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**Essay Two – *In Cold Blood***

Before writing *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote’s works were described as having “unrealistic characters, fanciful plots, and [an] indifference to moral and societal issues” (Garson). Although those are not terrible qualities, they do not describe a well written non-fiction novel. Capote, however, does a one-eighty when publishing *In Cold Blood*. Capote artistically delivers a factual recount of the Clutter family’s murder in 1959, delving into the lives and childhoods of the murderers. More specifically, through flashbacks and changes in point of view, Capote gives a deeper understanding to the mental instability of Perry Smith, based on his life growing up. Capote’s message about the growth and stability of a person’s childhood reflects his own personal experiences in connection with Smith’s character. The attitude conveyed by Capote reflects his stance on the murders and offers a different explanation for the crimes committed by Smith and Hickock.

Within *In Cold Blood*, the details of the Clutter’s murders are described from multiple points of view using different tones. In “The Last to See Them Alive”, the murder scene is portrayed using a third person omniscient point of view: “At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them—four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives.” (Capote, 5). This contributes to the passive tone Capote conveys. The nonchalant attitude used towards the Clutter’s murders relays the mere abruptness of them. The omniscient narrator acts as if these murders are no big deal because no residents knew about them yet; that “not a soul…heard them” (Capote, 5). This mirrors how the trial disregarded the psychiatrist’s diagnoses of Dick and Perry, as if they were no big deal. If these reports were included in the trials, however, there may have been a different outcome. Capote includes these to remind readers that there was a possibility that this was not just a random act—these men had something seriously wrong with them that could have willed them to commit these crimes.

Capote also uses first person, specifically through Perry Smith to describe tense, serious moments. This is shown by Smith’s recount of the murders: while he is confessing to the murders, Smith goes on and on about every last detail of the night. In comparison with omniscient narrator, Smith sounds angry after realizing he hadn’t remembered correctly: “’Wait. I’m not telling it the way it was.’ Perry scowls.” (Capote, 244). This connects back to the mental state of the murderers; Smith has a slight sense of obsessive-compulsive disorder, having to get every last detail correct. Capote includes this instability to remind the readers that although he did murder an entire family, these acts may have been due to another underlying cause, aside from the encouragement of Dick Hickock.

Some of the vulnerability Perry Smith’s character experiences can be related back to his childhood. All throughout *In Cold Blood*, flashbacks are utilized to detail the adolescence of Smith. Smith was the recipient of constant abuse from his mother and father. Smith’s father abused his mother, however, who is to say he didn’t receive it, too. After running away with her children, Smith’s mother committed suicide, forcing her children to be put into an orphanage. It was at this orphanage where Smith was abused “because of wetting the bed” (Capote, 132). Smith also recalls following his father around the country, after being pulled from this orphanage, where he is not able to go to school on a regular basis and is abused, both physically and mentally, by his father. Capote uses these flashbacks to give the reader insight and a more in-depth analysis on the murderers, however, Smith recalls these memories as a reason for his circumstances as an adult. As seen later in the novel, Smith still struggles with sucking his thumb and wetting the bed, which is an example of how his childhood trauma still affects him in his adult life. Because of this, there is evidence that the abuse and neglect received from his mother and father could have been a reason for his instable mind as an adult; Smith never really “grew up”.

Capote also includes point of view from Alvin Dewey to represent how he and many residents of Holcomb felt before and after the trials of Smith and Hickock. The Clutter’s murders were very personal to Dewey because he knew and went to Church with them every Sunday, as did many other residents of Holcomb. However, Dewey recalled that “even if [he] hadn’t known the family and liked them so well, [he] wouldn’t feel any different. Because [he’s] seen some bad things…but nothing so vicious as [that]” (Capote, 80). Dewey goes on to say that “however long it takes, it may be the rest of [his] life, [he’s] going to know what happened in that house: the why and the who.” (Capote, 80). Dewey does end up finding out who and why they killed the Clutters, however, it “failed to satisfy his sense of meaningful design” (Capote, 245). It is interesting, though, because, even after their executions, Dewey had no closure because he felt as though the courts explanation, that they were murdered to eliminate witnesses to a robbery, was fake. This is another reason Capote probably included the psychiatrist’s reports; people could take comfort in the fact that the Clutter’s weren’t just randomly murdered for fun, mental illness had a significant role.

The circumstances put in place by Perry Smith’s parents were not new to author, Truman Capote. He is seen to connect with Smith’s character, and is why I believe Capote emphasizes the murderer’s backstories. Capote grew up very similarly to Smith: “The early years of both Smith and Capote were nomadic. Both hungered to escape from poverty and obscurity. Both were estranged from their fathers, neglected by their mothers. Both had talents which went unrecognized and therefore unencouraged.” (McAleer). Like Smith, Capote was dragged around the country by his parent who was on a quest for love, adventures, and employment (Allen). Capote “had an intense fear of being abandoned” and “remember[ed] practically all of [his] childhood as being lived in a state of constant tension and fear” (Allen). This further emphasizes why Capote included the Smith’s background and his mental stability.

Because Capote also went through some of the same struggles as Smith, the readers are able to connect on a deeper, more personal level with the murderer. Although he did kill someone, Capote brings in this sense of normalcy with his personal connection to Smith. Harper Lee, who was with Capote during his assessment of the Clutter’s murder, believed that “every time Truman looked at Perry he saw his own childhood” (McAleer). Since Capote and Smith had a very similar upbringing, it brings the point that if Capote ended up normal, why didn’t Smith? The answer, as alluded to by Capote with the inclusion of the psychiatrist’s reports, is mental illness. Capote also had many similarities with Smith on the sexual level. During interviews, Smith questioned Capote about his sex life and he did not hold back: “I told him honestly in great detail all about myself—some of own problems were very close to his. He could see I was very sincere.” (Nance). Seeing how close Capote got with Smith, it further solidifies why Capote tries so hard to make the reader understand that mental illness played a role in this tragedy. Capote wants the reader to see Smith as a human being and not just a murderer.

In *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote truly wants the reader to take into account how mental illness can affect a person’s life. Capote also shows, through flashbacks, how childhood experiences can shape the life of a person. Capote connects with Perry Smith and particularly wants the reader to understand why he murdered this family “in cold blood”. Although *In Cold Blood*, is a factual recount of the Clutter family’s murder, Capote utilizes techniques like tone, point of view, and plot to demonstrate the underlying message of the text: mental illness has a significant impact on the actions of people and we should not discount the back stories of people with these diseases.

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