

Małgorzata Olsza

## **A Cold Look at the American Society: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* between Document and Metaphor**

In many ways, *In Cold Blood* (1965) marks the height of Capote's literary career: highly anticipated by reviewers and readers alike, it was both a financial and a critical success. Indeed, 1966 apparently belonged to Capote, who was hailed as a genius and an author of a masterpiece (Garson 1). Part of the publicity and excitement was, and perhaps still is, associated with the work's supposed genre. Namely, *In Cold Blood* was the first non-fiction novel—a story meant to tell “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” Although the formula was quickly adopted by other writers, in America and abroad, the novel's generic affiliation also aroused controversy. This article analyzes the novel in terms of its genre(s) and the consequences of the generic tension. I claim that *In Cold Blood* is an essentially a hybrid literary form, combining the traditions of non-fiction (documentary) writing and the Gothic. This generic instability manifests itself in the literary techniques employed, as well as in the treatment of both form and subject matter, thus transforming a narrative of a singular event into a work of a universal dimension.

The theoretical framework for the subsequent close reading is twofold, comprising documentary writings (with history and journalism as its exemplary forms) and the Gothic, treated as a tool for metaphorizing the repressed. Thus, to paraphrase Barthes, I intend to demonstrate the creation of “non-fictionality” effect, as opposed to the re-creation of the events. The analysis of the Gothic poetics will, in turn, saturate the image of *In Cold Blood* with darker tones, thus turning it into a multidimensional work of art. Firstly, it is essential to address the controversies excited by the juxtaposition of two genres as divergent as non-fiction and the Gothic. At first glance, their coexistence within one text seems implausible, since one belongs firmly in the domain of fiction, whereas the other opposes the very idea of fictionality. Still, *In Cold Blood* manages to defy the constraining generic categories discussed by Derrida in *The Law of Genre*.

“Genres are not to be mixed,” Derrida states ironically (55), postulating that the classical definition of genre assumes a certain limitation and purity which

results from the rules imposed by the category.<sup>1</sup> Such an understanding indeed forbids any transgression, contamination or contradiction; consequently, any defiant work will seem deformed or abnormal. What this also implies is that these categories are natural, stable, and correct, while, as Derrida points out, they are in fact constructs, perpetuated through constant repetition and ambivalent in their very nature (60). Derrida acknowledges the blurring of genre boundaries and approves of the effect of “impurity, anomaly... monstrosity” (57). And the genre which Capote’s work represents is definitely a “monstrous” one: born out of contention, the novel embraces and exploits generic impurity, constituting a completely new hybrid category in which the seemingly contradictory traditions intertwine.

Indeed, generic tension manifests itself already in the novel’s full title, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences*. The mention of “a true account” and “consequences” invokes the category of non-fiction and reports of undiluted truth, while phrases such as “in cold blood” and “a multiple murder” carry Gothic connotations.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Capote’s entire *oeuvre* is essentially composed of two types of texts, the non-fiction and journalistic pieces written for *The New Yorker* and other American magazines, and the Gothic, or dark, novels and stories, such as *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). *In Cold Blood* is neither type, or on the contrary, it is both at the same time, with much of the book’s appeal deriving from the strained relationship between the genres. Non-fiction elements aim at actualizing events, while the Gothic strives to universalize them: Capote both (re)constructs an actual story and endows it with a deeper meaning.

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1 The very concept of the genre stems from the natural sciences; hence the rigor and seriousness associated with the category. Indeed, as Todorov claims in *The Fantastic*, “[g]enres are precisely those relay-points by which the work assumes a relation with the universe of literature” (8) and as such should be clear markers of what a given work essentially is. According to Derrida, “[a]s soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: ‘Do,’ ‘Do not’ says ‘genre,’ the word ‘genre,’ the figure, the voice, or the law of genre” (56).

2 For the discussion of the novel as a work of non-fiction see in-depth studies by Wiegand and Malin (*Truman Capote’s ‘In Cold Blood’*), which challenged the book’s documentary status. The body of critical literature devoted to the Gothic in Capote’s work is, unfortunately, much smaller, mostly comprising succinct observations. Malin briefly comments on the issue in his *Truman Capote’s ‘In Cold Blood’* (63, 71, 101). Similarly, Charles Crow limits his comments to declaring that Capote “claimed to have invented a genre of non-fiction novel, though the work draws on the traditions of... the Gothic” (161). More in-depth and recent studies regarding the Gothic status of the novel are provided by Michaud (2009) and Voss (2011).

Neither of the genres dominates, yet they are not reconciled either, exploring the boundary of coding history.

A short journalistic note published on November 17, 1965, headlined, “Wealthy farmer, 3 of family slain,” inspired the work. In its entirety, the note read: “A wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged” (qtd. in Clarke 317). This subject allowed Capote to take a critical look at the modern United States—“it’s what I really think about America,” the author claimed in an interview (qtd. Garret 474). Thus, a singular event, an exceptional fact, was metaphorized into a text containing an implicit diagnosis of the American mind.

### The Complexities of Non-Fiction Writing

“To be a good creative reporter,” Capote once said, “you have to be a very good fiction writer” (Plimton): in fact, the two traditions have always been intertwined and mutually inspiring. Still, the claim of non-fictionality invokes the fundamental questions of objectivity, truth, faithfulness, and reliability, which continue to be crucial for the discussion of Capote’s novel. The non-fiction category itself encompassing a broad spectrum of works (essays, diaries, documentaries, history, photography, biography, autobiography, and journalism) proves elusive, to say the least. The only essential prerequisite concerns, so to speak, the ontological status of the text: its origins must be traceable to fact and reality.<sup>3</sup> The dynamics of the unwelcome but necessary cross-over between truth and embellishment thus generates a number of research problems oscillating around the fact/fiction boundary. Ernst H. Gombrich postulates that “[t]here is no reality without interpretation” (307). While such a claim merely inspires new readings when applied to the imaginative realm of the visual arts, it proves problematic when employed in the realm of non-fiction writing. Indeed, the mechanics of combining fiction with non-fiction have been addressed in a number of ways.

Scholars of history such as Paul Ricoeur or Hayden White claim that not only is it virtually impossible to demarcate a boundary between the two spheres, but that the existence of history cannot be imagined without its drawing on literature. Ricoeur in fact claims that it is through “the organization of events by emplotment” that history makes sense to the reader (20). Developing this idea, White states that “[a] true narrative account... is less a product of the historian’s

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3 Paweł Zajas discusses the question of non-fiction as a genre in *Jak świat prawdziwy stał się bajką: o literaturze niefikcyjnej* (18–25).

poetic talents, as the narrative account of imaginary events is conceived to be, than it is a necessary result of a proper application of historical ‘method’” (27). Thus, the co-existence of facts and their subjective interpretation—a reworking necessary to present a given story as a comprehensible whole—seems inevitable.

Another “legitimation” of merging fact and fiction can be found in the works associated with the New Journalism, a trend which favored subjectivity over objectivity in reporting<sup>4</sup> and drew on techniques hitherto associated with fiction. The goal was to “reconstruct the experience as it might have unfolded” (Hollowell 25) instead of providing a factual account: re-creation, if not creation, replaced objective accounts, while gaps in the narration were filled with invention.

With its extensive use of literary devices and techniques, the highly complex category of non-fiction is far from an objective and faithful account of facts. Thus, unsurprisingly, the seemingly non-fictional façade of *In Cold Blood* conceals a deeper narrative and structural content. Through emplotment, Capote destabilizes the established notions of a documentary story, complicating them further through the inclusion of elements associated with the American Gothic. Both traditions, albeit varied in their generic features, carry a potential for coding history and destabilizing perceptions of reality.

### Repression and Disclosure: The Gothic as a Black Mirror

Among the leading critics who have theorized the Gothic, Leslie Fiedler, Irving Malin and Anne Williams have acknowledged the genre’s “metaphorical” powers—its ability to explore the hidden and unrealized areas of the psyche, race, gender and sexuality. “It is the gothic form,” Fiedler observes, “that has been most fruitful in the hands of our best writers: the gothic *symbolically* understood, its machinery and décor translated into metaphors for a terror psychological, social, and metaphysical” (28). Similarly, Malin emphasizes that American Gothic writers “are aware of tensions between ego and super-ego, self and society; they study the field of psychological conflict” (*New American Gothic* 5) and reflect these anxieties by creating a disrupted world. Williams, in turn, expands on the psychoanalytical theory of Julia Kristeva and interprets the meanings of classic Gothic tropes in their relation to the Symbolic. Through its engagement with the other, Williams argues, the Gothic suspends the Symbolic order, and thus mean-

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4 “One significant direction the new writing took was toward documentary forms, eyewitness reports, and personal and confessional narratives. The work of certain novelists, as well as that of certain journalists, reflects an unusual degree of self-consciousness about the writer’s role in society” (Hollowell 5).

ing, and transports the reader into the primal sphere of what Kristeva defines as the poetic or the Semiotic:

the familiar Gothic trappings of darkness, the supernatural, the haunted castle, and so on, all express, in their various ways, the tension between the Symbolic and the inexpressible other—the female, the maternal, the ‘Semiotic.’ Gothic is a discourse that shows cracks in the system that constitutes consciousness, ‘reality.’ Gothic, therefore, is a ‘poetic’ tradition in Kristeva’s sense of language disrupted by the Semiotic. (66)

The return of the repressed is essential to Gothic dynamics, as it signals the breakdown of reality and realism, with the Gothic tropes functioning as a complex metaphor for the established order and its defects. Apart from castles and ghosts, the essential Gothic iconography includes uncanny settings, cursed houses, as well as various forms of otherness and monstrosity (in modern Gothic fiction the other is often portrayed as the killer).<sup>5</sup> All these, present also in Capote’s work, function as representations of human, communal and social fears, as well as repressed memories. Indeed, the Gothic translates the underlying darkness into complex artistic conventions, proving to be a mode for “discussing some of the key issues of American society” (Crow 1). The Gothic novel is thus a black mirror that offers an abstracted, distorted and inverted reflection of the world; one can still see “reality” but endowed with piercing metaphorical qualities.

### **Document: A (Re)Creation of the Factual World**

“Writing has laws of perspective, of light and shade, just as painting does” Truman Capote once remarked (qtd. in Hill) when asked the importance of composition in literature. The non-fiction novel is no exception; some form of artificiality, organization, narration, and literary editing must be imposed on raw verity. In other words, Capote does not present the reader with a slice of real life captured instinctively without much consideration, but rather with a work carefully composed and executed with skill.

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- 5 Nicola Nixon observes that the killer’s image in the real and in fiction is in fact highly influenced by the Gothic mode, the latter supplying writers with the imagery and tropes from which the character of the killer is constructed. “If the on-going assumption is that the killer is not what he seems, that he is “excitingly dire” behind the mere illusion of ordinariness,” Nixon writes, “it shouldn’t surprise us that the writers about serial killers turn to the rearticulation of the nineteenth-century as both a paradigm and a constellation of metaphors.... As ‘literary solutions,’ in other words, gothic figures flesh out with fiction what is otherwise unavailable in the real” (224).

An analysis of the documentary and non-fictional elements in Capote's novel ought to begin with structure—its emplotment. The composition of *In Cold Blood*<sup>6</sup> includes four parts ("The last to see them alive," "Persons unknown," "Answer" and "The corner"). These titles are the first instances of dramatization, imposing interpretation on a series of events. "The last to see them alive" treats of the events before and directly after the murder. It does not describe the violent act itself, but involves only the accounts of those who learned about the crime afterward. "Persons unknown" relates the investigation of the murder conducted by Al Dewey, the chief detective, and the proceedings of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation. These events again are related simultaneously with the accounts of the traumatized residents of Holcomb, of the funeral, and of the murderers' shifting whereabouts, familiarizing the reader with the characters of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. "Answer" tells of the finding and identification of Smith and Hickock as suspects, which results in their arrest: this part culminates in the murderers' confession and Smith's testimony of the killings. "The corner," finally, recounts the murderers' trial, last days and execution. The focus constantly shifts from Smith, to Hickock, to Dewey, and to the Holcomb community. The execution finally takes place, six years after the crime, but the hanging is not the definite and conclusive image with which Capote leaves the reader: *In Cold Blood* ends with Al Dewey visiting the Holcomb graveyard and pondering upon the passage of time and the strange ways of life.

Framing the story into a classical four-part structure allows Capote to impose a certain rhythm upon it. As Garrett observes, the first three sections progress swiftly and easily, with a counterpoint provided by the final, longest section (468). The suspense is retained despite the narrative's clearly defined direction, as Capote mentions "four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives" early on (17). The murder of the Clutter family and the execution of Smith and Hickock determine the novel's starting and ending points: the novel progresses from one death to another. It constitutes both a compositional procedure and a hint at the Gothic affiliation, reminding one of the novel's generic tension.

On the literary level, the four titles all correspond to the respective sections' content and, to some degree, foretell the occurrences. However, the titles also reveal an intriguing play of double meanings, pointing to the importance of interpretation and the ambivalent status of what is called a fact. Each of the titles can be read in a twofold manner, as they gradually acquire deeper meanings. "The last to see them alive" alludes to the victims' last day as seen

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6 *In Cold Blood* was first published in four installments in *The New Yorker*. The first part of the text appeared in the September 25, 1965 issue and the entire book was published by Random House in 1966.

by the neighbors and the murderers, but also as “seen” by the writer and the reader: an apt and realistic (re)construction created by the author, who imposed coherence on individual witness accounts. The “Persons unknown” are unknown to the police, but familiar to the reader. Similarly, the reader does not need an “answer” concerning the perpetrators, as s/he knows either identity from the very beginning—ironically, this answer is required only by the characters in the story. The “corner” signifies a literal, symbolic, and structural end of the two main characters and, consequently, of the narrative. This play with meanings indicates that the writer is fully aware of the mechanics of the narrative and is not afraid to exploit them. It is also an ironic testimony to the fact that the more objective, realistic and authentic the narrative strives to be, the more its status as fiction is revealed.

The first section begins with rather detailed, bird’s-eye-view descriptions of Kansas and Holcomb. The perspective subsequently narrows down to focus exclusively on Holcomb and its everyday life, institutions, and residents, only to allude to the murders at the end of paragraph five (17). At this moment, the convention of a “small-town America” story, chosen by the author as much for its obvious cultural connotations as for its ironic effect, splits into two separate narratives. The first seems to be a classical story of a perfect hardworking American family, but Capote challenges and ultimately deconstructs such associations. This storyline appears almost unreal and even farcical when intertwined and confronted with the second narrative, that of the murderers. “What took place in Holcomb was a nightmare collision of two incompatible Americas,” Tynan remarks, “the land of heart loving, God-fearing families and the land of vengeful, anarchic outcasts” (130). There is to be no unified image of the world in this narrative; yet, the division into two storylines brings not only perplexity but also a faster and more nervous rhythm.

Momentum and tension both grow with the numerous, successive shifts in perspective. First, the reader learns more and more about the Clutter family. The past and present of the clan are recounted, the atmosphere of peace and prosperity emphasized, or perhaps subtly mocked, with Mr. Clutter’s remark that this country could be “paradise—Eden on earth” (24). The tragic aspect of this observation in the face of future events is one among numerous instances of dramatic irony,<sup>7</sup> which yet again points to the text’s status as a construct.

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7 Virtually every transition from passages treating of the Clutter family to the Smith-and-Hickock sections is marked with an ironic statement. For example: “[a] bookmark lay between its pages [the Bible], a stiff piece of watered silk upon which an admonition had been embroidered: ‘Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is’” (41).



In contrast to the classic introductory description of the Clutter family, the two other important persons of the drama are deliberately kept in the shadows. At first, Hickock and Smith are only referred to as “the young men” or by personal pronouns and their first names are disclosed only after some time (Capote 25–26). That notwithstanding, once the actors take the stage, the plot settles into its proper rhythm. The sections about the Clutter family life are both contrasted with and complemented by the anxiety-filled sections describing the actions of Hickock and Smith, who are approaching Holcomb and the farm. The short, dynamic paragraph in which the two intertwining stories culminate reads as follows:

‘This is it, this is it, this has to be it, there’s the school, there’s the garage, now we turn south.’ To Perry it seemed as though Dick was muttering jubilant mumbo-jumbo. They left the highway, sped through a deserted Holcomb, and crossed the Santa Fe tracks. ‘The bank, that must be the bank, now we turn west—see the trees? This is it, this has to be it.’ The headlights disclosed a lane of Chinese elms; bundles of wind-blown thistle scurried across it. Dick doused the headlights, slowed down, and stopped until his eyes were adjusted to the moon-illuminated night. Presently, the car crept forward. (68)

This section is filled with animated verbal exchanges, constituting a condensed if highly realistic scene conveyed through the “right here, right now” convention, implying the immediacy of the experience, challenged by the use of the past tense. Thus, a curious mixture of past and present, of distance and directness, is created. While the present contributes to the perceived sense of the instantaneousness and thus produces an effect of the absolute, unmediated and unprocessed truth, the use of the past tense points to a conscious arrangement and alteration of the story. The conflict and interdependency of events and their structuring, of chaos and order—an inherent feature of non-fiction—is presented here with particular intensity.

Another shift in viewpoint occurs after this meaningful passage. The murder itself is not described in the following paragraph, due to a highly skilled use of ellipsis. The Clutters’ perspective is now obviously impossible, and to continue with the Hickock-and-Smith storyline would rob the text of its power: instead, Capote describes the day following the crime, with the unsuspecting village community going about its business up until the discovery. However, the incident is still not recounted by means of a unified narrative, but through a bricolage of narrative voices, as if the Holcomb community has replaced the Clutter family in the narrative. Thus, the fundamental tension between the two Americas is retained.

“The last to see them alive” may serve as the model for the narrative structure employed in the remaining three sections of the novel, since the techniques and



effects used in Part One—such as dramatic irony, perspective shifts and contrasts, ellipsis, and polyphony of voices—are all present in “Persons unknown,” “Answer” and “The corner.” Interestingly enough, in the (re)construction of the novel’s individual parts, Capote adheres to the conventional development of dramatic narrative, as far as the exposition, introduction of conflict, and rising action are concerned, but he repeatedly tinkers with the climax. The climax of the first part—the murder and, more specifically, its description—is moved to Part Three, while the climax of Part Two (the ultimate result of the conducted investigation, i.e. the execution of the murderers) is transposed to Part Four. Even though the two aforementioned critical points are not climaxes in the traditional sense, as the reader is familiar with the course of events throughout, they still manifestly demand a presence, and otherwise render the narrative incomplete. Yet, through the author’s strategy even such a conventional narrative scheme is made more dramatic.

With events manipulated into a plot, the novel’s ultimate indicator of non-fictionality is the “Acknowledgments” where Capote addresses the reader directly stating that “[a]ll the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned” (9). Thus, to paraphrase Lejeune, the author establishes “the non-fictional pact,” promising the reader absolute truthfulness which, however, is contradicted by the constructed narrative. Actual events are embedded in the overwhelming structure of fictionality: the pact is heralded but not fulfilled. Indeed, the author selects, composes and positions all elements much in the same way as a painter uses color, perspective, light and shade to accentuate some events and occlude others. The picture painted by Capote might be a realist one, in the sense that it portrays life with the intention of fidelity, yet it remains a picture: an artificial (re)creation.

### **Metaphor: A Gothic World in the Making**

A skillful “painter” that he is, Capote does not confront the reader directly with a crude vision of darkness, but rather draws them steadily into the Gothic world of America by means of carefully applied themes, motifs and imagery. With its grand aesthetic and metaphorical potential, the Gothic at least partly opens the door to the domain of fiction, supposedly locked and sealed with the promises of factuality, thus counterpoising the documentary. It records the timeless and the universal in Capote’s story, portrays the confrontation of the two Americas, probes and exposes societal fears. It is at this point that “behind the mask of the dispassionate reporter we can begin to make out the excited stare

of the southern-gothic novelist with his febrile delight in weird settings and lurid details" (Tanner).

A constant generic tension present in the novel and most explicitly expressed in its title is echoed on the structural level at the novel's very beginning. A juxtaposition of document and metaphor is expressed through the appearance of the "Acknowledgments," signifying non-fictionality, next to a quote from Francois Villon's *Ballade des pendus*, yielding a macabre and grotesque charm so characteristic of the Gothic. Even before the novel begins, one is made aware of its double nature. Gothic traits are further present in the portrayal of Holcomb. The small town—albeit real—may constitute a synecdoche for the entire nation, given the town's central location in the United States. Its description, therefore, only ostensibly adheres to the facts and is intriguingly lined with fear and dread, thus contributing to the tension between the singular and the symbolic. A serene small town is transformed into a place with many disturbing features, a place whose stillness is another mask. Helen Garson points to "the unseen and hidden darkness gathering around the victims" (144)—or indeed, one might add, around the entire community. Short passages, single sentences, well-chosen adjectives or verbs contribute to this effect: "[a]fter the rain, or when snowfalls thaw, the streets, unnamed, unshaded, unpaved, turn from the thickest dust into the direst mud" (15). In these unnamed and hostile streets stand the reminders of the community's former greatness: the neglected dancing hall and the closed bank. Their ruined signboards are signals of decay, transience and gradual disintegration of town and society. It is not nostalgia that is evoked here, but anxiety. The rest of the town is presented as "equally melancholy" with "the keening hysteria of coyotes, the dry scrape of scuttling tumbleweed, the racing, receding wail of locomotive whistles" (16–17) heard at night. Lonesome, secluded, almost lifeless, strangely terrifying at nights—that is the place to which Capote transports his readers.

Another facet worthy of attention is the treatment of family relations and household spaces. On the most literal level, the fact that an entire family is brutally murdered in their own home immediately suggests Gothic connections. Indeed, Capote develops a complex analysis of a family drama, addressing the issues of history, gender relations and patriarchal rule. With the initial assumption that at the heart of the story lies the clash of two Americas, entwined in a tight deathly embrace,<sup>8</sup> Capote sets out to describe the two faces of the conflict—the Clutters and "the others"—extruding dark tones from either party.

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8 Capote described the conflict as follows: "The Clutters were such a perfect set of symbols for every frustration in his [Perry Smith's] life. As Perry himself said, 'I didn't have anything against them, and they never did anything wrong to me—the way other people have all my life. Maybe they're just the ones who had to pay for it'" (Plimpton).

At first glance, the Clutters seem a quintessential example of a happy and successful American family: moderately rich, hard-working, church-going, community-engaged and respected by their neighbors, they represent the virtues of the American society. Yet, as implied in the description of Holcomb—a perfect small town in theory, a haunted Gothic space in fact—darkness underlies every manifestation of the apparent “normality.” Mr. Clutter, the head of the family, is portrayed as patriarchal and overbearing. The familial house constitutes his space, designed and built by him. As Capote states, it was the house that “impressed Holcomb; it was a place people pointed out” (21). It belongs to Mr. Clutter both literally and figuratively and it is only gradually that the reader learns about the other family members who live there. The most unusual of the Clutters, and simultaneously the one that evokes the most compassion, is Mrs. Bonnie Clutter, first seen by the reader through her husband’s eyes as a strange element in an otherwise conventional family:

In regard to his family, Mr. Clutter had just one serious cause for disquiet—his wife’s health. She was ‘nervous,’ she suffered little spells—such were the sheltering expressions used by those close to her. Not that the truth concerning ‘poor Bonnie’s afflictions’ was in the least a secret; everyone knew she had been an on-and-off psychiatric patient the last half-dozen years...—the tension, the withdrawals, the pillow-muted sobbing behind locked doors[.] (19)

Mr. Clutter associates his wife’s state with external factors—in an attempt to regard the “afflictions” as a medically curable (i.e. rationally explicable) illness, he refuses to make any connections between Bonnie’s mental problems and her immediate environment—the family. Transformed by Capote into a Gothic character, “a mad woman in the attic,” when still alive,<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Clutter becomes a literal ghost, haunting the neighbors with every appearance.

Furthermore, the Clutters are never portrayed as a closely-knit community. Rather, each withdraws into his or her reclusive space: Mr. Clutter into his office; Mrs. Clutter into her bedroom, the daughter Nancy into the kitchen and her bedroom, and the son Kenyon into the cellar. According to McAleer, “[h]ere, indeed, is a household the occupants of which are leading ‘lives of quiet desperation’” (213). Therefore, this perfect all-American family has its dark and shameful mysteries and its inner disintegration had started long before the mur-

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9 The tension between non-fiction and the Gothic tension finds its confirmation in the two oldest Clutter children’s reaction to the novel. As Voss observes, they “especially disliked the way Capote portrayed their mother as emotionally very fragile and one-dimensional, a view shared by Bonnie Clutter’s brother, Howard Fox, who told a reporter, ‘I know who she was. Other people don’t because of that book’” (144–145).

derers reached Holcomb. Symptomatically, it is only once that the reader meets the Clutter family all assembled together—in very gruesome circumstances:

The four coffins, which quite filled the small, flower-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—it was this, especially, that lent the scene an awful aura—the head of which 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. (103)

Capote paints a truly dark picture here: the disintegrated family are finally seen together as their bodies are deposited in caskets. The entire scene, charged with dark and powerful undertones, brings together the issues crucial for the idea of the family in the novel. Firstly, the episode is a metaphor of the family's estrangement. It removes the family from the domain of the reality and realism to transform it by means of the Gothic imagery into a powerful symbol of an average American family. With their heads and faces enclosed in white fabric, the family loses its individuality and becomes a shrouded token of the failed American Dream, if not a warning for other over-confident dreamers. Through an ironic quirk of fate, the deceased are all dressed in national colors: the red of Nancy's dress, the blue of Mr. and Mrs. Clutter's attires, and the white of the cocoons on their heads all combine to form the flag of the United States. At the same time, marking the novel's generic tension, the above fragment is saturated with details worthy of a journalistic account (including numbers, fabrics, and names). Indeed, the Gothic elements encountered throughout the entire novel convert a non-fiction story of one Kansas family into a timeless tale of social drama. From this tragically symbolic image of the deceased in their caskets, Capote leads the reader to the final view of "four graves gathered under a single gray stone... in a far corner of the cemetery" (343): in an unceasing hum of whispering "wind voices," the Clutters continue to haunt their neighbors, by extension all fellow Americans and the reader.

The "monsters" in the story, Hickock and Smith, complete the tragic picture painted by the author but do not constitute its only driving force. Decent middle-class America is also to blame: "the other" that it fears was born dangerously near it. Indeed, one should not be satisfied with a clear-cut division between the good and the bad, the successful and the rejected. By his presentation of the family and his description of the Gothic "monsters" (whose grotesque and repelling features are emphasized as much as are their troubled pasts and toxic

family relations), Capote seems to have blurred the comfortable distinction between “I,” “we” and “the other.” The Clutter and the Smith families were both dysfunctional;<sup>10</sup> thus, the family appears as a symbolic source of threat and an immediate sign of the haunting past. America, Capote seems to suggest, is not a harmonious land of prosperity but a place tormented by desires, ravaged by patriarchy and haunted by pangs of conscience.

There is no reconciliatory ending to the novel, as there is no ease to the tension between non-fiction and the Gothic. The generic composition of *In Cold Blood* not only undermines, but also redefines the traditional notions of the genre. On the one hand, the novel adheres to the rules of both non-fiction and the Gothic and becomes entangled in the problematics inherent to the two literary modes; on the other, it defies the two genres in the very act of their counterpoising. The generic tension suggested by the title, the novel’s organization, Holcomb’s description, and the presentation of the Clutter’s, in fact allows the book to acquire a perspective that is wider and more universal. As Helen Garson aptly observes, “[r]eaders, left with a weight of sadness and loss, recognize that they have been confronted not only with an American tragedy but also the human tragedy, the wanton as well as the inexplicable nature of existence” (164). Indeed, the novel is located between document and metaphor, its cogency lying in the contrast between the two.

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10 Indeed, in a quintessentially Gothic doubling, Mrs. Clutter may act as an equivalent to Perry Smith who, as a homosexual and social outcast, is also “the other” in the patriarchal American society of the late 1950s. This correspondence of the two characters is also observed by Michaud who points out “the mutual alienation of Perry and Bonnie” (161). In turn, Hicks writes that “[v]ictims and murderers—two versions of our founding myths—there are elements of each in the Other and they will not remain comfortably apart” (172).

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