr. Clutter himself is "finding secret solace in tobacco," while Nancy is a compulsive nail-biter. Still, as Capote fills in the details of the town and community, he gives the picture of a respectable decent enough family.

In the eyes of Holcomb's people, Herbert Clutter and his family represent the fulfillment of the American Dream. Capote reinforces this comments: "an inch more rain and this country would be a paradise-Eden on earth" (23). Mr. Clutter has earned all his wealth by the sweat of his brow; he is seen still working eighteen hours a day. The family typifies all of the traditional American values. Nancy especially shows the all-American character of her family.

As presented in the first section much of what is most admirable about the American spirit is unquestionably embodied in the victims of the savage murder. Thus, their inexplicable deaths that follows disrupt Holcomb's ethical universe profoundly. "Of all the people in all the world, the Clutters were the least likely to be murdered" (102).

The community's collective disbelief is voiced by the local school teacher:

Feeling wouldn't run half so high if this had happened to anyone except the Clutters. Anyone less admired. Prosperous. Secure. But that family represented everything people hereabouts really value and respect, and that such a thing could happen to them-well, it's like being told there is no God. It makes life seem pointless. (105)

As a result of the human need to rationalize, the citizens of Holcomb assumed the murderers must have come from their own limited circle, must have been connected to the victims. The chief detective Dewey, who in many ways represents the common sense of the community, when he finally got confessions from Smith and Hickock, felt disappointment, for the

confessions... failed to satisfy his sense of meaningful design. The crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act; the victims might as well have been killed by lightning. (277)

What is so striking about the murders is that while reading about them within a fictional context (i.e. not a newspaper story), the reader is aware of their factuality; it is a true story. It is awesome for: "they were like you and me, the sort to whom the inconceivable does not happen" (Malin 116).

Capote's artistic talent renders *In Cold Blood* more than merely a documentary. "It might be said about Truman Capote that everything he touches turns to literature" (Malin 163). This is seen in the portrayal of the murderers, especially of Perry, the bloody murderer, yet at the same time the victim of fate. As one reviewer put it, the reader begins to see Hickock and Smith not as "illiterate, cold-blooded murderers," but as "literate, psychopathic heroes" (Malin 80). Perry becomes the total symbol for the exile, the alienated human being the innocent, sometimes evil child.

Perry is the most interesting character in the book. As John Hollowell states, the portrayal of Perry Smith is the "main dramatic interest" of the book, Capote's "greatest accomplishment in it". He further states that three things are revealed about the nature of this nonfiction novel if Perry Smith's portrayal is

examined in detail: (1) The affinity of Smith's character to the characters of Capote's fiction; (2) the methods of heightening dialogues and scenes; and (3) the legitimacy of Capote's claims that *In Cold Blood* should be considered literature rather than journalism (75).

Like Hollowell, other critics such as George Garrett and William L. Nance agree that Perry resembled Capote's fictional characters, especially those in his earlier fiction.³ Having a rich and childish imagination, having a recurring dream, being sensitive and physically deformed, Perry possesses the right characteristics that make him similar to the fictional characters.⁴ Perry Smith is an outcast from society almost from birth; he is a psychic cripple, a loner who resembles the protagonist of a Capote gothic story or novel. He brings to mind characters such as Joel Knox of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Collin Fenwick and Dolly Talbo of *The Grass Harp* for whom Capote has a great sympathy. In *The Worlds of Truman Capote*, William L. Nance says:

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 alighting classifications as "abnormal". (16)

Capote evokes the reader's sympathy for Perry Smith frequently by comparing him to wounded animals. Rather than a human being responsible for his actions, Smith is more often described as a frightened "creature." Perry's appearance at his trial begins:

Only Perry Smith, who owned neither jacket nor tie, seemed sartorially misplaced. Wearing an open-necked shirt (borrowed from Mr. Meier) and blue jeans rolled at the cuffs, he looked as lonely and inappropriate as a seagull in a wheatfield. (306)

In the section titled "The Corner," Mrs. Joie Meier, wife of the undersheriff decides: "Well, he wasn't the worst young man I ever saw" (285). Perry spends his time in prison writing in his journal and taming a pet squirrel. Perry was also sensitive and had artistic inclinations; He couldn't do away with his personal

treasure box of memorabilia (he later left it to Capote with a hundred-page letter to be given after the execution) which contained his Korean War medal, lyrics and songs, paintings and drawings, notebooks with lists of "beautiful" or "useful" words and a diary.

Besides being an outcast from society, Perry has been wronged by society. He was a half-breed and was pushed around through a life of much misery and hatred (a brother and sister committed suicide), a life mainly of blows received (in a Detention Home he was punished for bedwetting). The psychiatrist, Dr. Jones, asked Hickock and Smith to write autobiographical statements. In one section Perry describes his childhood after his alcoholic mother left her husband taking the children with her:

My mother was always drunk, never in a fit condition to properly provide and care for us. I run as free and wild as a coyote. There was no rule or discipline, or anyone to show me right from wrong. I came and went as I pleased-until my first encounter with Trouble. I was in & out of Detention Homes many many times for running away from home and stealing. I remember one place I was sent to. I had weak kidneys & wet the bed every night. This was very humiliating to me, but I couldn't control myself. I was very severely beaten by the cottage mistress, who had called me names and made fun of me in front of all the boys. She used to come around at all hours of the night to see if I wet the bed. She would throw back the covers and furiously beat me with a large black leather belt-pull me out of bed by my hair & drag me to the bathroom & throw me in the tub & turn the cold water on & tell me to wash myself & the sheets. Every night was a nightmare. Later on she thought it was very funny to put some kind of ointment on my penis. This was almost unbearable. It burned something terrible. She was later discharged from her job. But this never changed my mind about her and what I wished I could have done to her & all the people who made fun of me. (309)

The blows were stored up until they erupted in a wild act of irrational violence at a later date. He had absolutely no feeling for

the Clutters at all, and chatted kindly to them before killing them. In his confession, it was revealed that Mr. Clutter served as a scapegoat for the collected wrongs of his life.

It wasn't anything the Clutters did. They 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.
(326)

The Clutters stand for everything in life that Smith found unattainable: love, security... The murder became an emotional release. "It is easy to kill - a lot easier than passing a bad check".
(326)

Since the descriptions of Smith make use of the substance and obsessions of Capote's fiction, they help to reveal the mark of dramatic heightening. The characterization of both killers with sympathy, their treatment as persons, elevates the nonfiction novel, makes it more than a mere detective story. As Nance declares:

Capote's deep sympathy for Perry makes *In Cold Blood* a powerful work of art and a probing and admirable attempt to understand a human being. If it is less than completely successful, so are all such efforts. (215).

By juxtaposing and bringing together the lives of and values of the Clutters and those of the killers, Capote produces a harsh image of the deep duality in American life. It is a collision between the visible rewards and the suppressed horrors of American life. It is the transformation of the American Dream into an American nightmare, the failure of the American Dream.

In essence Capote presents his vision of America in his book:

It's what I really think about America. Desperate, savage, violent America in collision with sane, safe, insular, even smug America-people who have every chance against people who have none (Malin 84).

It should be recognized that for some the world is lonely, suffocating, fearful and loveless; and in a world like this such things as the Clutter murder will happen again and again; they are inevitable.

No matter where they go Perry and Dick cannot escape their inexorable fates. David Galloway expounds on the significance of the open road in his article "Why The Chickens Came Home to Roost" (Malin 154-163). The ten thousand mile odyssey of the murderers, which Capote traced every mile of at his own expense, symbolizes the desperate, directionless course of these men's lives. Once upon a time the open road was not only a theme of romance, but a vital factor in economic expansion and political continuity.

For many it represented the possibility of making a new start, but for Perry and Dick it is a labyrinth, not a southern paradise. It is not the sense of "new" place where they might make a new start that emerges from the cities and towns the two visit, but of their temptations, the same frustrations. Yet, the only similarity between the two accomplices was the result of their ventures on the road. Hickock was disfigured in an automobile accident and Smith so maimed in a motorcycle wreck that he became an addict to aspirin.

Capote's treatment of the facts creates a context of meaning beyond these particular killers of this particular crime. He weaves the facts of the case into a pattern that resonates with the violence of an entire decade of American life. He presents without commenting; he arranges without analyzing. As Conrad said, "Facts are silent and any singing they do depends on their orchestration by a human arranger" (Malin 101).

The point discussed by the critics was whether or not *In Cold Blood* represented a new genre, as Capote ardently claimed, and if it did, was it really the first nonfiction novel. However, it is undebatable that the first time the nonfiction novel gained widespread critical exposure as an innovative form was with the publication of *In Cold Blood*.

One major critic of the nonfiction novel, M. Zavarzadeh, in his important critical text, *The Mythopoetic Reality : The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*, calls *In Cold Blood* "One of the achieved nonfiction novels written in the postwar years" (115). Although Zavarzadeh agrees that *In Cold Blood* is a nonfiction novel, he states that it is not the first time the term has been used; moreover, it is not the first example of a nonfiction novel.

For further discussion it is necessary to see how Zavarzadeh defines the nonfiction novel.

I have used the term "nonfiction novel" as a descriptive, not normative, concept for a genre of prose narrative whose works are characterized as bi-referential in their narrative mode and phenomenalist approach to facts.

(74)

By "bi-referential," he means that the nonfiction novel has both personal and subjective material in it, as well as actual historical and factual material. In other words, it has two fields of reference: the internal world of the narrative and the outer world of its experiential context. Thus, to judge how effective the writer's technique is, one has to observe the way he explores, discovers, and expresses the unique inner shape of the narrative generated by the situation itself. This gives the nonfiction novelist the advantage to choose the details of his narrative according to a pattern. Nevertheless, the pattern of this novel is medium-imposed rather than interpretively shaped by the writer. It is the medium that forces the writer to select details. The writer selects details and arranges them in order to find an exact narrative correlative for the happened events. Through this process the writer does not aim at revealing a private vision of reality, that is, his own interpretation of life; he aims at recording events in order to comprehend them. Capote records events in his book; he does not try to impose meaning or to moralize upon them. He cannot transcribe everything which has happened; the necessities of his medium force him to select.

The fusion of the in-referential and the out-referential, namely the imaginal and the experiential components of the nonfiction novel, is called the "angle of reference" by Zavarzadeh. The angle of reference determines the degree of closeness of the narrative to either of its referential axes and is a proof of the balance preserved by the two. Therefore, it enables the reader to judge the effectiveness and the success of the nonfiction novel and also helps to distinguish it from other kinds of narrative. To the degree it leans toward either axis, it loses the tension between the fictive and the factual. In such a case it either results in the fictive novel or the factual narrative. *In Cold Blood* preserves its bi-referential

tension and its outcome is a narrative with a "right angle of reference," the ideal, if a nonfiction novel is to be created. Truman Capote is able to maintain the balance between internal reference and external reference.

In drawing the characters or the people, as Zavarzadeh calls them, the nonfiction novelist tends more to record that which is seen than to analyze the imagined inner life. His method is achieved by gathering information about them. The internal psychological analysis in the nonfiction novel is done not by the writer himself, but usually by an expert in the field. In *In Cold Blood* it is a psychiatrist who performs this duty. In order to avoid interpreting internal reality, which cannot be tested directly, Capote does not act as the analyst but as the recorder of analyses performed by someone else. Therefore, psychiatric reports, clinical tests and dreams are employed. Perry has dreams of freedom and escape, in which he is rescued by the "big yellow bird."

The nonfiction novel provides the reader with enough clues to check the authenticity of the experiential component. Consequently, dates, places, public events, newspaper accounts, interviews and reports are traceable in it as in *In Cold Blood*.

According to Zavarzadeh's classification of the nonfiction novels, *In Cold Blood* is an "exegetical" nonfiction novel- "a factual narrative registering the public or private events which have taken place in the absence of the author, in the past" (93). Since the writer is not a witness to the event all the evidence he can find has to undergo an intensive exegesis, that is analysis.

In his attempt to register the past events in their original shape, the nonfiction novelist uses a variety of research techniques. He investigates the public documents, private records such as letters, diaries and journals, and interviews people. That is why Capote called it a "24-hour-a-day job." He spent years talking to the murderers, the townspeople and everybody involved in the unfortunate event.

In the exegetical nonfiction novel there is a time gap between the actual occurrence of the events and their registration. Again the novelist uses divers research techniques to bridge this gap. His approach to facts in an important factor.

Through an exploration of the actual, *In Cold Blood* evokes the myths shaping contemporary consciousness. Capote sustains the tension between the factual and the fictional and manages to capture the inherent complexity of contemporary reality in the ambiguity of the narrative. Holcomb, Kansas, is explored so thoroughly that the smallest details of everyday life begin to reveal their complexity until each sign becomes a symbol, and the usual distinction between the literal and the metaphorical, the happened and the imagined, the fact and fiction vanishes (Zavarzadeh 115). It is reminiscent of Thoreau's words in *Walden* :

"I would so state facts that they shall be significant, shall be myths or mythologic" and Capote is continuing an old American tradition when he tries to get at the 'mythic' significance of the facts by simply stating them. It is a tradition based on the belief that 'if men would steadily observe realities only' they would discover that 'Reality is fabulous' (again the words are Thoreau's) (Malin 98).

The town itself gradually loses its geographical solidity and becomes an emblem of America itself - where more than a murder, a collision between the forces and ideas that shape the American Dream occur. An alien reality, symbolized by the two strangers who creep into the village in the darkness of the night perturbs the life of the village creating an almost communal "psychosis". The rural innocence of America is violated by the urban experience of the two strangers who eventually kill Mr. Clutter - the epitome of the values and attitudes of the community as well as his family.

Capote uses "synchronic narration" in which the flow of time is stopped, and the contents of the moment are registered simultaneously. This helps to capture the force of the collision and the subsequent terror of the village. Following a short topographical description of Holcomb in the first section, the next sixteen sections of Part I focus alternately on the last day of the Clutter's while the two killers are shown on their way home. This continues throughout the book and also creates a certain suspense. In the early sections Capote narrates the events in a chronological order. As Zavarzadeh expresses, (115-127) the very values which have shaped the Clutter family life of public fulfillment and interior emptiness have also shaped the life - style

of their killers. They are the incarnation of the darker side of the Middle American spirit. They represent the anxieties - not yet acknowledged- which eat up the private life of the Clutters. The same cultural values which endow the Clutters with wealth and public security prevent the human development of the abilities of Perry and Richard, and deny them any personal fulfillment. "They are the refugees of the American Dream" (122).

Perry's life, his background and his attitude toward the external world are all conveyed in the narrative through a number of documents: his father's letter to the Kansas State Penitentiary, his sister's letters, to him in prison, comments on this letter made by Willie-Jay, Don Cullivan's letter, Perry's own autobiographical sketch and Dr. Jones's psychiatric evaluation. Capote avoids analysis; he merely acquires the appropriate documents and inserts them in the narrative. The same method is used in the depiction of the Clutters and Hickock. Obviously the method of informing the reader is similar to the way the reader as a real person in his or her own life gathers information about other people: external observations and statements made by the people themselves or their friends, relatives and acquaintances.

The use of the omniscient narrative point of view in *In Cold Blood* shows how the nonfiction novelist transcribes reality without putting forth his own vision of reality. The omniscience which informs a nonfiction novel is based on the writer's thorough research, rather than on his imaginative authority. Thus, the omniscient point of view of *In Cold Blood* is an empirical omniscience. When speaking of Nancy Clutter, Capote mentions in parentheses the dress she is buried in. He is able to inform the reader that Nancy will be buried in a particular dress because he has found it out through his research. The nonfiction novelist thus obtains authority through his research. The nonfiction novelist thus obtains authority through the exegesis of all the sources of evidence - interviews, official documents, autobiographical sketches and the like. In this way Capote is able to reconstruct even the conversation of a dead girl as he explains in an interview:

Each time Nancy appears in the narrative, there are witnesses to what she is saying and doing-phone calls,

conversations, being overheard. When she walks the hired man is a witness and talked to her then. The last time we see her, in her bedroom, Perry and Dick themselves were the witness, and told me what she had said. What is reported of her, even in the narrative form, is accurate as many hours of questioning, over and over again, can make it. All of it is reconstructed from the evidence of witnesses - which is implicit in the title of the first section of the book - "The Last to See Them Alive" ⁵ (Malin 39).

Perry Smith and Richard Hickock murdered the Clutter family on November 15, 1959. Almost six years later, they were executed on April 14, 1965.

The ending of the book suggests its aim and proves that it is not merely a documentary record. While remaining true to documentary fact, Capote seeks "literature's truth, that sense of being drawn into a world of meaning and inner coherence" (Weber, *The Literature* 73).

The point of the book is not to inform the reader about what happened to the victims, the Clutters and Dick and Perry. It intends to draw out our feelings for them and to make us respond with feeling to the whole story. The epigraph clearly shows the author's intention with a poem by François Villon:

Frères humains qui après nous vivez,
N'ayez les cœurs contres nous endurcis,
Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,
Dieu en aura plus tout de vous merci.

The rough translation of the poem is :

O Brother men who after us shall thrive,
Let not your hearts against us hardened be,
For all the pity upon us ye give,
God will return in mercy unto ye (Weber, *The Literature* 78).

NOTES

- 1 *In Cold Blood* has sold 340,000 copies since first print and its 15th printing is on its way.
- 2 The information in this article is principally based on Malin, *Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook*.
- 3 William L. Nance, author of *The World of Truman Capote*, asserts that Capote succeeded best with Perry not only because he resembled the characters in his fiction, but because in his similarity to these child-like dreamer-victims he resembled the "author's imaginative projection of himself." Nance says:

Capote obviously thought of Perry as similar to himself even in physical appearance. In the book he makes much of Perry's small stature and speaks of his "changeling's face" (Nance 206).

In *Newsweek* Capote described himself: "If you looked at my face from both sides you'd see they were completely different. It's sort of a changeling's face" (Malin 57).

In the book Dick is amazed by Perry's interest in his face every time he looks into a mirror:

Each angle of it induced a different impression. It was a changeling's face, and mirror-guided experiment had taught him how to ring the changes, how to look now ominous, now impish, now soulful; a tilt of the head, a twist of the lips, and the corrupt gypsy became the gentle romantic. (26)

Nance also thinks that some knowledge of Capote's early life is essential to an understanding of his work, for even his nonfiction

work *In Cold Blood*, bears the marks of his childhood which Capote describes as "the most insecure childhood I know of" (11-12). Harper Lee who knew Capote well, told *Newsweek*, "I think every time Truman looked at Perry he saw his own childhood." Jane Howard of *Life* asked Capote whether or not he liked Perry and Dick, he said, "That's like saying, 'Do you like yourself?'" (Malin 56-57).

4 Since Capote experimented with several different styles, critics divide his work into two general categories: the "sunny" or "daylight" ("light" or "daylit"), and the "dark" or "nocturnal" ones. The sunny stories are often comic, somewhat realistic, and sometimes sentimental. The nighttime stories are concerned with a world of dreams and nightmares, gothics and grotesques, aberration and evil. The daylight stories are generally told as first-person narrative and move from the narrator to the outer world, whereas the dark stories have a third-person narrator and move to the inner world of the characters. Not only short fiction, but also the lengthier works follow this pattern. According to this explanation by Helen S. Garson in her *Truman Capote* (27), *In Cold Blood* falls into the second category.

5 In an interview with George Plimpton, Capote tries to imply that his being a famous author did not have any effect on the interviewees, he says:

A Kansas paper said the other that everyone out there was so wonderfully cooperative because I was a famous writer. The fact of the matter is that not one single person in the town had ever heard of me (Malin 29).

He elicited and tirelessly double-checked the recollections of the neighbors in order to reconstruct the dialogues of the deceased family. In relation to the murderers he states:

I could always tell when Dick or Perry wasn't telling the truth. During the first few months or so of interviewing them, they weren't allowed

to speak to each other. They were in separate cells. So I would keep crossing their stories, and what correlated, what checked out identically was the truth. (34)

As to whether hundred percent of what they say and what the author reports is true, remains debatable.

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