

Ashley Pizzini

Contemporary Lit

5th hour

3 January, 2020

### From Journalism to Nonfiction Novel: Capote's Use of Literary Elements

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* was the first of its kind by combining true events into a narrative with the first "nonfiction novel." Capote's use of place, voice, character, narrative, and style in *In Cold Blood* allows him to build tension and create fully developed, in depth characters that the readers can sympathize with. His accomplishment in using these literary elements is what makes this novel a staple to the true-crime genre.

*In Cold Blood* was published in 1965, six years after the murders that the book was based on. In the fall of 1959, a family of four was brutally murdered by two killers in Holcomb, Kansas. The story gives insight to the killers, victims, and community connected to the case while exploring themes of dreams, evil, human nature, and religion.

This novel received near-universal praise from the public for being a gripping, haunting, and realistic work because of its nonfiction narrative structure. Critics thought that although there was a lack of suspense, because the killers were revealed within the first forty pages, "Capote builds the tension with brilliant use of imagery and exploration of the characters" (Mayba). Other critics found the book to be shallow and a failure for Capote to keep his bias from the narrative (Kauffman, Thomson). Stanley Kauffmann believes that "The depth in this book is no deeper than it's mine-shaft of factual detail" and that it fell short of good journalism. Another source of controversy was the recreated dialogue that often misconstrued the truth, which is yet another way that Capote failed to be unbiased and true to the people of Holcomb, Kansas (Weiner).

Place is more than setting; It is the entire atmosphere and "sense of place" that is created by the time period, neighborhood, social class, and perspective of an area. This book was set in the place of the murders, Holcomb, Kansas, a small farming community that values religion, serving one another, and trust. Nothing out of the ordinary ever occurred in Holcomb and it is characterized as innocent place to live an ordinary life. The town's values were shown through the Clutter family, especially Nancy Clutter, "a leader in the 4-H program and the young Methodists League, an annual winner at the county fair" and was "an enigma the community pondered" (Capote 18).

The use of this element is critical because it is what Capote wanted to center his book around. He did not care if the murder case was solved or not, instead "his intention was to produce a tightly controlled forensic piece that examined the effects of a savage killing on an obscure community" (Thomson). Distrust and confusion arose from the townspeople after a horrible act was committed against

a family that emanated the town's values and completely changed the "sense of place." After the murders, many people in the community did not feel safe because of who it happened to. "But that family represented everything people hereabouts really value and respect, and that such a thing could happen to them---well, it's like being told there is no God" (Capote 88).

Place is an important element in this book since it was of great influence to the real life murder trial. Finney County, where the trial of the killers took place, and where Holcomb is located, was characterized as being highly religious and most likely against the death penalty. "But in Finney County one is still within the Bible Belt borders, and therefore a person's church affiliation is the most important factor influencing his class status" (Capote 34). Religion was used as a big argument against the death penalty during Smith and Hitchcock's trial, but was also used as an argument for it.

Capote uses voice in the story to increase the tension. Voice is the "sound" of the narrator, which features include presence, quality, and attitude. The voice of this narrator is outside the action, informative, sympathetic, and doleful. Before the killing of Nancy Clutter the voice in the narrative builds the tension by creating an eerie tone. "She set out the clothes she intended to wear to church the next morning; it was the dress in which she was to be buried" (Capote 56).

Capote's use of voice in the story developed an insightful look into the lives of the victims, killers, and community. This insight enhances the themes the characters are living out. "Gone, too, was Perry O'Parsons," the name invented for the singing sensation of stage and screen he'd half-seriously hoped some day to be" (Capote 202). This use of voice gives more insight into the theme of dreams and Perry's desires.

Characters are defined by their desires, their physical description, and their motivations. Capote focuses on character greatly by giving each person in the story their own in depth description as well as the community itself. Perry is the protagonist of this story and is who Capote focuses most of his attention on. He gives details of how the Clutter murders occurred and his life story shows the making of a killer. "Every damn one of you got an education. Everybody but me. And I hate all of you, all of you---Dad and everybody" (Capote 185). Both of the killers, Dick Hitchcock and Perry Smith, had the desire to get an education and make a life for themselves but resented the world for their shortcomings. "I guess Dick resented it, not getting to college" (Capote 166). Their yearn for a better life motivated many of their choices after the murders.

Capote used characters dialogues, letters, or narrative to reveal character. One of the biggest sources of information about Perry Smith comes from two letters written by his father and his sister. Perry's father gives an in depth description of Perry's upbringing while Perry's sister reveals themes within his character. Perry's story is brought up multiple times throughout the novel, while Dick's is mentioned once or twice.

The main characters had things that helped the reader to better understand their personality and motivations. Perry had boxes of sentimental items and an addiction to aspirin that resulted from a serious motorcycle injury. This deepened his character by showing his attachment to anything he could call his own. It also shows his insecurities and pain that he has dealt with his whole life.

Narrative is designed to elicit a response in the reader and to support our understanding of the book's message or theme; it is how a book is revealed, paced, and structured. *Cold Blood* is structured into 4 parts: "The Last To See Them Alive", "Persons Unknown", "Answers", and "The Corner." Capote uses this structure to create dramatic irony, tension, and follows the true-crime genre in following a typical crime sequence. The first part of the book is called "The Last To See Them Alive", named after Bobby Rupp, who was the last to see the Clutters before they were found dead. "For Bobby, as he was to learn before nightfall, was their principal suspect" (Capote 72). The second part of the book is called "Persons Unknown". After Al Dewey finds a bloody footprint in the crime scene it is pretty much assumed that two men were involved in this crime. "Not that they were claiming them; Dewey and his team decided to keep secret the existence of this evidence" (Capote 83).

The novel has a nonlinear timeline with flashbacks and flash-forwards that help you to better understand the characters. This also keeps the story interesting by revealing the details of how the Clutters were killed when Smith and Hitchcock finally get caught. Capote is able to bring back some suspense with the 4 part structure with the section "The Corner." This part of the story leaves the reader wondering if the killers get out of their death sentence.

Capote's use of style is shown with the implication of diction, syntax, motifs, dramatic irony, and metaphors. Style is the overall effect of the choices the author makes regarding literary elements and devices. The use of diction, syntax, and metaphors gives characters their own unique tone of voice, while dramatic irony and motifs add tension.

Each character has their own unique style of diction and syntax which is derived from the real life interviews that Capote had with the killers. "Deal me out, baby. I'm a normal" (Capote 111). Certain word choice that Capote would use for each character showed their education, or their attempt to look educated, and their social status. The use of racial slurs shows the time period and character of Dick Hitchcock.

The use of motifs was very minimal, but impactful. In the novel Perry fantasizes about a big yellow bird that will take him away from his troubled life. "A warrior angel who blinded the nuns with its beak, then so gently lifted him, enfolded him, winged him away to "paradise" (Capote 93). This motif enhances the theme of dreams and the American dream that Smith wanted to achieve. Another motif was Dick's use of the nickname "honey" for Perry. This enhances the homosexual undertones that, though Capote did not fully explore in the novel, were still very much present.

The use of metaphor was another way Capote gave characters their own voice and syntax by using phrases that were unique to their character. “Dick would never do that--- spill his guts” (Capote 227). Perry had more trust and loyalty towards Dick than what was actually there in their relationship, since Dick had no hesitation in pitting all the murders on Perry to clear his own name.

Dramatic irony is used before the Clutter family is murdered to help build the suspense. Mr. Clutter writes a check for a new life insurance policy the night before he is killed (Capote 47). Nancy Clutter lays out her dress for church which ends up being the dress that she is buried in (Capote 93).

The universal specificity of *In Cold Blood* is what Capote accomplished to convey by using all five elements. Universal Specificity is the idea that an author creates a story and gets the specifics right, so that the reader may infer it’s broader, more universal significance. By exploring the themes of dreams, evil, and religion, Capote was able to show the weaknesses of human nature in every character. He captured how a real life tragedy has an effect on real people and sacrificed suspense for realism. The use of character with such in depth narrative on each person allowed the reader to see each character’s flaws and weaknesses that come from experiencing hardship.

The five literary elements, place, voice, character, narrative, and style, allowed Truman Capote to transform his pages of journalistic information into a “nonfiction novel” that impacted readers. While staying true to the real life people that it was based on, he was still able to build suspense because of his choices in style and narrative. The “sense of place” and the use of character and voice gave readers insight to the characters and community.

Works Cited

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Penguin Random House, 1965, New York.

Kauffman, Stanley. "Capote in Kansas." *The New Republic*, 22 January 1966.

Mayba, Yevgeniy. "Review of Capote's *In Cold Blood*." *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science*, San Jose State University, Vol. I, Spring 2013.

Thomson, Rupert. "Rereading: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*." *The Guardian*, 5 August 2011.

Wiener, Mandy. "Oscar Pistorius' Sentencing And The Classic True Crime Novel." *This Week's Must Read*, NPR, 14 October 2014.