



The Tragic Dilemma of the killers: A study of Criminal Motivations in Truman Capote's In Cold Blood

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Abstract

This paper discusses the aspects of crime and the dilemma of the killers as the main cause of violence in In Cold Blood, the greatest and best memoir novel by Truman Capote (1965). The writer will examine the essential subjects present throughout the novel, including brutality, homicide, victimhood, redemption, and retribution, in addition. How the writer manages to use dramatic devices such as characters, setting, and style. The purpose of this research is to demonstrate how and to what degree In Cold Blood is a superb synthesis of literary works, investigative reporting, and media coverage, as well as a rigorous social and cultural, spiritual, and mental cause of violence, the origin of evil, and a meticulous assessment of the consciousness, particularly the felonious way of thinking, that's still a mystery and an oddity.

Keywords: Truman Capote, violence, homicide, victimization, atonement and punishment.

معضلة القتل المأساوية: دراسة الدوافع الإجرامية في رواية ترومان كابوت بدم بارد

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ملخص

يناقش البحث جوانب الجريمة ومعضلة القتل باعتبارها السبب الرئيسي للعنف في رواية بدم بارد حيث تعد من أعظم مذكرات ترومان كابوت (1965). حيث سيبحث الكاتب الموضوعات الأساسية الموجودة في جميع اجزاء الرواية، بما في ذلك القتل بوحشية والخلاص والعقاب، بالإضافة إلى الاجابة على عدة تساؤلات منها كيف تمكن الكاتب من استخدام الاساليب و التقنيات الدرامية مثل الشخصيات والإعداد والأسلوب. الفكرة من البحث هو إظهار كيف وإلى أي درجة تعتبر الرواية الاستقصائية، والتغطية الإعلامية توليفاً رائعاً للأعمال الأدبية فضلاً عن التغطية الاجتماعية والثقافية الصارمة، والسبب الروحي والعقلي للعنف، وأصل الشر، وتقديم سبب واضح و دقيق للوعي الشخصي، لا سيما طريقة التفكير الإجرامية، حيث لا يزال هذا لغزاً وشيئاً غريب الأطوار

الكلمات المفتاحية: ترومان كابوت ،العنف ،القتل والإيذاء ،التكفير عن الذنب والعقاب.

Introduction

There is bloodshed and horror in practically every perspective of life. We are constantly exposed to alarming news and information about gruesome murders, terrible murders, and atrocious offences, which makes us increasingly apprehensive



about our safety and the fate of humanity. Several writers, reviewers, scholars, and social psychologists have attempted to explain the essence of felons, their motivations, and some participants in humanity's unusual behaviour throughout the twentieth century, especially in its second half and at the turn of the new millennium. They have done this by closely examining sentient corrupt practices while observing the sociopathy and moral degradation of serious criminals and the degenerative changes of common people. They frequently fail to give a conclusive explanation for the causes, character, and rise of growing hostility, which is regrettable [1].

In American culture, particularly in the contributions of American novelists from the twentieth century, violence and crime frequently appear as motifs and themes especially in the literary fiction of the American South, with works by Flannery O'Connor, Norman Mailer, E. Welty, Katherine A. Porter, Carson McCullers, and, most importantly, Truman Capote, stands out as having the most explicit treatment of victimization, dictatorship, oppression, struggling, physically and mentally mistreatment. The last of the abovementioned novels is unquestionably the best at capturing the intricate, perplexing, frequently strange, and disgusting characteristics of his protagonists, including their addictions, fears, bizarre demeanours, and the tendency for violence and aggression. It's noteworthy to see that aggression, victimhood, and murder are still prevalent in many of his writings, particularly in his first novels. Such as (*Other Voices, Other Rooms*) which is about Memories of childhood, and the conflict between uninvolved genuineness and constrictive social attitudes. (*A Tree of Nights and Other Stories*) about untamed wilderness, the quest for love and identity. While "A Diamond Guitar" and, *In Cold Blood* deal with crime, guilt and penance. These literary works brought Truman Capote literary success and were renowned internationally [2].

The Gothicism genre and the Southern setting and characters

Truman Capote's novels contain enigma, anticipation, fear, and tragedy, as well as psychic and metaphorical aspects of gothic literature. This is because he integrates supernatural elements with both Southern settings and Southern personalities in his works [3]. However, when it comes to bloodshed, violent assault, crime, and condemnation, the recurring motifs that are most extensively examined in the aforementioned "A Diamond Guitar" and in *In Cold Blood*, the novel that will be examined in this essay, the writer tries to go far beyond bounds of the contemporary literary culture and language roots of the American South as well as provide a new public depth to the crime problem, yet he left a Southern context and some traditional practices as a foundation for exploring also regional problems. The



news item that attracted Capote's sight while he was reading the New York Times in late 1959 stated that Herbert Clutter, an oats and livestock farmer, his woman, their son, and his teenage girl, had been killed in their residence in Holcomb, a commuter town of Garden City in Kansas, served as the inspiration for the author to start writing one of the most magnificent works. Capote quickly concluded that the murder narrative was what he had been looking for, a topic that would allow him to create a novel that would remain, in the mind of his readers after reading it once. The idea of discovering a place and individuals who were unknown to him also enticed the writer [4].

Nevertheless, one of In Cold Blood's two central themes was the notion of the horrifying crime and painful deaths of the Clutters' family members. The killers of the Clutters, Richard E. Hickock and Perry E. Smith, who were hanged five and a half years after the crime, were a crucial topic the author brought up in his great novel. When Capote's book was released at the beginning of 1966, it immediately gained both critical and commercial acclaim [5].

From a stylistic, analytical, and historical point, In Cold Blood is still a remarkable novel. The book is regarded as a compelling work of literature that is expertly composed, a painstaking social investigation of violence, a mental depiction of the murderers, a vivid depiction of the Clutters tragedy, and a reporting that incorporates painstaking chronological investigation [6]. It's significant to observe that when writing the novel, Truman Capote schooled himself to keep a record of memories rather than writing or using a recording device throughout meetings and interactions:

For the goal of this kind of publication, I started to teach myself how to collect conversations on tape instead of using a recorder. I accomplished it by having a buddy read portions from a novel, after which I would write them down and attempt to match the source as closely as possible. I already could do it, but after practising these workouts for a year and a half, for a few hours each day, I was able to reach a reliability of 95%, which would be the minimum required [7].

The author read about the case and was ready to write about it for a very long period [8]. He meticulously researched homicide, its causes, the offenders' obsessions, and other topics to thoroughly study the lives of the casualties and the murderers. In addition to speaking with Hickcock and Smith, the story's two heroes, Capote also spoke with many other murderers to fully comprehend and investigate the mental defect. He also had Perry Smith's personal effects, namely, his stories, messages, drawings, and sketches, as well as a sizable number of data



containing research articles, letters, old newspapers, and court documents. This demonstrates the author's maintaining relations in the investigation, as well as his rigorous and taxing journalistic work, documentarian, and psychiatric therapist.

Plot Structure and the Portrays of the Crime

The novel is subdivided into four approximately equivalent portions with titles, with several stories for each part. Most of these short stories are so brief that one can be considered a page. The longest section of the text contains important information and details regarding Perry Smith's background, the subject of the writer's specific emphasis and increased intrigue. The opening chapter of the book, "The Last to See Them Alive," demonstrates how the perpetrators' and the Clutter family's trajectories cross and lead to the many gunshot killings. Further on, he leads the reader inside a horrifying scene that depicts the finding of the corpses of the four slain Clutters, which led to the summoning of the media, police officials, and friends and associates of the Clutter family to the River Valley Ranch. By evoking a sense of impending doom surrounding the innocent Clutter family, Capote steadily intensifies the tension in the narrative. It is clear where Mr. Clutter, unaware that it would be his last hours, strolled through his favourite grove of apple trees next to the riverbank as his daughter Nancy, shortly before she passed away, dressed for chapel the next day and eventually laid to rest in those same garments. A bookmark within the Scripture on Mrs. Clutter's nightstand finest captures the aspects of dread present in all these tiny images and actions of the Clutters [9]: *Take care, keep an eye out, and pray because you never realize when it will be* [10]. Smith and Hickcock also clearly enjoy a bright sky and no shade descends on them as they get ready for the long trip that will conclude with their executions when contrasted with the shrouded, concealed gloom amassing all around victims: They went out to the vehicle *"washed, brushed, and as immaculate as two guys leaving into a double dating."* (ICB, 37)

It is quite important to note that the author deftly heightens the suspense and magnifies the severity of the situation by the result obtained by changing the topic for a brief while. For example, one episode closes with one witness's disturbing statement *"The pain. The misery. They had died. An entire household. Graceful. I saw decent folks who were slain. You must understand it because it was true."* (ICB, 66) This abrupt change in viewpoint perfectly captures the absurdity of man's life, emphasizing its dullness, inevitable destiny, and imminent demise. As with the majority of the novel, the novelist maintains his distance from the actions being recounted at this time, more closely approximating a reporter or investigator than an author, but he also gives viewers plenty of room to engage with the narrative, forms their own opinions, and make judgements. Capote does not want to influence



the audience's decision-making procedure because, as K. T. Reed argues, the readers need to get to their judgments regarding the intellectual, social, and emotional conditions of the mass slaughter. In addition, the writer's hesitation to offer an ethical appraisal of the killers is a result of his in-depth knowledge of how their lives have developed and changed over time. In light of this, Capote's response—whether it be one of denunciation or sympathy for the murderers—would appear, in the context of the novel, inconsequential given the causes of the murder, the motivations of the perpetrators, and the potential outcomes of the homicide [11].

In the second section of *In Cold Blood*, headed "Peoples Unknown," the author discusses the ramifications of the several killings, including the confusion of the Kansas Criminal Intelligence Department and other crime control organizations over the apparent lack of legitimate reasons for the murder. As it turned out, neither Nancy Clutter nor her mom had been "sexually abused," and yet nothing appeared to have been missing from the Clutter residence [12]. Meanwhile, Capote pursues Smith and Hickcock on a chaotic, unfortunate adventure through Mexico and return, after which he delves into Smith's childhood, adolescence and psychological maturity, emphasizing his disconnected youth and painful traumatization. The chapter finishes with the killers marching along a barren highway in the Nevada desert, signalling the end of their so-far pleasant life and lifestyle at freedom and heralding their eventual demise.

Part three, which is entitled "Answer," is the narrative's climactic portion, presenting to the readers the two murderers' ultimate concern about their fate, and their anticipation of being apprehended and condemned soon. This part surely meets the readers' anticipation because they are now aware of the situation surrounding the killings. However, as Kenneth T. Reed points out, this section is perhaps the highest psychologically taxing and gruelling form of reporting in all of the contemporary reportage [13], and it was certainly a most tiring and unpleasant time for Capote. Overpowered by the tragic event of the Clutter household, and the anxious, suffocating environment in Holcomb, in which everyone yearned for the code to the crime puzzle, he went to such lengths to eventually understand the history of the premeditated murder, interrogating the murderers and interviewing their families and loved ones. The readers will bring to a horrific scene of violence, a terrible act of homicide, and a continuous thing of suffering and victimhood, throughout the questioning of the two killers. According to the thieves' evidence, Smith and Hickcock invaded the Clutter home through an open front door in their vain quest for a fictitious safe, waking up Herbert Clutter, his spouse, their younger daughter and their son. The victims were wrapped with wire and knotted, and Clutter and his child were taken to the cellar, where the killers slit Clutter's neck as



a preamble to the gunshot blast to his forehead. Herbert Clutter is accompanied in death by his son, daughter, and spouse, all by the same methods. The Clutters fall prey to Smith and Hickcock's avarice, and paradoxically, they are murdered for a little less than \$50 [14].

Experts like Kenneth T. Reed analyse the narrative's sad succession of circumstances from multiple viewpoints. For starters, they see them as a collection of causation events in which destiny is solely determined by coincidence. Secondly, they see the Clutter killings as the inevitable, all-the-more-rational result of societal and psychosocial characteristics that had built up over time [15]. In this regard, one would be led to conclude that Capote portrays Hickcock as well as Smith as ethical depravities of fine and dignified men caused by deprivation, uncomfortable, and brutality that spanned beyond a lifetime. In opposition, the Clutter household represents the consequence of its surroundings; yet, the family background has been marked by more positive traits than those who just had terrified the murderers' backgrounds [16]. It's also trying to imply that the heinous assassination of such an excellent and prosperous American household represents the breakdown of the American Vision, the supremacy of aggression, barbarism, moral decadence, and disease over communal peace, discipline, and stabilization. What boggles the mind is the murderers' motivations, or rather their seemingly unpremeditated malignancy, disingenuousness, aforethought, visceral hatred, and dying fixation. The writer has yet to present a precise response, leaving space for his followers, historians, and therapists to speculate.

"The Corner," the narrative's fourth and last section, concerns with suspect's confinement, many legal implications, technical obstacles, and eventual criminally negligent homicide. "The Corner" grabs the reader's attention and may be a hugely fascinating section thanks to its two description techniques. The first contains a substantial chunk of the suspects' memoirs, while the second is a detailed psychological evaluation of both convicts [17]. Such material invariably lends compelling authenticity and realism to both the offenders' behaviour and Truman Capote's account. Moreover, a few interjections, n't yet least of these is the pretty odd record of the Clutter property sale, and the seemingly unrelated revelation of the crime trends of specific fatality associates of Smith and Hickcock at the Kansas Correctional Facility in Lansing, enhance the narrative's effect, to a certain large extend paradoxically. The writer observes the sale as it proceeds, noting a pedestrian's observation that the sale of the family property matched their final burial. Nonetheless, the exhibition of criminals expecting doom at the jail reveals some idea of the gang mentality out of which the two main characters had formed their wickedness by Capote's portrayal of their misdeeds [18].



Capote's Literary Method and Style

In *Cold Blood* defies categorization because of the story's multifaceted significance, characterization, and style. The novelist considers it a novel art genre, which he has dubbed the "*non-fictional novel*" [19]. One could accept this characterization because the work integrates parts of journalistic and observational with creative approaches. It is described by the writer as innovative storytelling reportage, which is novel in both journalistic and literature. It's worth noting that Capote had seen journalistic integrity as longitudinal passes the exterior of topics, being relevant but ultimately disposable—whereas he believed that imagination could keep moving vertically and horizontally at the same time, with the storytelling movements being progressively augmented and nourished by an in-depth investigative process of frame of reference and public persona. In operating in real circumstances, the writer attempted to merge the finest of both creative realms to disastrous impact, as seen in his greatest famous novel. [20].

Capote's unique ways of establishing the authenticity of the scenario he develops cannot be overlooked. The author provided the factual information, interacting verisimilitude, honesty, and fantastical creativeness, disclosing them not in a simple and direct daily paper manner, but as a creative person who chooses relevant information and solo artists out that those which better serve the textual objective, comparable to an artist who keeps repeating a line or colour for significance, intensity, and concentration. Surprisingly, incorporating the best parallels and replicates the film method in its use of flashbacks and nearer, painstakingly detailed locales, the gaining support behind the flight, pursuit, and recapture of the criminals, public images, and judicial events [21]. Furthermore, the script's suspense builds when the pursuing - the killers - become chased, and they, the victims of a little innocent citizen, fall victim to, in Capote's opinion, Kansas' vast administrative criminal bureaucracy.

Considering the narrative's unique style, one cannot help noticing aspects of Southern Gothic fiction and gothic tragedy, most notably in the characterization of Bobby Rupp's tour to the Phillips' Funeral Service, where he manages to find the four caskets of the slain Clutter household, each victim's head wrapped in a giant ball of fabric to cover up the castrations of gunshots:

The four caskets, which nearly occupied the modest, flowe-filled room, were to be secured at the burial rituals - appropriately, for the effect achieved, notwithstanding the precautions given with the look of the deceased, was unsettling. Nancy wore a crimson velvet gown, her brother a colourful flannel sweater; the mom and dad were more subduedly dressed for the occasion, Mr. Clutter in navy-blue soft fabric, his wife in a navy-blue garment; and - and it was



this, particularly - the heads of each were wrapped in fabric, a distended chrysalis twice the dimensions of a normal damaged rubber ball, and the fabric quivered like Christmas forest (ICB, 93)

The preceding sample exemplifies Capote's artistic skill, and his ability to create suspense and dread while managing the storyline by isolating himself from the circumstances and individuals recounted.

Conclusion

In *Cold Blood* remained a dynamic, unnerving, and unforgettable thriller novel because of its interesting criminal nature of the content, perplexing storyline, spectacular atmosphere, and, perhaps the most significantly, a complicated, deep, and melancholy portrait of the killers, the narrative's primary protagonists. As stated previously, Truman Capote's work is an in-depth social, intellectual, and mental cause of violence, the essence of wickedness, and a spiritual quest to the human mind, especially the murderer's way of thinking, which stays undiscovered and incomprehensible.

Notes

- 1- Craig Haney, **Death by Design: Capital Punishment as a Social Psychological System** (Oxford University Press, 2005), 9.
- 2- George Plimpton, **Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career** (New York: Anchor, 1999), 21.
- 3- Irving Malin, **Truman Capote's in Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook** (Calif: Wadsworth, 1968), 14.
- 4- Ibid, 17.
- 5- Ibid, 18.
- 6- Ralph F. Voss, **Truman Capote and the Legacy of in Cold Blood** (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 32.
- 7- Ibid, 34.
- 8- Malin, 20.
- 9- Stephen Wade, **Writing True Crime: A Guide to Skills and Research in Producing Books and Articles** (Brighton: Straightforward Co Ltd, 2009), 51.



- 10- Truman Capote, **In Cold Blood** (New York: A Signet Book, 1965), 36. All subsequent quotations referencing the novel are taken from this edition, with the abbreviation (ICB) and the page number(s).
- 11- Terry Reed, **Truman Capote** (Boston: Twayne Publishers, a Division of G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 74.
- 12- Ibid, 75.
- 13- Dan Futterman , and Gerald Clarke. **Capote: The Shooting Script** (New York: Newmarket Press, 2006), 105.
- 14- Ibid, 106.
- 15- Reed, 78.
- 16- Truman Capote, **In Cold Blood: A True Account of Multiple Murder and Its Consequences** (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 86.
- 17- Ibid, 87.
- 18- Reed, 79
- 19- Helen S. Garson, **Truman Capote**. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing CO., 1980), 144.
- 20- Futterman, and Clarke, 107.
- 21- Garson, 145.

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