

Post 1945 American Anxiety in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*

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Abstract

America, while emerging as a superpower in the post-1945 world, tried its best to acknowledge the dream which was the basis of its Puritanic origin. This white American dream is very subtly challenged by Truman Capote in his 'true crime novel' *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences*. Beneath the conventional storyline, Capote brilliantly interweaves the multiple layers of complexities, ultimately pointing towards a not-so-stable post Second World War America, which experienced deep anxiety, suspicion and violence under a flimsy layer of stability and prosperity. The author punctures the image of the pristine American man, debates on good and bad, complicates right and wrong, blurs the gross division of protagonist and antagonist, and diffuses the watertight partition between Christ and Satan, by portraying murderers as metaphors of the counterculture movement which questions the truth value behind the civilised, white, beautiful, docile America and counter questions every moral ethical value that the country boasts of. Through his narrative technique, Capote presents the liminal space that America had been living in. The 'new journalistic novel' also questions the American juridical spirit and thus exposes anxieties related to law and justice. America in the 1950s was fighting the cold war outside and the counter-culture inside, and Capote, by exploring a real incident, presents it from various angles to give the readers a concrete alternative vision. This article thus intends to critically analyse the 'non-fiction novel' as a significant postwar narrative that brilliantly sketches the spirit, anxieties and chaos characterising postwar America by looking at the possibilities of anti-establishment while talking about crime itself.

Keywords: *anxiety, chaos, murder, postwar, spirit.*

In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences (1965) is a spine-chilling true crime novel authored by the American 'new journalistic fiction' writer Truman Capote (1924-1984). The novel begins with multiple murders and ends with the murderers getting punished. The murder takes place in the state of Kansas which 'represents the

quintessence of America...[and] has become, for most Americans, a barometer of the true American spirit'.¹ Capote by retelling the historically authenticated cold blooded murder of an apparently 'virtuous' family, reworks the bovine pastoral landlocked Kansas, comprising of white dominating, religious-ethnic-economically conservative Anglo-Saxon Americans, into a violent urban land. As Tell notes, 'Capote connected the wheat-bound, God-fearing people of Southwest Kansas to urban problems of violence and maladjustment.'² And beneath the conventional story line, Capote brilliantly interweaves the multiple layers of complexities which ultimately point towards a not-so-stable post Second World War America.

For a simultaneous portrayal and implicit critique of the anxiety, chaos and spirit characterising postwar America, Capote incorporates a literary technique which was gradually marking its significance in the history of American journalism. *In Cold Blood* is referred to alternatively as 'new journalistic fiction', 'non-fiction novel' or 'documentary novel', genres which developed in the 1960s at the hands of a number of American novelists and journalists, such as, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thomson, Joan Didion, Terry Southern, Robert Christgau, Gay Talese et al. In the words of Siegle the 'nonfiction novel makes us uneasy by its apparently oxymoronic nature – its mixing of reality and fiction; of journalist and novelist; of factuality and imagination.'³ Mas'ud Zavarzadeh calls it 'the "fiction" of the metaphysical void'⁴ and argues that the "'fictual" realm of the nonfiction novel has both the factual authority of reality and the "aesthetic control" of the fictional.'⁵ Imagination gives literary fiction the license to explore an incident from different angles which makes it different from journalism. Unlike traditional journalism, literature is not bound to be limited within the restrictions of form and content. However, 'new journalism' fuses a subjective aspect into its non-fictional structure, which was originally meant to be neutral, objective, detached and dispassionate. Rance notes that:

The claim of "new journalists" to be new was that they would report the current scene with no inhibition about availing themselves of the technical devices and much of the imaginative freedom hitherto assumed to be prerogatives of fiction.⁶

As a result, it provides a canvas in which fact can be mingled with imagination, where imagination is not something fanciful, but a concrete

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alternative adorned with solid rhetoric. Rance also opines that the rise of the genre, 'at least in a modern and self-conscious incarnation, coincided with what still might seem to count as a notably traumatic period in American history.'⁷ From the way Capote narrativises reality in this experimental 'true crime novel' through his lucid journalistic but persuasive fictional language, it seems that the use of this new genre does an appropriate justice to the structure and function of the plot in critiquing contemporary America.

America while emerging as a superpower in the post 1945 world tried its best to acknowledge the dream which was the basis of its Puritanic origin. The pure Nordic Americans considered themselves as the 'chosen few' who would establish a new era throughout the world. In fact, Mr. Clutter contriving a 'patch of the paradise, the green, apple-scented Eden'⁸ on earth can be meaningfully extended to the vision of all the white Christian Americans like him. The novel is situated in Holcomb, a village in western Kansas which stands alone on high wheat plains. The land, being compared to the Greek temples rising 'gracefully' and 'visible long before a traveler reaches them',⁹ represents paradise. The Garden City symbolises the Garden of Eden where inhabitants are peaceful, satisfied and prosperous. And Mr. Herbert William Clutter, the head of the family who gets murdered on November 16, 1959, is in every sense, the promising man emblematic of this deeply conservative, religious, patriarchal, pure white race. Master of River Valley Farm, the forty-eight years old non-smoker non-drinker 'man's-man figure' possesses a 'first-rate condition.'¹⁰ His popularity is evident when the author tells us that he is:

community's most widely known citizen, prominent both there and in Garden City, the close-by county seat... his name was everywhere respectfully recognized among Midwestern agriculturists, as it was in certain Washington offices, where he had been a member of the Federal Farm Credit Board during the Eisenhower administration.¹¹

Clutter with his 'brain expertly racing with the newest'¹² represents a microcosm of the larger development projects that President Eisenhower was carrying throughout America. He stands for the all-round progress that postwar America sought to achieve. Both in his appearance and in his activities, he appears as the New Adam in New Eden, who can successfully contribute to the American dream. Not only Mr. Clutter, his children who

would grow up to be the future of the nation are all highly promising. The two elder daughters are well-settled. The younger ones, Nancy and Kenyon help him in 4-H program and Young Methodists League. Emblematic of the Methodist Christian, they do a lot of charity. In short, the Clutters are ideal American citizens who symbolise how America as a nation functions.

This white American dream is challenged and shattered when its representative Clutter family is murdered. It fused 'the religious order and the "manic" rage' and 'distorted' the 'stable qualities like time.'¹³ Clarke claims that '*In Cold Blood* took Kansas's Finney County by storm.'¹⁴ The magnitude of the crime created a huge sensation throughout the nation as it ruptured the Edenic sentiments of the conservative Christians, and the novel 'challenged the popular image of rural Kansas by placing it in the same assemblage as random violence and anxious citizens.'¹⁵ 'Always certain of what he wanted from the world' and 'had in large measure obtained it.'¹⁶ Mr. Clutter can't save himself and his endearing family. It shows the chaotic and vulnerable side of America which appears to be a superpower. This was exactly the situation of America in the 1950s and 60s when the flood of counterculture movements drowned the elite front liners. There are a plethora of incidents in the novel which indicate the anxiety and chaos plaguing the whole nation. Though on the surface level, everything is too good in Holcomb, Capote stitches in occasional discords from the very beginning of the novel. In the very opening paragraph, the atmosphere pervading Holcomb comprises '*hard blue skies*' and '*desert-clear air*' (emphasis mine) which is described as '*more Far West than Middle West*.'¹⁷ The far west is more crime-ridden comprising 'born gamblers' living a lowly life owing to harsh geography, 'extremely shallow precipitation and anguishing irrigation problems.'¹⁸ The 'ranch-hand nasalness' perceived in the local accent and the men wearing 'narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes'¹⁹ are representative of the deep western violent cowboys found in crime fictions. Holcomb, therefore, is not as pristine as it seems and has connections with far western criminal origins. The prosperous ranchers here are not satisfied with hectares of land but also indulge in exploitation of the natural resources. Mrs. Browne complains Garden City as the worst 'bedlam...noisier than a bomb raid...Monsters howling the bloody night long...horrid racket...hateful prairie wind...most appalling moans.'²⁰ One single mishap 'stimulated fires of mistrust'²¹ throughout Holcomb in the flame of which gentle and

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helpful neighbours became strangers in a moment, and the pristine idyllic place became a paranoia. Postwar America thus experienced deep anxiety, suspicion and violence under a flimsy layer of stability and prosperity. Bouts of anxiety are also evident whenever we peep inside the apparently perfect Clutter family. To quote Rance:

Herbert Clutter presiding as an imperious patriarch over a family of neurotics, with son, Kenyon, and wife Bonnie, being no less portentously myopic than himself, and only his daughter, Nancy, being shown as durably stable, though herself afflicted by a trivial round of communal obligation and the religious bigotry behind her father's insistence on the termination of her romance with Bobby Rupp.²²

After six years of a nationally talked of crime, in the flourishing immediate counterculture background, Capote 'recreated our Middle West'²³ and thus punctures the image of the pristine American man by presenting such inside flaws through subtle connotations.

In *In Cold Blood*, Capote debates on good and bad, confuses right and wrong, complicates the victim and the predator, and diffuses the watertight partition between Christ and Satan. The way he sketches the family history, outer appearance and inner psyche of the two criminals, Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Edward Smith, 'strengthened his arguments against capital punishment.'²⁴ His first description of Perry is, 'Like Mr. Clutter...[Perry] never drank coffee.'²⁵ Perry's 'black' hair is also similar to Clutter's 'dark' one. Capote thus compares the 'iodine' skinned son of a 'full-blooded Cherokee'²⁶ with someone who is the representative of the white Christian American advancement. Moreover, while the murderers are reported in newspapers as mindless monsters without any conscience, Capote in the novel interestingly presents them as full-blooded personalities, remorseful, and suffering from pangs of torment. When the novel ends, they in fact arouse more sympathy in the minds of the readers than the victims. To quote Mrs. Meier after the death sentence is given:

I still feel bad about it...Perry and I got to know each other real well...[he was] Crying like a child...all he said was, "I'm embraced by shame."²⁷

Despite having a disproportionate physique and a horribly troubled childhood, Perry is an incessant voyager, who sings strumming guitar, pens ballads, speaks in a gentle, prim and soft voice, is greatly talented in

multiple fields, and yearns for a lot of learning despite never being appreciated by anyone. Capote also time and again sheds light on 'Dick's affection for his parents, his professed concern for them.'²⁸ Mr. Hickock brings out Dick's inner goodness when he says that his 'boy has plenty of good inside him.'²⁹ Dick and Perry are weak, maimed and helpless, survivors of major accidents, possessing physical debilitations, and always in dire need of money. Inspector Dewey 'could not forget their sufferings.'³⁰ Capote 'situated the murder in the context of the lives, childhoods, and sexualities of Smith and Hickock' and made common man 'recognise in the murderers men not unlike himself.'³¹ As Carpenter exclaims, 'a little more hate, an ounce less stability, and I might have been a murderer.'³² By portraying Dick and Perry as ordinary men, 'more sinned against than sinning', Capote implies that in their genes they 'were doomed and directed to act in this fashion; there was no other outcome possible.'³³ Rance says that:

strong hint of a social derivation for the deviancy of Dick and Perry is reinforced by the presentation of those tremulous pillars of society, the Clutters.³⁴

Thus the readers are compelled to give a second thought on whether or not the crime is really committed 'In Cold Blood' as the title claims. Call rightly argues:

Mr. Capote does such a masterful job that, when Smith tells of cutting Clutter's throat, the reader can understand, almost, why the killer's tormented mind made him commit the murder. The book helps the reader to understand that the murder was not in cold blood at all, but was Smith's subconscious effort to prove his existence as a man to a society that had pretty much ignored him.³⁵

Through his narrative technique, Capote presents the liminal space that America had been living in.

Capote's summary of the accident – 'four shotgun blasts...ended six human lives,'³⁶ including the lives of Dick and Perry, indicates as if, the murderers were also killed by the state in exactly the same manner as the former killed their victims. They are in no way greater criminals than the state. This is much intensified when the young Oklahoman reporter

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mentions the whole trial to be ‘unfair’ as these ‘guys don’t stand a chance’. If the court went on to hang the criminals without considering their ‘rotten life’, then that is ‘pretty goddam cold-blooded too.’³⁷ The ‘hollowness’ of Judge Ronald H. Tate, who was ‘an intimate friend of Mr. Clutter’,³⁸ represents the hollow white Americans being indifferent to the plights of people throughout the world whom they slaughter down every day. The diplomats sitting in Washington are the engineers of the mass murders that America commits throughout the world, and in colder blood than Dick and Perry. Vietnam had the panoramic landscapes like Kansas which were devastated by the onslaughts of America, similarly as the ‘foreign sounds’³⁹ of Dick and Perry shattered the peaceful ambience of Holcomb. Capote deliberately brings in non-relevant issues such as the ‘grim United States Army and Air Force Disciplinary Barracks’,⁴⁰ the convicts manufacturing ‘automobile license plates, lumber, old machinery, baseball paraphernalia’⁴¹ and the news broadcasting the talks of the ministers regarding the space race to remind one of the imperialistic projects carried out by America. Floyd’s drowsiness on hearing such news and Dick’s sheer indifference after murdering the Clutters can be meaningfully extended to the nation’s drowsiness towards the mass destruction of the rest of the world. The counterculture movement questions every moral and ethical value that the country boasts of. Capote’s role as a non-fiction novelist becomes important, like that of a journalist, in exploring the apparently unperceived pangs of the nation. Anita Loos rightly comments that the novel is ‘a Homeric poem as terrifying as the awful age we live in.’⁴²

Capote’s novel also questions the American juridical spirit and thus exposes anxieties related to law and justice. The title of the novel, unlike that of other crime fictions, gives equal, if not more, importance to the ‘Consequences’ of the murder (than the actual ‘Murders’). Capote through a parallel media trial acknowledges the murderers’ perspectives in detail which were denied in the court. The lawyer Logan Green is compared with a night-club comedian. The jurors lay inattentive throughout the defense attorneys’ hearings while Green usually ‘woke them up’⁴³ with his ‘rabble-rousing, brutal’⁴⁴ address. The Judge kept on sustaining the objections of the prosecutor and overruling those of the defender. Thus the entire judicial understanding is reworked in the narrative. To quote Tell:

When Capote cut and pasted Joseph Satten’s psychoanalytic treatment of the murderers into the heart of *In Cold Blood*, he brought it near and set it in

action against local habits of justice.⁴⁵

Again, Satten described the murder as 'mental eclipse', 'schizophrenic darkness,' and 'lapses in ego-control'⁴⁶ and thus was sceptical of the M'Naghten Rule which was the 'crux in deciding the fates of Dick and Perry.'⁴⁷ Interestingly, the deeply religious God-fearing public showed no mercy and desired for animalistic treatment of the murderers, as Perry confides to Capote:

When I saw that crowd, I thought. Jesus, these people are going to tear us limb from limb. To hell with the public hangman. They were going to hang us on the spot... what's the use of going through this whole ordeal? Trial and everything. It's such a farce. These prairie-billies, they'll hang us in the long run.⁴⁸

To conclude, Truman Capote's new journalistic fiction explores a real incident and presents it from various angles to acquaint the readers with 'the difference between what is true and what is *really* true.'⁴⁹ Rance sums up the spirit of postwar America when she says, 'America even with her best face forward had somehow slain herself.'⁵⁰ Dick and Perry symbolise the counterculture movement which questions the truth value behind the civilised, white, beautiful, docile America. America in the 1950s was fighting the cold war outside and the counterculture inside. The Clutter family murder can be considered as a premonition of the assassination of the handsome, blue-eyed, Nordic featured, rich, philanthropic John F. Kennedy, four years later. The counterculture movement attacked Kansas which functions 'as a stand-in for the nation as a whole, the distilled essence of who we (Americans) are.'⁵¹ Kennedy the perfect man, and Clutters the ideal family since they represented establishment at the backdrop of anti-establishment. In a sense, Capote not only 'identified the residue of counterculture in a society which insisted on virtue and values' but in his 'subversion of those qualities,'⁵² he blurs the gross division of protagonist and antagonist. This also leads us to ponder whether the counterculturists attacking the American government or the latter attacking the rest of the world are the real villains in the postwar scenario. Capote presents Dick and Perry as 'victims of a cruel society.'⁵³ If the murderers are to be condemned, the American nation as a whole is to be condemned for

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mass murders throughout the world. Thus, America is not, as is believed, the chosen land. Instead, it is in dire need of liberation from its vehement wrongs by some exotic force, as the tropical parrot delivers Perry from torture by Americans. Capote viewed the postwar scenario as ‘desperate, savage, violent America in collision with sane, safe, insular even smug America people who have every chance against people who have none.’⁵⁴ Lastly, the ability of the narrative to look at the possibilities of anti-establishment while talking about crime itself makes it a significant postwar narrative that brilliantly sketches the spirit, anxieties and chaos characterising postwar America.

Endnotes :

- ¹ Shirley Ellen Rash, ‘Maybe It Was You: The Implications of Southern Gothic Elements of Criminality, Sexuality, and Race in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*’, *Theses and Dissertations*, (University of Arkansas, 2015). <http://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/1208>. p.13. Accessed 06.10.2020.
- ² Dave Tell, ‘The Meanings of Kansas: Rhetoric, Regions, and Counter Regions,’ *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 42.3 (2012) : 214 - 232. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41722432?refreqid=excelsior%3Ae47909e3d07e74b1984b836bd3f4f38b&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents p.215. Accessed 06.10.2020.
- ³ Robert Siegle and Capote, ‘Capote’s “Handcarved Coffins” and the Nonfiction Novel,’ *Contemporary Literature* 25.4 (1984): 437 - 451. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1208055?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents. p.437. Accessed 06.10.2020.
- ⁴ Siegle and Capote, ‘Capote’s “Handcarved Coffins”, 437.
- ⁵ Siegle and Capote, ‘Capote’s “Handcarved Coffins”, 438.
- ⁶ Nick Rance, “‘*Truly Serpentine*”: “*New Journalism*”, In *Cold Blood and the Vietnam War*. *Literature and History* 11.2(2002): 78-100. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.7227/LH.11.2.6> p.80. Accessed 14.07.2021.
- ⁷ Rance, ‘*Truly Serpentine*’, p.89.
- ⁸ Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences* (New York: Random House, 1992), p.32.
- ⁹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.18.
- ¹⁰ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.21.
- ¹¹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.22.

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- ¹² Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.30.
- ¹³ Siegle and Capote, 'Capote's "Handcarved Coffins"', 448.
- ¹⁴ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.214.
- ¹⁵ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.215.
- ¹⁶ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.22.
- ¹⁷ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.18.
- ¹⁸ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.20.
- ¹⁹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.18.
- ²⁰ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, pp. 181-182.
- ²¹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.21.
- ²² Nick Rance, 'Truly Serpentine', p.84.
- ²³ William Lindsey White, 'A Glorious Talent', *Emporia Gazette* (1965), p.4.
- ²⁴ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.220.
- ²⁵ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.33.
- ²⁶ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.36.
- ²⁷ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, pp. 463 - 464.
- ²⁸ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.158.
- ²⁹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.252.
- ³⁰ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.375.
- ³¹ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.229.
- ³² Karl Menninger, *The Crime of Punishment* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p.7.
- ³³ George Plimpton, *Truman Capote* (New York: Anchor Books Doubleday, 1998), p.215.
- ³⁴ Rance, 'Truly Serpentine', p.84.
- ³⁵ Everett Ray Call, 'In Cold Blood?' *Emporia Gazette* (1966), p.4.
- ³⁶ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.21.
- ³⁷ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.461.
- ³⁸ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.491.
- ³⁹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.21.
- ⁴⁰ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.465.
- ⁴¹ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.467.
- ⁴² Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography* (The University of Michigan: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p.361.

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- ⁴³ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.457.
- ⁴⁴ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.460.
- ⁴⁵ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.222.
- ⁴⁶ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.219.
- ⁴⁷ Rance, 'Truly Serpentine', p.82.
- ⁴⁸ Capote, *In Cold Blood*, p.63.
- ⁴⁹ Siegle and Capote, 'Capote's "Handcarved Coffins" and the Nonfiction Novel', p.440.
- ⁵⁰ Rance, 'Truly Serpentine', p.84.
- ⁵¹ Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), p.29.
- ⁵² Frederick R. Karl, 'The Fifties and After: An Ambiguous Culture,' *A Concise Companion to Postwar American Literature and Culture* (ed. Josephine G. Hendin) (2004): pp. 34-85. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470756430.ch2>, p.75. Accessed 14.07.2021.
- ⁵³ Tell, 'The Meanings of Kansas', p.220.
- ⁵⁴ George Garrett, 'Then and Now: "In Cold Blood" Revisited,' *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 72.3 (1996): 467-474. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26438775.p.468. Accessed 06.10.2020.