

TRUMAN CAPOTE'S VOICES AND ROOMS AND HIS IDIOSYNCRATIC EXPRESSIONS OF DIVERSITY

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Abstract: Although sometimes seen as a regional writer, because of his seedtime spent in the South, Truman Capote, among the writers having emerged in the middle of the 20th century, shows amazing versatility and willingness to adapt to a life "on the road," traveling between and among places and spaces on the American literary map. He will be a writer experimenting with other voices, other rooms, as the name of his first novel suggests, while living on the edge. And then, how can one ignore the exercise in diversity of perspective that Truman will engage in, in his shift from the exploration of the special femininity of a Manhattan geisha in Breakfast at Tiffany's to the incursion into the troubled consciousness of the killers in In Cold Blood?

Keywords: Southern Gothic, factual non-novel, fictional non-novel, psychobiography, LGBT

Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is important not only for being the author's first novel. For the literary world, it is worth mentioning that its setting is based on Monroeville, Alabama, the small city in which Capote grew up in the company of his closest childhood friend, Harper Lee, who will also get distinction with her own Southern novel of racial prejudice, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. The individual who would hear various voices and inhabit various rooms and write about them had been born as Truman Streckfus Persons in New Orleans, Louisiana. He would be sent to the more provincial Monroeville in early childhood, to live with his mother's relatives after his parents got a divorce. And to meet a very important childhood friend, Harper Lee. The two future novelists occasionally shared their solitudes and their interest in the fictional and non-fictional worlds that the South exhaled around them. When he was eight, Truman was adopted by his mother's second husband, Jose Garcia Capote, exchanging his Streckfus Persons surname for the more sonorous, complete name of Truman Garcia Capote, the whole lot this time moving together to New York City.

Capote had great expectations from the test he was facing with in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. He was obviously aware of the distinguished competition he had in the realm of the Southern Gothic, while at the same time wishing to achieve moments of aesthetic transcendence. He was afraid of failure, as it was his first full-length literary project. William Todd Schultz quotes the young author on his design and his literary creed as prompting his first book:

"I do want it to be a beautiful book because it seems important to me that people try to write beautifully, now more than ever because the world is so crazy and only art is sane." This statement neatly encapsulates Capote's basic attitude. Art was where he found clarity, where he assumed complete control; everything else was "madness"(in Schultz 42).

Capote's first novel displays a strong autobiographical dimension, whose protagonist, Joel Harrison Knox, a thirteen-year-old, resembles Truman as a young teenager, shy, maladjusted, uncertain about his gender identity, extremely sensitive. Robert Emmet Long

considers that Capote's frank treatment of homosexuality contributed to its remarkable *success de scandale*, while also describing the perfect timing of the novel's publication:

The book's timing was perfect, since it coincided with the publication of Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which demonstrated with academic rigor the greater than assumed prevalence of homosexuality. The subject had been broached in a few American novels of the earlier 1940s, but it was implied or hinted at rather than being confronted (Long 40).

The novel is set in the depressing, decayed atmosphere of the South, in Skully's Landing, on what had used to be a plantation. It is a good illustration of what has come to be called Southern Gothic fiction in which, in addition to the typical atmosphere, one comes across a gallery of weird, but picturesque characters, much in the tradition so well made famous by William Faulkner in such novels as *The Sound and the Fury*. Harold Bloom notes Capote's determined quest to appear to be "self-generated," the "obsessive denials" of more than obvious influences:

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 (Bloom 1).

What appeared at first to be a mysterious situation, with a woman furtively watching Joel from a distant window above, leads to an encounter between two kindred souls. In a symbolic coming out scene, Joel's cousin, Randolph, the man disguised in women's clothes, reveals himself as herself, the two cousins thus made to acknowledge their real sexual orientation. As Thomas Fahy is quick to note the protagonist's final realization, 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" (Fahy 160). The novel ends with Joel realizing both who his cousin Randolph really is and who he is himself in a "gender trouble" coming-of-age narrative.

Much in the fashion in which Fitzgerald has a male narrator as witness in relation to the more glamorous male character as focus in *The Great Gatsby*, so is the anonymous narrator in Capote's novella, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in relation to the female Holly Golightly. Holly, although far from affluent, is determined to have ... breakfast at one of the most luxurious jewellery shops in Manhattan. The narrator and Holly are neighbors in a modest apartment building in Manhattan's Upper East Side in the early 1940s (1943 or 1944). Holly appears to assume an uncertain identity, somewhere between a dubious socialite, a call girl, a kept woman, a prostitute, mixing with men from all walks of life, including rich, "respectable" people like Rusty Trawler, a foreign diplomat, Jose Ybarra-Jaegar, and dangerous mobsters like "Sally" Tomato. The narrator is fascinated with the young woman's eccentric lifestyle and her perceptive remarks on social life in New York's high life clubs and restaurants.

In *Other Voices, Other Rooms* Capote had challenged, in a true anxiety of influence scenario, his illustrious predecessors in Southern Gothic, while also artistically tackling important gender issues that would become important in LGBT discourse in the following decades. In *Breakfast at Tiffany's* he had traveled north, confronting his personal experience with the life and times of a New York socialite living on the edge. Now the author was about

to tread on new ground, full of promise as well as of apprehensions, as Schultz notes in his psycho-biography of Truman Capote, suggestively called *Tiny Terror*:

Capote now entered the realm of the super-real, of straightforward reportage. It was a task he was just barely up to. He loved it; he hated it. Literally, it almost killed him. Psychologically, it left him on the threshold of madness. Artistically, he intuited, in pretty short order, that what he had on his hands was a masterpiece. But could he bring it off? (Schultz 74).

There is much more than “tiny terror” in Capote’s 1966 book. *In Cold Blood*, published in 1966, a true crime narrative, is a remarkably peculiar piece of journalistic nonfiction in a form later to be explored by Norman Mailer in his factual non-novel, *Armies of the Night*, published a couple of years later. The term nonfiction was assumed and promoted by the author himself, with readers and critics tempted to challenge the label and the genre: how can one draw the line between the factual and the fictional in such a text as *In Cold Blood*?

Learning about the horrible facts and human beings that inspired the book, one is tempted to see the title as true to its content: one of the most heinous cases of multiple murder, deliberate, cold-blooded, perpetrated by callous monsters. But it soon turns out that Capote himself wants to challenge his book’s title, turning an apparently factual reporting of a cold-blooded murder into a complex narrative, in which clear-cut distinctions between black and white are designed to be difficult to make. It is what usually happens in memorable fiction, in which, like in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a novelist turns the reporting of a mother killing her baby into a moving story about the evils of slavery and into a special narrative expression of a mother’s love for her child.

The preparatory documentation work, leading to the interview of the killers and of the killing, was done by Capote in the company of Harper Lee, who followed him all the way to Kansas for the important undertaking. Like Capote, the gentle lady, who would achieve literary success with her famous *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, had also entertained hopes for a career in reportage, with Schultz claiming that she had intended to do investigative work on the Ku Klux Klan (Schultz 76). How such peaceful individuals as Capote and Lee may become so engrossed in such sinister stories has obviously to do with their fascination to explore “other voices, other rooms,” to understand human experience, sometimes in its most unpalatable forms. What is more, this interest had largely to do with an investigation of the origins and mechanisms of murder as they affect an individual’s or a group’s mindset.

It all started with hard facts, and Capote set about doing some thorough research on them. He had decided to investigate the murders when he had read about them in the press, went to Kansas, and got in touch with the investigators and with the murderers soon after they were arrested. The documentation work he did was impressive, the notes he made amounting to around 8,000 pages. Will that ocean of factual evidence turn into the proclaimed nonfiction book? A main explanation for the amount and length of this considerable work had to do with the length of the killers’ imprisonment. Although soon tried and sentenced to death, the two murderers stayed on Death Row for five years before they were executed. Capote developed a special relationship with the two, especially with Perry Smith, interviewing them and corresponding with them on a regular basis. This obviously prompted him to see them as trapped human beings, rather than as monstrous creatures who had savagely tortured, terrorized and eventually killed a whole family in a peaceful farming community in Holcomb, Kansas. In a way, it amounts to playing with fire between reporting and creating a fictional framework in an engagement with “other voices, other rooms,” of a much more gothic realm.

Hard facts do not hamper the intervention of the author's imagination, which is allowed to find the spaces where it can roam more or less freely, while also allowing the text as a whole to be a good example of the new brand of nonfiction literature and new journalism in which, apart from Norman Mailer, one can also mention such prominent authors as Tom Wolfe, with two, apparently contradictory, yet memorable illustrations of the new subgenre, the countercultural *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and the celebratory achievement of America's space race heroes in *The Right Stuff* (see Tom Wolfe). However, comparing the topics and approaches adopted by these authors would show too little grounds for anyone willing to place them in the same generic drawer. Capote's fictional design is a harder nut to crack, so to speak.

Capote's 1966 nonfiction book is a devastating, yet strangely undertaken portrayal of evil, an examination of the compulsions and effects of a heinous crime. Capote may have aimed at achieving a distance from the horrible and terrible true story he had chosen to unfold, the cold-blooded murders of four members of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, in November, 1959, by Perry Smith and Richard ("Dick") Hickock. However, he failed, if that had been his initial design.

The book is remarkable in its faithful consideration of hard facts, assiduously collected with the assistance of the criminal investigators, whose trust he gradually managed to win, as well as by means of the long interviews with the perpetrators. It so turns out that closeness is bound to lead to sympathy, even in such terrible circumstances, which some people might approve of, allegedly on artistic grounds, others might firmly dismiss, on ethical grounds, a dilemma that average readers and informed critics are likely to be confronted with. Capote's puzzling engagement with "fact" and fiction in this text which he calls "nonfiction" elicits a variety of responses, which are obviously accepted only by some of the readers.

Thus, Alfred Kazin himself appears to blur the boundaries that the text plays with, "a stylized book" that works on the reader's emotions, in the critic's opinion, so well that it succeeds in being accepted as a work of art, as fiction: "*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" (Kazin 24). The imagination of his essay is quite revelatory to this effect: "The Imagination of Fact." If so, how will Capote "imagine" the facts that he apparently reports in his apparently nonfiction book?

Kazin is right in stressing the fictional, rather than the non-fiction side of the book. It is framed as a novel that "works on the reader's emotions," in several distinct ways. The most obvious way is the one borrowed from the Gothic tradition, using the creation of mood and atmosphere by suspense and foreshadowing, as well as by promoting, at times, dramatic contrasts between good and evil, to be subsequently qualified and made more problematic, as a general human condition is to be dealt with. Form is linked to emotion, and Capote is a great stylist. Form and content, style and emotion engage in a permanent point - counterpoint relation. In addition to what will appear as the contrast between the unreliability of the title in terms of emotion and its reliability in terms of hard facts, the text is based on a long series of contrasts which are gradually deconstructed.

After the terrible title referring to the hard facts, the epigraph appears to equate the cold-blooded killers, Dick and Perry with ... François Villon. Like the French poet, imprisoned at the time he was creating his famous "Ballad of the Hanged," the two murderers are shown waiting, in the final, Part IV of the book, in one particular section of the Kansas State Penitentiary. That section has a peculiar name, the Corner, euphemistically referring to Death Row, where they are to be hanged. The excerpt from Villon's epigraph, its first stanza,

speaks in the name of those who have already been hanged, imagined to address ordinary people, asking for pity and understanding. It will turn out that Capote, in his permanent exploration of a variety of voices and rooms, will prove to be, like many a fiction writer, sensitive to Villonian and non-Villonian villains alike, so to speak. Thus, the epigraph, as well as the final section of Part IV, a scene in the cemetery where Dick and Perry have been buried, frame the book around the fate of the killers, apparently giving them prominence in what we might call Capote's both fictional and nonfictional plot against the readers' anticipated insensitivity to these people's tragic condition.

Is one then urged to read what is in between, with the killers as protagonists, as another "American tragedy?" Are they to be seen as Hickock and Smith or as Dick and Perry? Truman Capote is too skilled a writer to take too many risks, one might think, but his fascination with the exploration of other voices and other rooms is there all right. After the epigraph, which sends the reader to the denouement, in an effort to elicit some sympathy for the killers, the emphasis shifts from the very first title of the first section, "The Last to See Them Alive." This part of the novel, while foreshadowing the idea that a terrible mass murder is about to be represented, as well as the brief mention of four shots at night at River Valley farm, a remote part of Holcomb, Kansas, contains a series of flashbacks to a temporal setting before the murders. These flashbacks focus on the Clutters, a respectable and prosperous family. Geographically and symbolically, Holcomb, Kansas, and the Clutters are right in the middle of mainstream, respectable America. The central figure is that of the *pater familias*, Herbert Clutter. Mr. Clutter is energetic and resourceful, a farmer who has become affluent through hard work and perseverance, a strong family sense. He is the best illustration of the American Dream having come true, and intense focalization on him in this part of the text invites admiration and sympathy on the part of the reader. After all, Herb Clutter stands for honest, hard working America. Although his wife has become emotionally unstable as a result of a long illness, Mr. Clutter energetically attends to his business, looks after the house, takes good care of the two teenage children still living with him and his wife. The fifteen-year-old boy and the sixteen-year-old daughter are nice and well-behaved, while peaceful and prosperous Holcomb, although in the middle of both America and nowhere, looks like a Garden of Eden. However, as already mentioned, intimations of the impending horror appear from the very beginning. Quite significantly, they include, from the beginning, the mention of the shots that changed the rural community for ever.

On reading closely, one detail in the account of the shots catches the alert reader's eye: "At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them - four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives"(5). It will turn out a little later that two adults and their two teenage children had been killed "in cold blood," if we are to "factually" trust the title, as already discussed. The "all told" will make the difference in the text as fiction, not nonfiction. The rest of the book will clarify this: it was the four shots that ended the four innocent victims' lives, and two more: the lives of those that the epigraph of the book so sympathetically and pathetically refers to: Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Thus, literary language may diverge from factual reportage: the shots are to blame, Dick and Perry, like the four members of the Clutter family, are, themselves, among the victims, in one particular interpretation, which might emerge in the subsequent sections of the text as fiction, rather than the text as nonfiction. Those shots ruined the "poor" killers' lives, to put it briefly. What will follow until the gruesome murders are described in detail in Part III is a narrative structure which features a polyphony of voices and focalizers, abruptly switching from the consciousness of victims before the murders, to those who are to be the killers, and then, gradually, adding the perspectives of casual witnesses and investigators. However, as more

weight appears to be given in certain sections to the killers themselves, and as the voices of the victims are brutally silenced, the reader is increasingly invited to share more with the murderers as fugitives and as focalizers than with other characters. Effects of closeness thus may produce a certain degree of identification between the reader and the runaways as focalizers and protagonists, whose far from nonfictional “ballad” Truman Capote appears to compose.

Those who are likely to disagree with Capote’s artistic design may argue that the killers’ sympathetic representation as human beings would have to be read lucidly, rather than emotionally, empathetically, sympathetically. Why would the story of cold-blooded murderers be read emotionally, one might ask. *In Cold Blood* may be seen as a textbook example of how an author and the narrative techniques of dealing with distance, detachment and identification may go as far as manipulating even expert, informed readers.

Such an undertaking would be seen, as already stated, in the American and European Gothic tradition, in which, at times, the work of fiction encourages closeness to the villain figure, thus adding dramatic effect to the overall picture of light and darkness. In the novel, as it will be seen, Capote attempts at achieving intimacy, and therefore a sympathetic attitude to all the characters, investigators, victims and killers alike, apparently thus promoting the idea that criminals are victims of the imperfections of the society in which they were born and raised, unless they are “naturally born killers,” a phrase that reminds one of the title of Oliver Stone’s 1994 movie, but also of the way that cinematic text addresses similar issues of criminal responsibility or blissful innocence.

In an examination of characters predetermined by frustration, troubled childhoods full of loneliness and violence, the author creates the opposite effect of what one might have initially planned, becoming extremely involved with the murderers, whom he interviewed in prison for a long time during their five-year-wait on Death Row. He thus came to undertake something that was diametrically opposed to his nonfiction design.

Especially in Perry Smith, an unfortunate youth from an underprivileged, dysfunctional family, Capote appears to have found a kindred spirit. Perry is a youth with problematic gender identity, while at the same time showing a naïve self-induced interest in art and language which distinguishes him from the even less uneducated Dick. A certain identification with this unfortunate, tormented individual, combining sudden bursts of violence and frustration with more humane behavior must have largely contributed to Capote’s artistic design. Young Truman Capote himself had experienced alienation and marginality, but his interest in language had helped him in his attempt at making sense of the chaos of human experience.

This brings us, full circle, to the young author’s artistic aspirations as expressed in the first quote from Schultz’s biography of Truman Capote, *Tiny Terror: Why Truman Capote (Almost) Wrote* Answered Prayers: “people try to write beautifully, now more than ever because the world is so crazy and only art is sane” (qtd. in Schultz 42). The facts dealt with in *In Cold Blood* are horrible and terrible, but Capote, like in his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, believes in the power of art to make sense of what the journalist that he tried, but failed to be, desired to amount to a nonfiction text.

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