

Journalism as Artistic Expression: The Critical Response to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*

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Abstract

This review examines and synthesizes the critical discourse surrounding Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* to demonstrate the ways various scholars have historically received and positioned the text within the field, as well as the ways that the novel shapes an understanding of truth in relation to art in contemporary American society. Specifically, this paper identifies primary literary elements of the text, including narrative structure, panopticism, and detailed imagery, that *In Cold Blood* critics identify as deliberate strategies Capote employs to craft a meaningful, evocative novel that forever changed American journalism and reportage. This literature review demonstrates that with traditional novelistic techniques at his side, Capote created an authentic representation of a murder and its repercussions that ultimately probed the complexity of American society in the 1960s.

Set in Holcomb, Kansas, *In Cold Blood* tells the story of a family of four murdered after a botched robbery by two small-time criminals on the night of November 14, 1959. The novel was a critical success, not only due to the violent nature of the crime it describes, but because Capote declared that every word of his novel was completely true, an unprecedented move at that point in the American literary canon. Capote himself alleged, in an interview with George Plimpton, that his specific manipulation of journalism—"the most underestimated, least explored of literary mediums"—would yield a "serious new art form: the 'nonfiction novel,'" beginning with his own text, *In Cold Blood* in 1966 (Plimpton 25).

In Cold Blood stayed atop the bestseller list in the United States for months, and Capote himself garnered extreme public attention almost as quickly as his novel, frequently becoming the subject of interviews and cover stories across US publications. Both support and criticism emerged from book reviewers across the country in the late 1960s. Many championed *In Cold Blood* as a new, exciting form of literature with great literary merit for generations to come. In her review for *Harper's*, Rebecca West predicted that *In Cold Blood* would easily be elevated as a "literary *tour de force*," as Capote "crawled like an ant of genius" over the Kansas

landscape to create a work of art unlike any other (92). Other reviewers questioned whether the text was deserving of the attention and celebrity it realized. Sol Yorick, for example, writes that the text was nothing more than "sob-sisterism wedded to Southern Gothic prose," (77) while William Phillips disparages *In Cold Blood* as "reassuringly old-fashioned in its straightforward rendition of a 'true story'" (103).

In Cold Blood has remained relevant in literary discourse, as scholars continue to investigate the literary, theoretical, and thematic implications of Capote's style, subject matter, and unique method of storytelling. Several branches of Capote scholarship have emerged in the current field of *In Cold Blood* criticism. A number of critics attempt a traditional close reading of the text to understand the ways that Capote's style implicitly introduces the themes of the novel, while others seek a broader, more theoretical discussion of *In Cold Blood* and the nature of the relationship between art and truth. The central discussion in the field of Capote criticism has progressed from merely debating whether or not Capote crafted a new, unprecedented method of storytelling for contemporary American writers. Instead, the field of *In Cold Blood* criticism became focused on the implications of Capote's text on the relationship between journalism and art, both during the time of publication and today.

It is the aim of this paper to examine and synthesize the critical discourse surrounding Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* and demonstrate the ways in which various scholars have historically received and positioned it within the field. Central to this paper is a discussion of the various techniques critics identify that Capote employs in his creation of a "unique and exciting form of writing" and the ways in which his style contributes to the reader's experience of *In Cold Blood*. Scholars most often attempt to understand the text and its importance through an analysis of Capote's style and novelistic techniques, among them a classic third-person narrative style, narrative gaze, and panopticon, as theorized by Michel Foucault. I also discuss the text's reception and the ways in which *In Cold Blood* shapes the epistemological discussion of the relationship between fact and fiction. Two critical questions emerge in a survey of *In Cold Blood* studies: What elements of Capote's craft and unique method of storytelling work together in the text to support his implicit commentary on contemporary American society? How do these elements and his commentary contribute to a possible crisis of differentiation between fact and fiction, between truth and art?

Capote's claim that *In Cold Blood* was "immaculately factual" still generates discussion amongst many scholars centered around Capote's own voice and the understanding of the truthfulness of the events of the novel. Chris Anderson, Jack DeBellis, Alan Collett, and others, argue that Capote remains silent throughout the text and avoids influencing the trajectory of the events of the novel. As DeBellis writes, for example, Capote remains an outside observer and repeatedly "removes all remarks which might draw attention to himself in order to provide more 'objective reporting'" (524). Other critics, Eric Heyne, Trenton Hickman, and Craig Goad included, believe, however, that because he spent six years researching, interviewing, and writing the text, Capote unwittingly and unavoidably entered himself into the events of the novel by developing a personal relationship with the killers and the people of Holcomb, Kansas, and ultimately shaped the representation of the truth.

Techniques at Work in *In Cold Blood*

Indeed, for all Capote's claims that the text was nonfiction, analysis reveals many conventional literary techniques at work in the novel. Within the expansive

body of *In Cold Blood* scholarship, one of the elements critics most frequently call attention to is the style of narration and narrative arrangement of *In Cold Blood* as a means to influence the reader's experience of the text. Capote tells the story of the Clutter family murders by way of what many scholars, including John Hellman, Miriam Halfmann, and George Creeger, identify as a third person, heterodiegetic narrator. Hellmann writes in "Death and Design in *In Cold Blood*" that Capote narrates "from the perspective of self-effacing omniscience," refusing to enter himself into the story. He "repeatedly moves 'inside' certain characters...a technique which enables him to retain an 'objective' overview while simultaneously providing the subjective views of a variety of characters" (66). John Hollowell similarly argues in his critical essay "Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*: The Search for Meaningful Design" that deeply probing the thoughts of individual characters is the most controversial technique of the nonfiction novel, as Capote "adopts a point of view coming from inside the suspect's mind" (101). A number of scholars, including Hellman, Halfmann, and David Galloway, maintain that Capote can assume this narrative position because he interviewed and researched exhaustively while in Holcomb. The reader can discover more about the characters and their personal insights not only through Capote's specific description of events and characters, but also through his "use of direct and indirect speech," (Halfmann 76). Ultimately, the effect of this specific style of narration, Creeger writes in "Animals in Exile: Imagery and Theme in Capote's *In Cold Blood*," is that "the author appears to be an impartial chronicler" of the story and thus "creates an effect of authenticity" (112).

Considering Capote's style of omniscient narration and his deliberate act of removing himself from the story, a number of critics also call attention to his heavy reliance on the creation of short, concise chapters that occur outside of chronological order. Donald Pizer refers to this narrative arrangement in "Documentary Narrative as Art: William Manchester and Truman Capote" as a "dual sequential narrative," as Capote recounts the story back and forth in loosely chronological order through two primary narratives: that of the killers and the killed. Pizer observes, "The sequential narrative is broken down into short sections, each linked to the other not only by the forward moving time scheme but by our awareness that the two groups are drawing together geographically and that they will soon meet

climactically” (113). David Galloway writes that Capote “cuts from victims, to killers, to pursuers [and] piles image upon image” to reconstruct the story as it unfolds in his research and interviews (“Real Toads in Real Gardens” 162). To demonstrate, Galloway points to the first part of *In Cold Blood*, entitled “The Last to See Them Alive.” This section of the text closely follows Perry and Dick as they drive across Kansas and prepare for the murder on the fateful day of November 14, 1959. Capote juxtaposes individual short scenes, such as the intense, fastidious preparation of Dick’s 1949 Chevrolet and Nancy’s selfless act of teaching Jolene Katz how to bake her blue-ribbon pie, over and over within the narrative structure, creating ominous connections at the beginnings and ends of consecutive chapters. For example, Capote concludes the chapter about the Chevrolet with, “Dick, racing the engine, listening to the consistent hum, was satisfied that a thorough job had been done,” only to immediately begin the succeeding chapter with “Nancy and her protégée, Jolene Katz, were also satisfied with their morning’s work” (Capote 24). Galloway, Pizer, and Craig Goad each argue that the ultimate effect of this juxtaposition is primarily to maintain suspense within the narrative. Creeger considers the dual sequential narrative even further, suggesting that it also “provides the narrative with a strong sense of motion and confirms the intimacy of the relationship between the criminal and the community” (97). Though the two stories do not seem related – on the surface, could a pair of repeat criminals planning a murder *really* be similar to a pleasant, well-to-do American family of four? – the dual sequential narrative structure ultimately connects the two stories in a way that suggests to readers that the killers and the killed may be inseparable after all.

Just as the narrative structure of *In Cold Blood* demonstrates a deliberate attempt by Capote to shift the reader’s response to the text, so too does Capote’s use of observation as an element of style. Scholars regularly identify, typically in conjunction with his narrative style, Capote’s use of surveillance in *In Cold Blood*. David Guest provides one of the most significant analyses of observation in the text in his chapter on Capote in *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment*. He invokes Michel Foucault’s interpretation of the panopticon from *Discipline and Punish* to argue that Capote’s style of narration turns the novel into a “prison” for the two murderers, in which the narrator constantly gazes at the criminals from a

position of permanent omniscience. Thus, he writes, “Smith and Hickock are placed in a sort of panopticon, while the all-seeing narrator sits, himself unseen, in the observation tower” (114). Capote is a silent outside observer, commenting without becoming a presence within the novel. The panopticon is particularly evident, Guest argues, in the scenes following the arrests of the murderers, in which Dick and Perry are both literally imprisoned within the walls of a jail cell, but also imprisoned in Capote’s own narration. Guest writes that though Capote was not present at the jail cell immediately after the arrest of the killers, he “reconstructed it in such a way that the narrator is written into the observation tower, able to see not only the men but also their thoughts and feelings” (114).

The ultimate effect of Capote’s narrative surveillance through the panopticon is that the killers never escape the narrator’s grasp of the events of the novel, and as such, readers’ understand the killers through the eyes of the narrator and his perception of them. In his critical essay “The Last to See Them Alive: Panopticism, the Supervisory Gaze, and Catharsis in Capote’s *In Cold Blood*,” Trenton Hickman furthers Guest’s argument and establishes that the panopticon extends beyond Capote’s treatment of the murderers, but also to the Clutter family. He argues that Capote controls the text using a particularly cinematic panoptic gaze that looks upon all characters and scenes as something that can be controlled and managed to further his theme (468). Like the killers, the Clutters cannot escape the observation and gaze of the narrator, and thus the narrator’s interpretation of events colors the understanding of the characters and their thoughts. Capote extends his narrative gaze to the Clutters, Hickman explains, by portraying the events of November 14, 1959, specifically as the family’s last. He continually makes reference to the inevitable fate of the killed, even titling one of his chapters “The Last to See Them Alive.” Calling it “Capote’s awful calculus,” Hickman argues that this casting of the “panoptic net” allows him to “own both the victims and the killers of the novel,” in order to control their portrayal within the pages of *In Cold Blood* (467).

Two scholars, Majeed Jadwe and Miriam Halfmann, expand upon the idea of the panopticon and its role in the text, suggesting that the narrator’s gaze from the metaphorical observation tower within the novel extends beyond both the killers (as Guest argues) and

the Clutter family (as Hickman argues) to include even the readers. Both scholars argue that Capote's narrative gaze upon the killers, the killed, and the town of Holcomb also engulfs the reader, and thus the reader receives the text differently as an active participant. Writes Jadwe, "The reader... is no longer a watcher but a recipient whose dynamic of response is largely framed by the emotional upload of the narrative perspective of the scene staged" (276). Similarly, Halfmann argues,

The narrator's gaze leaves no one out... If Dick and Perry are incarcerated in the novel, the reader is their fellow prisoner. From the beginning until the end, the narrative is constructed to absorb him and to cause him to respond emotionally not only to the fate of the Clutters but also to that of their killers. In short, the reader's reception of the novel is being controlled. (Halfmann 95).

The works of Jadwe and Halfmann insinuate that Capote's deliberate action of drawing the reader into the panopticon is important to understand because he shapes, controls, and molds the reader's response to the text, instead of simply chronicling the events of the murders and their repercussions as might have been implied by his claims that the novel was "nonfiction" and "completely true." Jadwe and Halfmann's argument seems to suggest that, just as the dual sequential narrative structure of *In Cold Blood* shows that the lives of the killers and the killed are inseparable, the narrative gaze that extends to include readers shows that the killers and the readers may be inseparable on some level, too. Perhaps Capote sought to demonstrate that just as the Clutter family could not escape the cruel forces that dictated the horrible events of the fateful night in 1959, neither could the reader escape the same forces within the contemporary American society to which Capote writes.

Alongside narrative structure and panoptic supervision, a third element of Capote's text that scholars of *In Cold Blood* identify as a means of shaping the reader's response to the text is his proclivity for intense, evocative imagery, and, paired with it, meaningful symbolism within nearly every scene or portion of dialogue. The extreme detail in the text represents Capote's deliberate artistic insertion in the text, and serves as one of the primary means through which he creates meaning in *In Cold Blood*.

Several authors, including Creeger, Galloway, Nick Nuttall, and Robert Morris, point to Capote's artistic recreation of scene and character through the use of extreme detail as one of the most important elements of *In Cold Blood*. The images he creates, they argue, function within the text on a fundamentally symbolic level, as individual images build upon each other to create larger portraits of people, places, and spaces. In one of the most significant works of Capote criticism, "Capote's Imagery," Morris describes Capote's style and penchant for extreme detail in the clearest terms:

Immediacy, gained through the simple present – or, barely an exception, through the passive voice in the simple past – provokes a sense of uneasiness, anticipation, or apprehension. Further, a stasis, evoked by select images, suggests silent suspension in space and time... What Capote is doing throughout, of course, is overlaying realistic setting with surrealistic properties that foreshadow his subsequent dream sequences. (179-180)

The scenes Capote creates are both structurally and thematically significant, and demonstrate what Morris identifies as metaphysical "novelistic control" (180). He suggests that Capote fashions each scene to force readers to recognize the thematic commentary he sought to impart in *In Cold Blood*, especially surrounding the human condition and the relationship between man and death. Morris concludes that in charging the images of the text with powerful symbolic meaning readers "must come away from *In Cold Blood* with the realization that the... human condition is as fragile and eternal as the wheat bending on the immense Kansas plains, and fate as inexorable as the wind that blows it" (186). Galloway expands upon Morris' definition of Capote's imagery in "Why the Chickens Came Home to Roost in Holcomb, Kansas: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*" to argue that Capote is "systematically and artfully shaping our initial vision of the scene; observations are made... that go beyond the documentary necessary to create an explicit sense of place" (147). Through his manipulation of the "vision" of the scene via extreme detail and imagery, Galloway reasons, Capote also shapes the emotional response of the reader, and thus creates meaning on a deeper, more symbolic level: "Every physical detail contributes to the overall realism of the passage, yet each slots into a larger scheme of inference... of symbolism" (147).

Similarly, Nuttall argues that Capote's style in *In Cold Blood* is not so much the recapitulation of events but instead a recreation of "atmospheric authenticity" that relies on "the accumulation of feelings, emotions, sensations" (181).

Creeger expands the discussion of imagery in "Animals in Exile: Imagery and Theme in Capote's *In Cold Blood*," focusing on Capote's subtle use of animal imagery. He points to the repeated use of images of animals in exile—animals attempting to escape, animals in hiding, animals imprisoned, or even dead animals—as a means of shaping the characterization of the killers, especially Perry (97). Creeger argues that Capote draws explicit connections between Perry and the animals in exile, notably the gray tomcats who run free outside of the courthouse and the slaughtered pheasants in the town of Holcomb. This ultimately shows the extent to which the townspeople "denominate the criminal an animal" (96) and thus "deprive Perry of his humanity" (106). The people of Holcomb "effectively separate him from his own conscious self- image – that of a group of human beings," which ultimately allows the community to use action against him, namely an unfair trial and a perhaps undeserved execution, for which there might otherwise have been "fewer sanctions" (96-97). The effect of Capote's carefully crafted animal imagery, Creeger continues, is to construct a more sympathetic view of Perry as misunderstood and a product of his environment, not an intrinsically cold-blooded killer. A sympathetic view of Perry is particularly evident in Capote's final portrayal of Perry as a "creature walking wounded" (Capote 341). This image helps to restore Perry's humanity in the eyes of readers, and concludes Creeger, to remind readers "not to harden [their] hearts against him, but... to have pity on him" (106).

Though Capote's narrative arrangement, use of the narrative gaze, and emotive imagery constitute three of the literary elements most frequently discussed within the critical discourse of *In Cold Blood*, a number of scholars identify other elements of the text that also contribute to the larger discussion of the novel and its place in the literary canon. Both Melvin Friedman and John Hellmann, for example, identify similarities between Capote's text and mock-detective novels. Friedman writes in "Towards an Aesthetic: Truman Capote's *Other Voices*" that several elements of the novel—the "imaginary Clutter safe with the imaginary money," for example—"smack of the mock-detective,"

in which criminal investigation is a "substitute for plot and action" (173). Additionally, certain scholars, including Goad, Creeger, and Hellmann, extract an allegorical framework from the novel, based in the biblical notion of the loss of paradise. In this division of *In Cold Blood* scholarship, critics frequently point to instances in which Capote constructs various Edenic paradises only to subsequently have them violated or destroyed by an external force. "To demonstrate the ways in which the town represents on a fairly large scale the myth of the Garden [and] the attempt to recapture Paradise," writes Creeger, "...would not be difficult" (101). He, among others, argues that many characters attempt a recreation of their own "private Eden," including Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter, Perry Smith, and Alvin Dewey. Each of the gardens function within the text, Hellman argues in "Death and Design in *In Cold Blood: Capote's Nonfiction Novel as Allegory*," as part of a larger "aesthetic construct which constantly points toward a realm of mythic truth" (66).

Beyond the Novel

The critical discourse of *In Cold Blood* extends beyond the pages of the novel, too. Many critics, including Goad, Friedman, Guest, and Jon Tuttle, identify a number of similarities between *In Cold Blood* and Capote's earlier body of fiction, as well as the works of his contemporaries in the literary canon of the American South, including Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Carson McCullers. Looking at Capote's entire body of work prior to the publication of *In Cold Blood*, Goad argues in *Daylight and Darkness; Dream and Delusion: The Works of Truman Capote* that until the publication of *In Cold Blood* in 1966, Capote wrote with a distinctly dichotomous style, as his fiction embodied a tension between "daylight" and "nocturnal" elements. *In Cold Blood*, Goad maintains, represents a turning point in Capote's style. The novel serves as a unification of the dark, twisted, nocturnal realm of Capote's fiction with the lighter, charming, daylight realm (55). He reproduces specific elements of his nocturnal fiction, like Joel Knox's compulsive, destructive domain in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, as well as elements of his daylight fiction, such as Holly Golightly's innocence in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and the pastoral scenery of *The Grass Harp*.

Similarly, Friedman argues in "Towards an Aesthetic: Truman Capote's *Other Voices*," that Capote wrote

within a very specific traditional mode of Southern American fiction when he crafted *In Cold Blood*, and his text inescapably echoes those of other Southern literary greats (166). Specifically, Tuttle argues that *In Cold Blood* is artistically indebted to Flannery O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," especially in situational awareness, characters' speeches, and religious symbolism. He writes, "acknowledging that artistic effort frequently falls short of its author's ideal, Capote demonstrates the necessity of also drawing on worthy predecessors...to enrich his own creative efforts" ("Glimpses of 'A Good Man' in Capote's *In Cold Blood*" 145). Guest identifies this indebtedness to O'Connor in *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment*, arguing that in the characterization of Dick and Perry, the influence of popular characterizations of the psychopath, particularly O'Connor's Misfit, is evident (128-129). These connections between both Capote's own work and the work of other Southern authors demonstrate that scholars typically do not consider *In Cold Blood* as an island within the American literary canon; instead, it exists as a work both informed and influenced by a greater tradition of fiction crafted and reproduced by Capote and his contemporaries.

Although it can be shown to have many connections to the canon of Southern fiction, in another way the publication of *In Cold Blood* in 1965 represented a decisive break with the past. Truman Capote's nonfiction novel quickly changed the meaning and direction of journalism and objective reporting in the United States. Scholars often recognize *In Cold Blood* as the earliest manifestation of New Journalism that became widespread in American journalism in the late 20th century and produced such well-known American authors as Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Hunter S. Thompson, and Joan Didion. The development of New Journalism and Capote's "nonfiction novel" seems to have been made possible by, more than anything else, the culture of the 1960s. Though a discussion of the historical context is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to point out that scholars of *In Cold Blood* often agree that the text holds a mirror to the society in which it was published, and exemplifies a particular historical moment in the United States, a "notably traumatic period in American history," as Rance argues (89). America was a nation at the height of the Cold War, plagued by paranoia and anxiety, and suffering under the stress of severe "social

dislocations" (Rance 89). Philip Roth, a contemporary of Capote, testified to the nature of American society in 1961, writing, "The American writer in the middle of the 20th century has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even kind of an embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist" ("Writing American Fiction"). Capote himself meditated on the meaning of *In Cold Blood* and its reception amongst American readers in the 1960s, stating that the book can be seen as a "reflection on American life, this collision between the desperate, ruthless, wandering, savage part of American life, and the other, which is insular and safe" (Plimpton 43). He intensely probes the intrinsically related themes of violence in the community, the destructive elements of the American Dream, and the irrational pull of fate on the individual and the collective: issues that resonated sharply with readers during the immense "thrills and spills" of American life in the 1960s (Rance 80).

Out of the facts and research he accumulated over six years, and with traditional novelistic techniques at his side, Capote created a representation of the events of November 1959 and their repercussions, and uses his authorial influence to charge it with emotion, sensation, and feeling to ultimately extract meaningful, deliberate thematic resonances that permeate the text. It is through these scenes and the cumulative effect of their authentic yet artistic reconstruction that Capote implicitly creates meaning in the text, just as a traditional realist novelist would. The specific literary and novelistic techniques Capote employs in *In Cold Blood* grant him the freedom to explore important issues of his time and ultimately ushered in a new understanding of the novel in the scholarly discourse of the American literary canon. Additionally, these same literary and novelistic techniques marshaled in a new era of reportage for American journalists, in which writing about current events was no longer just an exercise in factual examination and information synthesis. Instead, in *In Cold Blood* Truman Capote truly fashioned journalism into an art meant for readers to experience and enjoy.

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