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## **Sociological and psychological aspects of crime in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood***

The aim of this article is to examine sociological and psychological aspects of crime in Truman Capote's most celebrated nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1965). The author of the article is going to analyse the crucial themes running through the book, such as violence, murder, victimization, atonement and punishment as well as the writer's narrative techniques, characterization, style and setting. The article is going to prove how and to what extent *In Cold Blood* constitutes an excellent mélange of literature, journalism and reportage as well as a thorough sociological, philosophical and psychological study of crime, the nature of the evil and a painstaking analysis of the human psyche, especially the criminal's mentality which still remains enigmatic and inscrutable.

Violence and terror are ubiquitous in almost every aspect of our life. Being regularly bombarded by shocking news and announcements of brutal killings, heinous acts of murder and hideous crimes we feel less and less self-confident and more anxious about our life security and the world's future. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in its second half, and in the threshold of the third millennium numerous writers, critics, philosophers and sociologists, while witnessing sundry acts of violence, pathology and moral debasement of hardened criminals as well as the degeneration of "ordinary" citizens, having examined minutely human corruption, endeavour to find the explanation to the criminals' nature, their motives and the abnormal conduct of certain members of the society. Unfortunately, very often their research and investigation are of no avail since they fail to provide a definite answer to rising violence, its roots and nature.

Crime and brutality constitute recurrent motifs and themes in American literature, especially in the works of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American writers. Violence, tyranny, persecution, suffering, mental and physical oppression saturate miscellaneous US books, yet this subject matter is the most conspicuous in literature of the American South, prime examples of which are the novels and stories of Flannery O'Connor, Norman Mailer, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, and, above all, Truman Capote. It is undoubtedly the last of the afore-mentioned novelists who excels at

depicting complex, labyrinthine, often eccentric and grotesque features of his characters, their obsessions, phobias and fears, odd demeanour, propensity for violence and ferocity. Interestingly enough, in a considerable amount of his works, especially in his early fiction, death, murder, violence and victimization remain background elements. It is the lost childhood and loneliness (*Other Voices, Other Rooms*) (1948), the unexplored realm and search for identity (*A Tree of Nights and Other Stories*) (1949), child memories, the struggle between innocent naturalness and restrictive societal values (*The Grass Harp*) (1951) and untamed wilderness, quest for love and identity (*Breakfast at Tiffany's*) (1958) which come to the fore. Needless to say, crime, guilt and penance are still omnipresent in his fiction and become crucial components in "A Diamond Guitar" (1950), a story in the southern group story collection and in *In Cold Blood* (1965), a novel which gave Capote worldwide recognition and literary acclaim.

In his writing Truman Capote combines elements of Gothicism with both a Southern setting and Southern characters, therefore his works have mystery and suspense, terror and horror, heavily textured description, strange episodes and people, and psychological and symbolic features of the gothic (Garson 14). Nevertheless, when it comes to violence, crime, murder and punishment, the themes most thoroughly explored in the above-mentioned "A Diamond Guitar" and in *In Cold Blood*, the novel to be scrutinized in this article, the author strived to go beyond the confines of the literary and cultural heritage of the American South and provide a new national dimension to the crime issue, yet he left a Southern setting and some local traditions as a base for investigating also regional roots of villainy. The subject that inspired the novelist to write one of the most stunning works was the report which caught Capote's attention while he was looking through the *New York Times* in November 1959 and which stated that Herbert Clutter, a wheat and cattle farmer, his wife, their teenage son and daughter had been killed in their home in Holcomb, a suburb of Garden City in Kansas. Soon after reading the account, Capote decided that the story of the homicide was what he had been searching for, a subject that would enable him to write a book which would endure (Garson 141). Furthermore, the novelist was tempted by the thought of exploring an area and people that were rather unfamiliar to him. However, the motif of the atrocious crime, agonizing death of the members of the Clutters family was one of the two major themes of *In Cold Blood*. Another significant aspect the writer raised in his outstanding novel was the story of the murderers of the Clutters, Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Edward Smith, who were executed five and a half years after the murder. Capote's book appeared in January 1966 and became a literary sensation critically and commercially (Garson 142).

*In Cold Blood* remains an intriguing book from a literary standpoint as well as from a journalistic and documentary perspective. The novel is considered a riveting,

finely written literary work, a meticulous sociological examination of crime, a psychological portrait of the murderers, a graphic illustration of the Clutters tragedy, a reportage combined with meticulous historical research (Voss 2011). It is worth noticing that while working on the book Truman Capote trained himself not to write or use a tape recorder during interviews and conversations, but instead to make notes from memory afterwards:

I began to train myself, for the purpose of this sort of book, to transcribe conversation without using a tape-recorder. I did it by having a friend read passages from a book, and then later I'd write them down to see how close I could come to the original. I had a natural faculty for it, but after doing these exercises for a year and a half, for a couple of hours a day, I could get within 95 per cent of absolute accuracy, which is as close as you need." (Plimpton 2)

Having read about the case, the novelist spent a considerable amount of time preparing to write about it (Carson 142). In addition to examining in-depth the lives of the victims and the killers, he carried out laborious research on crime, its roots, the criminals' motifs, etc. Apart from interviewing the two protagonists, the main actors of the book, Hickcock and Smith, Capote had conversations with lots of other murderers in order to explore and gain understanding of the criminal mentality. He had in possession a vast collection of files containing research material, letters, newspaper clippings, court records, as well as the belongings of Perry Smith, mostly his books, letters, paintings and drawings. This testifies to the writer's extensive involvement in the case, his meticulous and exhausting work as a journalist, documentarist and psychological analyst.

The book is divided into four titled sections of relatively equal length, each part comprising a number of vignettes. Some of these little stories are exceptionally brief, one constituting a single paragraph. The longest part of work provides crucial information and facts about the life of Perry Smith, the man who captured the author's particular attention, aroused his interest, all the more fascination. In the first part of the novel "The Last to See Them Alive" the author shows how the paths of the Clutter family and the criminals converge and culminate in the multiple shotgun murders. Later on, he invites the readers into a devastating scene which shows the discovery of the bodies of the four murdered Clutters after which law enforcement officers, friends and acquaintances of the Clutter family and the press were summoned to the River Valley Farm. Capote builds and gradually heightens the suspense in the story by creating an atmosphere of fatality about the unsuspecting Clutter family. It becomes noticeable where Mr. Clutter walked though his favourite orchard of fruit trees alongside the river, not being aware it would be his last day, whilst his daughter Nancy, hours before her death prepared her clothes

for church the following morning, the clothing in which she was later buried. All these little pictures and activities of the Clutters contain the elements of doom (Garson 144), which is best reflected in a bookmark inside the Bible on Mrs. Clutter's night table: "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is." (Capote 36) Furthermore, when set beside the veiled, hidden darkness gathering around the victims, Smith and Hickcock appear to have a cloudless sky and no shadow falls on them as they prepare for the long journey that will end with their own deaths: "Scrubbed, combed, as tidy as two dudes setting off on a double date, they went out to the car (Capote 37).

It is also worth noticing that the writer dexterously exacerbates the tension and heightens the horror of the circumstances by contrapuntally altering the subject momentarily; whilst one scene ends with the distraught testimony of one witness ("The suffering. The horror. They were dead. A whole family. Gentle. Kindly people, I knew, *murdered*. You have to believe it because it was really true.") (Capote 66), the subsequent section commences with some inapt/extraneous statement: "Eight non-stop passenger trains hurry though Holcomb every twenty-four hours. Of these, two pick up and deposit mail – an operation that, as the person in charge of it fervently explains, has its tricky side" (Capote 66-67). This dramatic shift of perspective illustrates the irony of human existence, all the greater its banality, inevitability of fate and impending doom. As in the whole book, at this point the author is distant and remains aloof from the events described, resembling more a journalist and a reporter than a writer, yet also he leaves much space to the readers, enabling them to get involved in the story, make their assessment and hold a personal judgment. As Kenneth T. Reed maintains, it is crucial for the reader to draw their own conclusions about the philosophical, sociological and psychological circumstances of the mass murder and therefore Capote does not wish to interfere with the reader's judgmental process. Added to that, the author's reluctance to provide a personal assessment and moral judgment about the criminals stems from his profound understanding of the development and evolution of the murderers' lives. In view of this Capote's reaction with either condemnation or compassion for the killers would seem, in the context of the book, irrelevant taking into consideration the reasons for the crime, motives of the criminals and how the murder could have occurred.

In the second part of *In Cold Blood* entitled "Persons Unknown" the writer deals with the aftermath/repercussions of the multiple murders, encompassing the bewilderment of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and other law enforcement agencies about the evident lack of reasonable motives for the crime. As it turns out neither Nancy Clutter nor her mother were "sexually molested", and to all appearances, nothing had been stolen from the Clutter home (Reed 105). Concurrently, Capote follows the travels of Smith and Hickcock through a wild, bad-check-passing revel through Mexico and back again, after which he looks into the early life and emotional growth of

Smith, stressing his disjointed youth and traumatic experiences in the childhood. The author concludes the chapter by presenting the murderers marching along a deserted highway in the Mojave desert which terminates their so far harmonious existence and life at liberty, and heralds their ultimate fate.

Part three ("Answer") is the climatic section of the four, last part of the novel, revealing to the reader the final apprehension of the two criminals on their destiny, their foreboding of being shortly caught and sentenced. This section undoubtedly fulfills the expectations of the readers since they are at last acquainted with the circumstances of the murders. Nonetheless, as Kenneth T. Reed remarks, this part may be the most emotionally stressful and exhausting piece of writing in all of modern reporting (Reed 106), and for Capote it was perhaps the most fatiguing and depressing moment. Being overwrought and overwhelmed by the tragedy of the Clutter family as well as by the tense, stifling atmosphere in Holcomb where everybody longed for the key to the criminal mystery he went to great lengths to finally get to know the details of the homicide having interrogated the murderers as well as interviewed their families and friends. During the questioning of the two killers the reader is introduced into a revolting scene of homicide, a heinous act of murder, a gradual process of agony and victimization. According to the testimony of the criminals, Smith and Hickcock entered the unlocked door of the Clutter home in their futile search for a nonexistent safe, and concomitantly awakened Herbert Clutter, his wife, and their teenage daughter and son. The victims became tied, and their mouths bound with tape after which Clutter and his son were removed to the basement where the murderers cut Clutter's throat as a preliminary to the shotgun blast to the head. Herbert Clutter's death is followed by those of his son, daughter and wife – all by the same means. The Clutters fell prey to Smith's and Hickcock's greed, yet ironically they became sacrificed for less than fifty dollars.

Critics such as Kenneth T. Reed examine the tragic series of events presented in the novel in two perspectives. Firstly, they view them as a complex of cause-and-effect circumstances in which fate is determined by pure chance. Secondly, however, they regard the Clutter murders as the logical, all the more rational consequence of sociological and psychological forces that had gained momentum throughout many years (Reed 107). In this respect one is led to believe that Capote represents Hickcock and Smith as corruptions and moral perversions of decent and respectable men brought about by destitution, ill-treatment and violence that reached back for more than one generation. Contrastingly, the Clutter family also embodies the product of its environment, however, the family history has been characterized by more positive features than those that had frightened the lives of the killers (Reed 107). Here, it is also tempting to remark that the atrocious murder of such an exemplary and successful

American family symbolizes the failure of the American Dream, the triumph of violence, brutality, human degeneracy and pathology over social harmony, order and stability. What still remains puzzling is the question concerning the criminals' motives, or rather their apparent motiveless malignity, unscrupulousness, premeditation, deep-rooted hatred and death obsession. The author is unable to provide any clear answer, leaving the space for his readers, sociologists and psychologists.

The fourth and final part of the novel ("The Corner") deals with the incarceration, various legal complications, procedural difficulties, and ultimate death by hanging of the accused. "The Corner" captures the readers' attention and may constitute a particularly interesting section due to its two methods of documentation. The first of them is a huge portion of the defendants' autobiography, whilst the second is a meticulous psychiatric report on both the prisoners (Reed 107). Such a documentation ineluctably provides convincing credibility and plausibility to the behaviour of the criminals as well as to Truman Capote's narrative itself. Furthermore, the impact of the novel is augmented, to some extent ironically, by a few digressions, not the least of which is the weird account of the Clutter estate auction, and by the apparently irrelevant discovery of the criminal careers of particular death-row companions of Smith and Hickcock at the Kansas state Penitentiary in Lansing. As the auction progresses the author remarks, referring to a bystander statement that the disposal of the family estate mirrored their second funeral. Nevertheless, the gallery of villains anticipating death at the penitentiary unfold through Capote's description of their crimes some sense of the criminal culture out of which the two protagonists had evolved their criminality (Reed 108).

Due to the manifold meaning, character and style of the book *In Cold Blood* does not fall into one generic category. The writer himself regards it as an innovative art form, to which he has given the name "nonfiction novel" (Garson 143). One could agree with such a definition since the work combines the elements of journalism and documentary with the techniques of fiction. The author labels it as imaginative narrative reporting, which is new both to journalism and to fiction. It is interesting to observe that Capote perceived journalism in terms of horizontality- it skims over the surface of things, being topical yet finally throwaway, whereas he maintained that fiction could move simultaneously horizontally and vertically, the narrative momentum being steadily enhanced and enriched by an in-depth investigation of context and character. In dealing with a real-life situation, the novelist endeavoured to combine the best of both literary worlds to devastating effect, as could be seen in his most celebrated novel (Thomson 2011).

One cannot fail to detect Capote's intriguing methods used to establish the reality of the drama he unfolds. Mingling realism, authenticity with novelistic imagination, the

writer provides the facts, yet revealing them not in straightforward newspaper fashion but as a creative artist who selects details and singles out those which best serve the literary purpose, similarly to a painter who repeats a line or colour for meaning, depth and intensity. Interestingly enough, the structural pattern resembles and echoes film technique with its use of flashback and close-ups, its carefully depicted settings, the gathering momentum behind the flee, chase and the capture of the criminals, the crowd scenes and the courtroom episodes (Garson 143). Moreover, it is worth remarking that the tension of the narrative rises as the pursuers – the murderers – change into the pursued, and as they, the victimisers of a small innocent family, fall prey to, in Capote's view, the large bureaucratic system of criminal justice in Kansas.

Taking into account the style of the novel one cannot fail to observe the elements of Southern Gothicism, gothic horror, particularly noticeable in the description of Bobby Rupp's visit to the Phillips' Funeral Home where he finds the four coffins of the murdered Clutter family, and the head of each victim encased in a huge ball of cotton to conceal the mutilations of shotgun blasts:

The four coffins, which quite filled the small, flowe-crowded parlor, were to be sealed at the funeral services – very understandably, for despite the care taken with the appearance of the victims, the effect achieved was disquieting. Nancy wore her dress of cherry-red velvet, her brother a bright plaid shirt; the parents were more sedately attired, Mr. Clutter in navy-blue flannel, his wife in navy-blue crepe; and – and it was this, especially, that lent the scene an awful aura – the head of each was completely encased in cotton, a swollen cocoon twice the size of an ordinary blown-up balloon, and the cotton, because it had been sprayed with a glossy substance, twinkled like Christmas-tree snow. (Capote 93)

The above excerpt illustrates Capote's literary artistry, his excelling at building tension and terror, yet simultaneously controlling the narrative by distancing himself from the events and characters described.

In conclusion it should be stated that *In Cold Blood* remains a vivid, unsettling and memorable novel due to its intriguing crime subject matter, enigmatic plot, dramatic setting, and perhaps most importantly, a complex, profound and gloomy picture of the murderers, the main characters of the story. As was previously pointed out, Truman Capote's work constitutes an in-depth sociological, philosophical and psychological study of crime, the nature of the evil and a spiritual journey to the human psyche, particularly the criminal's mentality which still remains unexplored and inscrutable.

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