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*In Cold Blood*©

Just as it employs other literary techniques – rearranging the chronological order of events, for example – Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* employs various forms of characterization to create what the author called “a non-fiction novel.” Capote’s skill at doing so is peerless, but his journalistic standards are somewhat suspect.

At the most basic level, Capote describes the physical appearance of his subjects to provide insight into their character, or, more accurately, the character which he ascribes to them. Hence we’re informed that at forty-eight, the embodiment of no-nonsense Midwestern values Herb Clutter “cut a man’s-man figure. His shoulders were broad, his hair had held its dark color, his square-jawed, confident face retained a healthy-hued youthfulness, and his teeth, unstained and strong enough to shatter walnuts, were still intact.” Snake-in-the-grass Dick Hickock’s lips “were slightly aslant, the nose askew, and his eyes not only situated at uneven levels but of uneven size, the left eye being truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue squint that although it was involuntarily acquired, seemed nevertheless to warn of bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature.” Perry Smith’s physical attributes, on the other hand, are portrayed with sympathy. “His tiny feet,” writes Capote, “encased in short black boots with steel buckles, would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady’s dancing slippers; when he stood up, he was no taller than a twelve-year-old child, and suddenly looked, strutting on stunted legs that seemed grotesquely inadequate to the grown-up bulk they supported, not like a well-built truck driver but like a retired jockey, overblown and muscle-bound.” Elsewhere, Capote rhapsodizes about Perry’s “iodine skin ... dark, moist eyes ... black hair ... pink lips and perky nose,” traits that gave him “a quality of roguish animation (and) uppity Irish egotism ...” Capote’s soft spot for Perry is plainly evident in this depiction, just as his physical sketch of Hickock betrays contempt. Though doubtless informed by countless hours of research, interviews and observation, the objective spectator might rightly ask whether these descriptions amount to stacking the deck.

Capote also makes liberal and effective use of point of view as a stylistic device to enhance characterization. In this way, readers can “understand,” as it were, the mindset of Dick and Perry, as well as glimpse the motive force that drives their principle pursuer, Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent Alvin Dewey. Capote is careful never to use “I” except when quoting sources directly, but by means of point of view, appears to reveal their innermost thoughts. As Perry tells Dick about a dream in which

he's confronted by a snake, he stops short, engaged in internal debate as to whether he should share how it ends. "The finale was of great importance, a source of private joy," Capote affirms on behalf of his protagonist. "He'd once told it to his friend Willie-Jay; he had described to him the towering bird, the yellow 'sort of parrot.' Of course, Willie-Jay was different – delicate-minded, 'a saint.' He'd understood. But Dick? Dick might laugh. And that Perry could not abide, anyone ridiculing the parrot ..." *In Cold Blood* contains many such passages, each reinforcing Capote's portrait of Perry as a sentimental, misunderstood dreamer. The omniscient narrator presumes to track Dick's ponderings as well, yet given Capote's dim view of Hickock, his state of mind is predictably rendered less favorably:

"I'm normal." And Dick meant what he said. He thought of himself as balanced, as sane as anyone – maybe a bit smarter than the average fellow, that's all. But Perry – there *was* something wrong with Little Perry. To say the least. ... In some ways old Perry was "spooky as hell." Take, for instance, that temper of his. ... The time had been when Dick had thought he could control, could regulate the temperature of these sudden cold fevers that burned and chilled his friend. He had been mistaken, and in the aftermath of that discovery, had grown very unsure of Perry, not at all certain what to think – except that he felt he ought to be afraid of him, and wondered why he wasn't. (Capote 108-109)

Presumably, the thoughts Capote ascribes to Dick and Perry were gleaned via exhaustive interview, and in that sense his use of point of view is a legitimate and undeniably brilliant stylistic choice. But getting inside the head of another human being, particularly one with psychopathic tendencies, can be a tricky business. How does Capote know, *for sure*, the exact nature of his subjects' thoughts, and the precise order in which they occurred? However sophisticated Capote's interviewing skills, it's unlikely that Hickock or Smith's recollections were faithful enough to their original thoughts to furnish the points of view so minutely detailed here. As with the chronological jumps and reconstructed dialogue that mark *In Cold Blood*, it's fair to place Capote's application of point of view under the rubric of "artistic license." This is not to impugn the author's facility as reporter or keen judge of character – one look at the chapters covering the trial disproves that notion – just to say that when examining Capote's methods, *caveat emptor*.