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Review of Capote's In Cold Blood

Yevgeniy Mayba

Masterfully combining fiction and journalism, Truman Capote delivers a riveting account of the senseless mass murder that occurred on November 15, 1959 in the quiet rural town of Holcomb, Kansas. Refusing to accept the inherent lack of suspense in his work, Capote builds the tension with the brilliant use of imagery and detailed exploration of the characters. The long and detailed accounts of the remote emptiness that surrounds the town of Holcomb instill the sense of peacefulness and quiet. Through these images Capote skillfully creates a background of calmness for the inevitable account of tragedy and senseless crime.

Where simple words of the newspaper articles fail to convey the utter shock and the atrocity of crimes that belong to the world of inner city slums and the imagination of fiction writers, Capote's rendition of the events creates a staggering contrast that chills to the bone. The windswept plains and starry nights that he describes in great detail evoke the feelings of security and tranquility. Set against that background is a life of a family whose existence not only embodies the values and clichés of an American dream and honest hard work, but also denies the possibility of evil. The detailed account of Clutters' life creates an involuntary bond that amplifies the real and yet larger-than-life tragedy.

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Capote does not suspend the details of gore; he does not tease and postpone the presentation of the massacre that occurred amidst the serenity that he meticulously constructs. Instead, when the time comes and the murders are about to take place, he avoids describing them altogether, forcing the reader to face the tragedy alone and to accept it as nonnegotiable and certain. That certainty and the seeming ease with which he transitions to describing the aftermath of the massacre force a chilling realization that contrary to all desires, time cannot be stopped and events past cannot be changed.

Capote does eventually disclose the details of that fateful night; however, remaining an impartial narrator, he does so through the confessions of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. By choosing to present the gruesome details in the same manner as they were discovered by the investigators, Capote sacrifices suspense to achieve a greater degree of realism. The description of the murders is still shocking, but it no longer carries the same degree of bitterness as the resignation to the random cruelty of life sets in. The confessions are delivered following the hectic crime-filled, cross-country ride by Dick and Perry and the beautifully crafted scene of the auction where the imagery of the fresh green grass rising out of the spring mud reminds of the continuity of life and the resiliency of the community. Peaceful and dignified in its perseverance, the community of Holcomb recovers from the initial shock of the murder and moves towards recovery and forgiveness. They do not gather to lynch the two murderers when they are brought back to Kansas from Nevada. What few people remain to see them arrive do so solely out of curiosity and to obtain some semblance of closure.

Capote refuses to settle on writing for the entertainment of the masses; he is creating a masterpiece where not a single stroke

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is placed until he is completely confident that it is perfect. The degree of sophistication in his writing indicates his desire to appeal to the more educated reader. Along with his dedication to the depth of his characters, that conscious effort moves his novel from the realm of monotonous mass-produced paperbacks to a completely different plane, a plane void of closure and reminiscent of the painful realities of true life and true crime. Instead of creating just another nightstand novel that provides readers with diversion and satisfies curiosity, he provokes thoughtful discussion of crime as a societal phenomenon.

The emphasis on crime as a product of social issues is particularly prevalent in Capote's obvious favoritism of Perry Smith. Perry's story is mentioned in great detail repeatedly, while Dick's background is given briefly and only on a few occasions. The selection of the material included heavily favors Perry. Abandoned by his own mother and berated by her for his apparent lack of masculinity, Capote clearly forms a much stronger bond with him. He chooses to reveal Perry's sensitive side to the reader, while overlooking sympathy-evoking incidents of Dick's life. He describes at great length the squirrel that Perry befriends and trains to do tricks. He details time and time again the childhood horrors of Perry's life. He even recounts a psychological study that mirrors Perry's case and casts doubt on Perry's culpability for the slaying of the Clutters. Capote alludes to the fact that Dick was a good father and loved playing with children but does so only once through the testimony of Dick's father, while testimonies and means of delivering them in Perry's case are both numerous and diverse.

Capote is not altogether biased towards Perry and does not openly excuse the horrible crime that he has committed. He includes the dialogue in which Perry's sister states that she is

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afraid of him and that while he can be charming, he does have a dark and frightening side to him. He also includes Perry's statements that allude to the fact that he would gladly kill his sister if given an opportunity. Yet, such accounts of his brutality are short and are often lost amidst the long narratives that evoke sympathy and diminish his responsibility. It is this favoritism that ultimately distinguishes this novel from the majority of true-crime fiction and elicits involuntary sympathy towards the seemingly irredeemable character.

By concentrating not only on the facts of the case, but also delving deep into the minds of those involved in the case, Capote blurs the conventional distinctions between good and evil. Instead, he chooses to portray the slaying of the Clutters as that which it truly was, a real life tragedy. As is oftentimes the case in real life, there are no monsters and no heroes; there are only people capable of being good, evil and everything in between. Despite the fact that the detailed exploration of the characters that are doomed to perish creates incredible tension and a desire to search for a protagonist, Capote stays true to the original events. Instead of portraying the investigators as hard-charging crime solving heroes, he chooses to show them as they are in real life: human and capable of being confused and tired. Instead of captivating with gruesome details and the prevalence of good over evil, he chooses to depict a much stranger subject. He explores real life with all of its unpredictability, randomness, cruelty and perseverance, and most importantly, redemption and continuity.

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Yevgeniy was born in Moscow, Russia and moved to San Jose with his family in 1998. He attended Cupertino High School and De Anza College before transferring to San Jose State University in 2007. Seeing the benefit of military service in the field of law enforcement, he enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2008. He was honorably discharged in 2012 and resumed his studies at SJSU. He is majoring in Justice Studies and is looking forward to graduating in Fall 2013 and utilizing his skills and knowledge to build a successful career in either a local or federal law enforcement agency. He enjoys reading, strategy games, and playing soccer in his free time.

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