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# “Maybe It Was You”: The Implications of Southern Gothic Elements of Criminality, Sexuality, and Race in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*

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“Maybe It Was You”: The Implications of Southern Gothic Elements of Criminality, Sexuality,  
and Race in Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

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College of the Ozarks  
Bachelor of Arts in English and History, 2013

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University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## ABSTRACT

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is frequently the subject of critical analysis of its genre, its factual accuracy, and its style. Previous critical examinations of the text often briefly acknowledged the thematic connections between this text and Capote's previous southern gothic work but do so without substantially delving into these similarities. For many, the text's Kansas setting prevents the book from properly being considered southern gothic because Kansas is commonly perceived as the most quintessentially wholesome and American of states while the U.S. South is frequently deemed the site of taboo and undesirable activity. This thesis questions this dichotomy and considers the ramifications of southern gothic elements of criminality, queerness, and race in Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Throughout the text, Capote evokes themes and imagery more commonly associated with the southern gothic but then subverts popular expectations by demonstrating how these behaviors exist even in the center of the American Heartland. In the depictions of criminality, violence, and the resulting anti-pastoralism that exists in the text, Capote questions the ideal of the bucolic rural farm and demonstrates that grotesque killers and violent impulses are not solely the products of southern gothic authors' imaginations—they exist in rural Kansas as well. Capote's portrayal of queerness also defies the common literary tendency of the early to mid-twentieth century to associate homosexual activity with the South, as he demonstrates how both homosexuality and gender role subversion are a part of Kansas life, too. Finally, *In Cold Blood* also demonstrates how racism is not exclusive to the South as Capote portrays the institutional racism within the Kansas prison system while also questioning the underlying logic of the black beast rapist trope. *In Cold Blood* ultimately demonstrates the problematic thinking in considering violence, queerness, and racism as exclusively southern and argues that, rather than banishing these concerns below the Mason-Dixon line, they are a part of a larger American identity.

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## Introduction: “The Same the World Over”: The Southern Gothic in Kansas

Truman Capote billed his 1966 text *In Cold Blood* a pioneering example of a new form of literature—what he termed a “nonfiction novel,” in which the events portrayed are real but conveyed through aesthetic means more commonly found in novels. As such, he intended the book to be as aesthetically captivating as his previous fiction but rooted in reality. The reality that he chose to portray in the book was murder in the American Heartland. Intrigued by a relatively brief news article about a Kansas farm family of four found murdered in their home in 1959, Capote traveled to Kansas and immersed himself in the case.

Several years later, *In Cold Blood* was published, depicting the story in its entirety, beginning with that fateful November morning when the Clutter family—comprised of patriarch Herb, his neurotic wife Bonnie, and their two teenage children, Nancy and Kenyon—went about the ordinary rhythms of an autumn Saturday, oblivious to the fact that it would be their last. However, the book does not solely focus on the victims of the crime; indeed, Capote’s book is more preoccupied with examining and portraying their two killers: smooth-talking conman Dick Hickock and his emotionally unstable partner in crime Perry Smith. Thus, juxtaposed with the Clutters’ final day on earth is also the killers’ preparations for their confrontation with the family and their long journey across Kansas, with the intention of robbing the family and leaving no witnesses. Capote delays the revelation of how the murders unfolded by skipping ahead from Smith and Hickock’s arrival on the Clutters’ farm to the aftermath of the crime, as he follows the townspeople’s horrified response, the investigation of the shocking murder, led by local Kansas Bureau of Investigation agent Alvin Dewey, and the killers’ rambling trek across the country and into Mexico while on the lam. The remainder of the book is concerned with the apprehension of

the killers, their trial, and the resulting execution of Smith and Hickock in 1965. Though *In Cold Blood* certainly mirrors the basics of any standard murder story, with its depiction of crime and consequence, it also complicates the formula by providing complex, nuanced psychological portrayals of the two murderers.

This thesis will examine the southern gothic elements in Capote's *In Cold Blood*, specifically its treatment of criminality, sexuality, and race. The southern gothic is often perceived as just gothic literature with a southern setting or a setting that resembles the South; however, geography is only a small part of what makes a text southern gothic. More specifically, Ralph Voss describes southern gothic literature as "convey[ing] a South haunted by its past, its violence, its injustice" and notes that southern gothic authors "seemed to grasp in their fiction that in many ways the South was a defeated land cursed by its own history of slavery and Jim Crow violence, a culture struggling economically as the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution slowly caught up with it and disturbed the social order after the American Civil War" (47). Marie Mulvey-Roberts, in discussing William Faulkner's work, provides a useful definition of the southern gothic, noting that it features "the inescapability of the past in the present, [and] the extreme pressures of racial hostilities and a lost mythos" (274). She also contends that "nothing less than the Gothic mode [of these features] is able to express the reality of the South" (Mulvey-Roberts 275). Because of the social situations illustrated in the genre, southern gothic literature (like Capote's earliest fiction, as well as that of Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers, among others) frequently features dark tales of grotesque characters while exploring themes of violence, sexuality, and race within the context of the South's traditionally rural, agrarian economy, conservative religious culture, and history of racial tension. As with gothic literature in general, issues of identity—especially abject identities—are paramount



concerns (Edwards xxiii-xxv). This issue of identity is even more essential to southern gothic literature, for the genre frequently delves into the common perception of the region as a repository of the socially taboo. Nonetheless, though *In Cold Blood* may be set in Kansas, the setting has far more in common with southern gothic literature than its Midwestern geographic location initially suggests. Just as Voss and Mulvey-Roberts identify the southern gothic as dealing significantly with the weight of its past, especially in regards to violence, racial tension, and a mythos that drives the area's sense of self, these issues, I argue, are also relevant to the Kansas setting of *In Cold Blood*.

Capote's text has inspired much critical discussion, but scholars have largely ignored the issue of its southern gothic pedigree, despite Capote's reputation as a southern gothic writer. Indeed, the majority of scholars (including Jack De Bellis, David Galloway, John Hollowell, Alfred Kazin, and Phillip K. Tompkins) who discuss *In Cold Blood* have grappled with the text in relation to Capote's self-coined term "Nonfiction Novel" and the factual accuracy of the text itself. A substantial amount of the remaining criticism, including that by William L. Nance, Thomas Slayton Johnson, and Ralph Voss, has considered *In Cold Blood* within the context of Capote's other work, noting similarities among style, theme, and characters. In the course of these critical examinations of the text, the relative gothic qualities of *In Cold Blood* are mentioned but without reference to its specifically southern gothic aspects. In *Truman Capote and The Legacy of In Cold Blood*, Voss, who offers one of the more extensive analyses of the gothic nature of *In Cold Blood*, notes the similarities between the text and earlier southern gothic works from Capote but stops short of calling *In Cold Blood* itself southern gothic. Indeed, the main focus of his argument is a vigorous defense of *In Cold Blood* against critics who deem it substandard because of its gothic qualities (49). A smaller number of critics have examined the

text in relation to other works by authors besides Capote, including Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (McAleer), Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (Tuttle) and Greek epics (Weathers, Edge). These scholars, too, avoid referring to the book as southern gothic, likely because its Kansas setting initially seems to preclude it from being classified as southern. Tuttle, however, does find considerable similarities between it and O'Connor's classic southern gothic short story.

Though the aforementioned critics do not discuss the book in regards to the South, De Bellis considers the Kansas setting a substitute for the southern landscapes Capote usually portrays. However, De Bellis does not substantially develop his claim. For the majority of his critical essay "Visions and Revisions: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*," De Bellis focuses on the editorial changes Capote made on the first published draft of the work (an advance publication of the text in *The New Yorker* in 1965) and the final Random House publication of the book several weeks later in 1966. In most of his essay, De Bellis approaches the text with a more standard critical approach for Capote scholars, thoroughly categorizing the types of edits the author made and contending that the text's believability is suspect precisely because of the many changes made to quotations. De Bellis then shifts to comparing the text to other Capote works, which is also a fairly traditional approach to *In Cold Blood* criticism. He deviates from the norm, however, in concluding, based on these similarities, that one can conceivably argue that

Kansas represented the South in Capote's imagination and . . . Smith [represented] Capote's doppelganger, [so] *In Cold Blood* then becomes the author's revenge upon the section which gave him the dual vision of his fiction, daylight and nocturnal, and which prompted the extreme tactic of the "nonfiction novel" as a way of release from his psychological bondage to the South. (535)

The claim is certainly a provocative one, but De Bellis does not expound on exactly why Capote would feel the need to avenge himself on the South in this manner, nor does he provide textual support for his claim, other than the brief identification of similarities between *In Cold Blood* and earlier Capote texts.

I agree with De Bellis that Capote substitutes Kansas for his more familiar southern settings; nevertheless, I do not think that Capote is doing so to exorcize personal demons in relation to the South. Instead, this thesis argues that Capote is substituting Kansas for the South, if not to rehabilitate the South of its dysfunctional reputation in American literature, then at least to point out that the South is not the country's sole source of madness, violence, and social taboos. Numerous critics, including Fred Hobson, Teresa Goddu, and Gary Richards, have all commented on the South's unique position in American literature, specifically as a repository of taboo topics. As Richards explains in *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961*, Americans have "quarantined the South as one of the few allowable sites of fictionalized deviancy, thus assuring nonsoutherners of their own relative normality" (22). Though Richards focuses on portrayals of sexuality in southern literature, Hobson and Goddu echo this sentiment in regards to depictions of racial violence in southern literature. In essence, southern literature—and especially the southern gothic—allows for the examination of thorny social issues that affect the entire country but without indicting the rest of the nation. By presenting Kansas in a southern gothic light in relation to issues like violence, queerness, and racism, though, Capote uses *In Cold Blood* to demonstrate that this distinction between the South and the rest of the country is severely flawed because grotesque murderers, nontraditional sexuality, and racist ideologies did not just exist in the imagination of southern gothic novelists. As *In Cold Blood* reveals, these issues also existed in real life in Kansas, a state that before the

publication of *In Cold Blood* was traditionally perceived as incorruptibly “wholesome” (Voss 20, 209; Tell 2-3).

Capote himself never suggested that his work on *In Cold Blood* was intended as a comment on regional perceptions of either the South or Kansas, though his comments on his thinking before and after his experiences of working on the book indicate a telling shift in focus. As the author later recalled in an interview with George Plimpton, when he first read the news article detailing the Clutter murder, Capote’s initial interest in the case was spurred by how seemingly different Kansas was from his other works: “the circumstances of the place being altogether unfamiliar, geographically and atmospherically, made it that much more tempting. Everything would seem freshly minted—the people, their accents and attitudes, the landscapes, its contours, the weather” (51). Nevertheless, a few years later, he was not touting this substantial change in setting. By this time, when questioned about how *In Cold Blood* was supposed to start a new direction in his work, Capote shrugged off the notion of it representing a complete change, commenting, “Who wants a complete break with anything?” and suggesting that the timeline of his work, including his Kansas-based text were “all one piece” because “it’s quite simple to see parallels in the things” (Nance 217-218). He even acknowledged that Smith “could absolutely step right out of one of my stories” (Nance 211). Instead of talking about the differences between *In Cold Blood* and his older works, when questioned about the text after its release, he was focusing on how the text functioned on a national level: “It’s what I really think about America. Desperate, savage, violent America in collision with sane, safe, insular even smug America” (Garrett 84). As his most comprehensive biographer Gerald Clarke has noted, Capote went to Kansas and inadvertently encountered in Smith “his [own] shadow, his dark side, the embodiment of his own accumulated angers and hurts. When he looked into [Smith’s] unhappy

eyes, he was looking into a tormented region of his own unconscious” (326). As a result, Capote’s Kansas sojourn was not the deviation in theme that he was looking for because, even amidst the flat Midwestern landscapes, he still found himself grappling with similar themes and concepts from his earlier work. Even if Capote never consciously or publicly acknowledged the similarities in reputation and perception that Kansas and the American South share, it is not unreasonable to consider the book with such a comparison in mind.

Though literary critics have hesitated to acknowledge the connection between the southern gothic and Kansas, historians more readily concede the similarities between Kansas and the South, particularly regarding the state’s legacy of violence, conservative Christian values, and racial tension (Campney, Leiker). An examination of Kansas history certainly suggests more similarities between Kansas and the South than the state’s original reputation would initially suggest: Kansas’s brutal Civil War legacy (in which the heavily divided state was nicknamed “Bleeding Kansas”); the Civil Rights movement’s place in Kansas history (Kansas school segregation was the issue of the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling); and the twenty-first century culture wars (when extremist conservative Christian Kansans like Westboro Church founder Fred Phelps and abortion doctor George Tiller’s killer make headlines). Though literary scholars have been reluctant to analyze the state of Kansas in relation to the South, there seems to be little disagreement that the state itself represents the quintessence of America. Robert Smith Bader, Thomas Frank, John Gunther, and Ralph Voss, among others, all discuss how Kansas has become, for most Americans, a barometer of the true American spirit, as opposed to the more trendy coastal areas or the more dysfunctional South. Nonetheless, such a portrayal of Kansas, as Bader repeatedly demonstrates in his analysis of the state’s reputation throughout the years, ignores the state’s contentious history. If Kansas truly embodies the American Heartland, this

reality is not solely one of stalwart, salt-of-the-earth farmers but also one that encompasses violence, arch-conservatism, and racism.

In light of this historical context, Capote's evocation of the southern gothic in *In Cold Blood* is less a matter of Capote's foisting his own southern "psychological bondage" on an unsuspecting Midwestern state than it is his presenting a social critique made all the more damning and universally applicable to the country through the use of southern gothic tropes minus the South. As such, readers could not merely dismiss the grotesque killers in the book as simply the result of traditional southern dysfunction and backwardness. Instead, these readers were confronted with the reality that these issues existed in the center of a supposedly wholesome, inoffensive Midwestern state like Kansas. The impact of Capote's message was heightened all the more by the book's release during the tumultuous 1960s, a decade when shocking murders, social unrest, and evolving social views further confirmed that the grotesque and taboo did not reside only far below the Mason-Dixon line.

To examine the southern gothic elements of *In Cold Blood*, I will divide my thesis into three chapters, arranged by theme—criminality and violence, sexuality, and race—and I will use a combination of genre theory of the gothic, Marxist literary criticism, and gender studies and queer theory in analyzing the southern gothic elements of these themes in Capote's text. The first chapter, on violence and pastoralism, focuses on the presence of criminality in the text. As *In Cold Blood* repeatedly demonstrates, the traditional rustic pastoralism associated with the Midwest is an illusion because of the potential for violence, which does not spare even the most quintessential American farm family imaginable. However, Capote does not present the conflict as outsider killers versus innocent agrarian victims; he frequently establishes parallels between the Clutters and their killers, as well as between the townspeople and the killers. In addition,

Capote portrays the town as decaying, a common gothic trope and depicts its residents as distrustful of each other, almost as if they recognize the area's gothic potential, which even Perry Smith comments on, claiming "Look at their eyes. I'll be damned if I'm the only killer in the courtroom" (Capote 289). All told, by juxtaposing grotesque outcasts and respectable farmers who on the surface appear wholesome but who possess potentially sinister undertones, Capote clearly evokes southern gothic elements, underscoring the presence of criminality within everyone.

The second chapter concentrates on sexuality and queerness, particularly in regards to the muted but still heavily implied homosexual relationship between Smith and Hickock and the inverted gender roles present among the otherwise traditional Kansans. Critics, such as Voss, Thomas Fahy, and Peter Christensen, frequently discuss the homosexual overtones of the book, but its resulting southern gothic ramifications are not mentioned in scholarly work on the text. In *Lovers and Beloveds*, Richards claims that queerness is often associated with southern gothic literature, despite the perception of the South as culturally conservative (22). In his description of Smith's and Hickock's relationship, Capote makes it clear that homosexuality and gender queerness in general were not limited to just southern gothic fiction (including his own work) but were also present even in rural, conservative Kansas. Beyond the homosexuality it portrays, *In Cold Blood* also frequently presents gender role inversions, in relation to not only the killers, but also otherwise "normal" town residents, including the local postmistress and even the case's lead investigator and Mr. Clutter himself. As with its portrayal of criminality in relation to outsiders, *In Cold Blood* evokes southern gothic themes of homosexuality and nontraditional gender roles that not only illustrate the inherent queerness of the killers but also reveal that they still bear more similarities with the respectable locals than they initially seem.

In the third chapter, I examine the southern gothic manifestations of race in the text. The role of race is considered one of the most significant aspects of southern gothic, and it clearly surfaces as an important theme in *In Cold Blood*. Race relations are rarely the focus of discussion for criticism on *In Cold Blood* or Capote's work in general; nevertheless, Capote clearly ties race in with the implications of capital punishment, namely in Perry's dreams of fellow hanged prisoners, most of whom are black, despite the relatively small number of African Americans in Kansas jails at the time. Even more significantly, the text also portrays the intersection of sexuality and race, particularly in its inversion of the classic southern gothic episode of a virtuous white female threatened by the possibility of rape at the hands of a non-white man. In the text, it is Smith—the part-Cherokee murderer—who rescues teenaged Nancy Clutter from the unwanted advances of his Caucasian associate, Hickock. The portrayal of race, as with criminality and sexuality, indicates clear southern gothic tropes and also question the role of those ordinarily deemed culpable.

Rather than Capote using Kansas as a means of avenging himself against his native South, as De Bellis suggests, I believe that Capote considers Kansas as an extension of the South to better chastise the entire country. In doing so, he not only evokes classic southern gothic tropes that effectively haunt the reader, but he also reminds his audience that the specter of violent criminality, queerness, and racism is not merely restricted to the South—and not even limited to those who can be dismissed as criminal misfits. It is just as much a part of the wholesome Kansas farmers as it is the dysfunctional killers. By cementing the many similarities between the killers and the respectable Clutters and other Kansans, Capote is arguing that these elements of violence, queerness, and racism are not limited to one region or subset of the country but are rather fundamentally American.



Chapter One: “I’ll Be Damned If I’m The Only Killer in the Courtroom”: Anti-Pastoralism,  
Violence, and Kansas Identity in *In Cold Blood*

For many critics, one of the most significant aspects of *In Cold Blood* is its presentation of America on the brink of the social turmoil of the 1960s. Critics such as Peter Galloway, John Hollowell, and Ann Algeo have argued that the 1959 confrontation between the Clutters, a respectable farm family, and their dysfunctional killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, represents an intersection between respectability and societal misfits, a preview of what was to come in the turbulent 1960s. For instance, Galloway in “Real Toads and Real Gardens: Reflecting on the Art of Non-fiction Fiction and the Legacy of Truman Capote” argues that *In Cold Blood* features the Clutters as “an apple-pie embodiment of the American Dream” and their killers as “classic victims of a success-oriented society” (145). Hollowell is more pointed in his assertions on the social significance of the crime, remarking that Capote’s text illustrates “the seemingly random, meaningless crime that had become symptomatic of America in the sixties” (qtd. in Algeo 1). Algeo supports this view, contending that the book depicts “the social dislocation” of the decade (75).

For others, such as Ralph Voss and Dave Tell, the battle lines are even clearer because of the book’s setting. Kansas is frequently termed part of the country’s “heartland,” partially as an acknowledgment of the state’s location in the center of the country but also because of the state’s common association with traditional values (Frank 150, 157-158). As such, Voss contends that Kansans still find *In Cold Blood* deeply unsettling precisely because the occurrence of a brutal murder in the middle of the American Heartland challenges the state’s 1950s “image of a

wholesome, well-scrubbed region” (209). Tell also comments on the book’s disruption of the state’s image, arguing that Capote juxtaposes “the wheat-bound, God-fearing people of SW Kansas [with] . . . urban problems of violence and maladjustment” (2), thus questioning the state’s reputation in the process.

All of these critics are certainly correct in their analyses of how the book pits all-American “squares” against the rejects of society and skewers popular perceptions of Kansas; however, the book’s message extends beyond merely shining a light on mid-twentieth century social tension and the horror of violence in the rural American Heartland. Indeed, Kansas history shows that the state was no stranger to violence before the Clutters were murdered in their own home—Kansas’s very existence was forged in the chaotic prelude to the Civil War, which prompted the state’s early nickname of “Bleeding Kansas.” If anything, the violence portrayed in Capote’s text hearkens back to the state’s history and Kansas’s earlier reputation. Kansas has long had a reputation for being traditional and quintessentially American, but it has also long been saddled with the image of chaos, radicalism, and violence.<sup>1</sup> Despite these polar opposite views of Kansas since the 1940s, the state has also been seen as a barometer of Americanism or, as John Gunther explains, its citizens are perceived as “the most average of all Americans” (qtd. in Frank 29). This notion of Kansas as one of the most, if not the most, quintessentially American state is corroborated by other critics, including Thomas Frank and Robert Smith Bader. Frank notes that in fictional works Kansas functions “as a stand-in for the nation as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomas Frank’s *What Is the Matter with Kansas?* and Robert Smith Bader’s *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists*. Both authors identify an early association of violence with the state, starting with the Bleeding Kansas period and on up through its notorious years of cowboys and cowtowns and then even later with outbreaks of radical labor sentiments. In addition, despite the perception of Kansas as a synonym for normalcy now, in its early years it was regarded as “freakish” (Frank 31). Bader perceives the changing image of Kansas, from wild to tame, as being the state’s reaction to its earlier history (95).

whole, the distilled essence of who we are” (29). Bader remarks that since the middle of the twentieth century, Kansas has represented “extraordinary ordinariness” for other Americans (125). However, Capote subtly but persistently challenges this Kansas persona throughout *In Cold Blood*. In his presentation of the staidly normal and the misfit outsiders, both residing in Kansas and both remarkably similar to each other, Capote suggests that violent criminality is a far more complex issue not only in Kansas but also in America as a whole.

Critics are certainly justified in reading the book as a reflection of the turbulence of American society in the 1960s; however, in contrast to these aforementioned critics, I argue that it is overly simplistic to regard Smith and Hickock as somehow wholly alien to the world the Clutters inhabit—or even a recent manifestation in this pastoral landscape. Instead, as Capote repeatedly shows in his book, these two killers are just as much a part of Kansas, and—by extension—America as the seemingly all-American Clutters are. Throughout *In Cold Blood*, Capote evokes anti-pastoral tropes, undermining the apparent wholesomeness and purity usually associated with the pastoral scenes depicted. Ordinarily the cozy farm scenes Capote portrays would be intended to evoke a nostalgic memory of placid domesticity; however, in Capote’s book they do the opposite. The lovely farmhouse that should symbolize peacefulness is the scene of a vicious, unfathomable multiple homicide, and the rural farmland the Clutters live on, which should guarantee isolation from the horrors of the world, only serves to make their murders more chilling because of the relative remoteness of their home. By marrying the farm imagery of pastoralism with the gothic elements of sensational murder, Capote uses anti-pastoralism to render what would traditionally be seen as normal and therefore desirable, i.e. the Clutters’ world, horrifying and undesirable. The linking of pastoral imagery with the dark imagery of the gothic also further reflects the unseemly side of Kansas, as well as the United States in general.

Just as the pastoralism of southern literature is complicated and rendered suspect by the issue of slavery,<sup>2</sup> the pastoralism of the Midwest is also troubled by its history of exploitation. Kansas was forged as a barrier to the spread of slavery, but the state (and the Midwest region and the entire country, for that matter) remained the site of Manifest Destiny-driven eviction of native populations to clear the way for the settlers and then the “destruction of native ecosystems” as a means of cultivating the very farms and lands glorified in traditional pastoral literature (Barillas 5). In his classic discussion of pastoralism in literature in *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx contends there are two forms of pastoralism—the simple, which deifies the ideals of pastoralism straightforwardly, and the complex, which presents a far more “ambiguous” view of the land, neither wholly good nor wholly bad (69, 71). Marx expresses a preference for the more nuanced complex pastoralism, which is exactly what Capote presents to his readers in *In Cold Blood*.

The 1966 release date of the book ensured that readers were also more willing to accept this dark portrayal of rural Kansas as acts of random violence seemingly became more common and also well-publicized via the media. In addition, the traditional image of wholesome, respectable farmers was also less enchanting during this time period, as many Americans became increasingly more mistrustful of traditional institutions. A few years previously, the image of a Kansas farm no doubt would automatically evoke nostalgia and a sense of placid tranquility for many Americans; however, the social turmoil of the 1960s eroded this sense of trust in previous narratives—what had once been deemed all-American had become suspect.

In addition, Capote frequently draws parallels between the respectable Kansas townspeople (the Clutters included) and the two killers to demonstrate their similarities. He also

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature*, “Foreword,” by Michael Cass, and Lucinda H. Mackethan’s *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature*.

calls attention to the area's history of violence, another subtle reminder that the popular perception of Kansas as a land of bland, meek farmers is patently untrue. To claim that *In Cold Blood* demolishes the state's innocuous reputation ignores other equally long-standing images of Kansas in the popular imagination. Likewise, to claim that the Clutters represent one side of American society—one that is harmless, good, and normal—and that their killers are the complete antithesis of this image ignores the numerous clues Capote offers throughout the text that challenge these stereotypes of the characters. Capote, through *In Cold Blood*, questions what constitutes Kansan identity and, in the process, American identity. Because of the common association of Kansas as a microcosm of the country as a whole, as outlined previously by Gunther, Frank, and Bader, the implied critiques of Kansas extend beyond that state to include critiques of America, too. As Capote himself explained in an interview with *Playboy* a couple of years after the publication of *In Cold Blood*: “[I]f you ask me who best represents the *real* America, I have to say a very modified and much more soiled and complicated version of the Clutter family. But Perry Smith—and I single him out because he had a deeply psychotic criminal mind, whereas Hickock was just a smart-aleck, small-time crook—does represent a very real side of American life” (Norden 133). In his presentation of the Clutters and the criminals, Capote is advancing both of them as a part of not just the people of Kansas but also the people of America as a whole.

### The Subverted Pastoralism of *In Cold Blood*

To this end, Capote evokes traditional pastoral images when he portrays the Clutters in the book's first section, which chillingly contrasts the family unwittingly going about their final day with their killers' ominous progress across the state of Kansas. At face value, these images of home and hearth further highlight the differences between the family and the men who slay

them and also make the consequent shattering of this cozy atmosphere all the more horrific in the family's final moments. Pastoral imagery is perhaps expected in such a tale because pastoralism has a long history in depictions of the Midwest.<sup>3</sup> Capote certainly evokes imagery traditionally associated with small-town life and farming in his portrayals of the family. As such, Clutter is frequently portrayed in relation to his farm on that fateful final day, and the text features him reflecting about the land he owns and farms. For Clutter, the land is fertile and beautiful: "an inch more of rain and this country would be paradise—Eden on earth" (Capote 12). To this end, Clutter devotes a lot of his attention to cultivating an orchard on his property, which Capote explains as Clutter's "attempt to contrive, rain or no, a patch of the paradise, the green, apple-scented Eden, he envisioned" (12-13). On the surface, these passages portray the pastoralism and fertile land many would associate with a farming region, but as the text shows, this view of the land derives more from Herb Clutter's mind than it does the reality of the land. His farm is certainly prosperous—his silo is brimming with the wheat he has harvested, which will fetch him a tidy sum of money on the market (Capote 11)—but the land is not classically beautiful in the traditional pastoral sense. Indeed, even as Clutter himself concedes, the land is almost as wonderful as he imagines it is capable of being, but it lacks the rain to transform his farm into the Edenic paradise that he envisions it as.

Just in these minute details, the pastoral image of farmland is tweaked—the land here is undeniably not an Edenic paradise—but Capote's questioning of the innate pastoralism of western Kansas delves further. As such, Capote extends the Eden metaphor beyond Clutter's own view of his property to include other gardens in the area, all of them ultimately futile

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<sup>3</sup> For more details on the relation between the pastoral and the Midwest, please see William Barillas's *Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland*.

attempts to recreate an idyllic, Edenic paradise in Kansas, according to George R. Creeger. Creeger points to the name of the nearby town of Garden City as symbolic of “the myth of the Garden” and, thus, indicative of the townspeople’s “attempt to recapture Paradise, to fulfill the American dream” (15). He contends that the gardens in the text represent this impulse even more strongly. Beyond Herb Clutter’s lovingly-tended orchard, Creeger also notes the presence of Bonnie’s window side garden and Alvin Dewey’s own metaphorical garden, a rural plot of land he hopes to retire to (16).

However, in the wake of the Clutter murders, these gardens lose their appeal and, consequently, so does the pastoral rural life that the family represents. Toward the end of *In Cold Blood*, Capote notes that Alvin Dewey’s “garden” will never become his garden in the way that he intends it to be because his wife is so horrified by the Clutters’ fate that she refuses to live in similar rural isolation (341). Mrs. Dewey blatantly rejects the pastoral image of rural farm life as an ideal. Rather than envisioning it as a peaceful respite, she instead sees this rural land as a nightmarish place to be murdered violently. As Creeger notes, Dewey’s garden dream is futile, but the former notes that the other gardens in the text are also all for naught: Herb Clutter’s beloved orchard is taken out by a plane before his own death and fragile Bonnie’s lovely flower garden succumbs to “autumnal decay” (16-17). Creeger posits that “[o]nly one garden in the whole book seems immune to violation”—the town cemetery (17). This symbolism is perhaps not unintentional, for Capote repeatedly draws attention to the town as a decaying force. In fact, Capote’s first description of the town of Holcomb is ominous and full of references to its decay:

Not that there is much to see—simply an aimless congregation of buildings divided in the center by the main-line tracks of the Santa Fe Railroad, a haphazard hamlet bounded on the south by a brown stretch of the Arkansas (pronounced ‘Ar-kan-sas’) River, on the north by a highway, Route 50, and on the east and

west by prairie lands and wheat fields. After rain, when snowfalls thaw, the streets, unnamed, unshaded, unpaved, turn from the thickest dust into the direst mud. At one end of the town stands a stark old stucco structure, the roof of which supports an electric sign—DANCE—but the dancing has ceased and the advertisement has been dark for several years. Nearby is another building with an irrelevant sign, this one in flaking gold on a dirty window—HOLCOMB BANK. The bank closed in 1933, and its former counting rooms have been converted into apartments. (3-4)

A slight undercurrent of condescension runs through the description, with the area's unique pronunciation of the river name highlighted, but the passage especially emphasizes the town's decay, despite the residents' perceptions of it as Edenic. More than one sign advertises an institution that is no longer in business, and the muddy roads are hardly modern or appealing-sounding. Though not described in such detail, Garden City is also painted as dead, literally. In describing its modest attractions from its Old West past, Capote notes that "the glammers of the past are today entombed" (32). Contrary to the popular pastoral image of a lush land and quaint small towns, Capote chooses to depict them as outdated and decaying. Just as the gardens are doomed to fail, the local towns are also doomed to crumble. Even if they do not entirely succumb to modernity, they seem destined to be forever stuck in a fantasy about the past.

The Clutters' view of Kansas as an otherworldly paradise is also not uniformly held by the characters, and these dissenters function as a mouthpiece for Capote's anti-pastoralism. For Perry Smith, the western Kansas landscape—"flat and limitless," "empty and lonesome"—is off-putting and disheartening (Capote 48-49). Smith wryly mocks the entire idea of Kansas as Eden as he and Hickock are driving toward the Clutter home the night of the murder, dismissively jeering, "Christ—and they told me to keep away from Kansas! Never set my pretty foot here again. As though they were barring me from heaven. And just look at it. Just feast your eyes" (Capote 49). This comment serves as a counterpoint to the Kansans' own lofty perception of the



state and further reveals Capote's own message—that Kansas is not a holy place, separated from the country's problems. Capote clearly evokes pastoral images in the text, but in doing so, he is hardly celebrating the Clutters' world. Instead, his use of pastoral imagery is intended to question the assumptions that underlie the pastoral idea. This land may be fertile, but it is not placid or even particularly desirable on its own. The Clutter homicides certainly represent an overt reason for why pastoralism is no longer desirable—the fear of random murder on a remote farm—but, as Ernest Mandel explains in his Marxist analysis of the history of crime stories, the increase of interest in such stories coincides with several sociological factors that directly affected reader interest in crime stories. One such factor is the increasing numbers of people who moved from rural areas to urban and suburban areas during the twentieth century. According to Mandel, this trend in “[t]he decline of farming and the exodus from the countryside” combined with the increasingly industrialized economy that fueled this demographical transition led people to seek diversion from the monotony of their new lives, and one of these distractions was reading crime novels (70). The anti-pastoralism reflected in Capote's *In Cold Blood* certainly reflects a developing sensibility among Americans that redefines American identity away from traditional farms and rural areas as more and more Americans moved away from these areas.

Furthermore, the pastoralism of the area is undermined by the history of its acquisition and the resulting displacement of natives and destruction of native habitats, as previously noted. Beyond the decay of the town and the futility of cultivating gardens in the land, Capote hints at the exploitive nature of the land's past with his note that “[t]he farm ranchers in Finney County, of which Holcomb is a part, have done well; money has been made not from farming alone but also from the exploitation of plentiful natural-gas resources, and its acquisition is reflected in the new school, the comfortable interiors of the farmhouses, the steep and swollen grain elevators”

(5). His use of the term “exploitation” is key here. It is true that the land renders sustenance for these farmers through the work of their own hands, but they also gain profit from its natural resources, which in turn allows the farmers to invest back into their own homes and lives. The farmers are not merely simple, good-hearted yokels who farm solely to feed their families. This description of the exploitation of natural resources is a throw-back to the early years of the state when droves of settlers arrived, determined to forge their own lives on the prairies, regardless of the inconvenient presence of Native Americans and the ecosystem that already existed in the state (Barillas 5). In his repeated usage of the antipastoral, Capote undermines the view of farm families like the Clutters as being purely all-American, but the point is not to demonize them. Rather, this characterization helps establish that, beneath the socially-acceptable veneer, the Clutters and their associates are more nuanced and less simplistic than they initially appear.

#### Killers and Kansans, Not So Different

Capote also goes to great lengths to establish how the two killers fit within the community of Holcomb, though they are undoubtedly perceived by the locals as outsiders due to their seemingly innate criminality in the townspeople’s minds. Despite the fact that Smith and Hickock are clearly criminals, they are both just as much a part of Kansas as the Clutters are. Capote’s entire presentation of the two killers serves to remind readers that criminality is not something foreign to Kansas or for that matter the country as a whole. Indeed, though Smith is not a Kansan, Hickock is. He was raised by respectable parents on a small farm in the eastern part of the state, and nothing in his background suggested the path he would eventually follow to death row. In that sense, Hickock shares much in common with the family he eventually plans to murder. Even Smith—who does initially appear to inhabit an alien universe as a native Nevadan who stayed in Kansas only as an inmate in the state’s prisons—is still thematically tied to the

state. As William Wiegand notes, Smith's family is part of "an older frontier tradition, of medicine shows and Indian rodeo riders, of prospectors and extravagant aspirations" (140). As such, his family history parallels nicely with Kansas's frontier history, settled by those determined to forge their own life in the remote wilds. Smith may not be an actual Kansan, but his heritage is not so foreign from the state after all.

Beyond establishing the Kansas credentials of Smith and Hickock, Capote also emphasizes that these men are not anomalies within Kansas. Lowell Lee Andrews is also on death row with the Clutters' murderers, an intellectual young man there for murdering his parents and sister in order to inherit insurance money (Capote 312). Like Hickock, Andrews is a native Kansan, raised in a seemingly normal family. In that sense, he is far more similar to the Clutters than the prototypical death row inmate. Though not joining them on death row, Hickock's former cellmate, Floyd Wells, the source of Hickock's dream to rob and kill the Clutters, is also a criminal and a Kansan. His efforts at respectability, which include the military and work on farms and in car shops, had failed, so Wells turned to a life of crime (Capote 159). Even after he was paroled following his testimony against Smith and Hickock, Wells quickly proved a recidivist offender and soon was serving a lengthy prison sentence in Mississippi for other crimes, according to Capote (285). Wells's background and fate are never as thoroughly explored as Smith's and Hickock's, but he too is identified with no outward reason for his criminal behavior—to all appearances, he should be no different from the Clutters. Indeed, as a former employee of the family, he seems to have blended in nicely with the Clutters; his departure from the farm was not precipitated by any clash with them. In his focus on other criminal misfits beyond the Clutters' killers, Capote emphasizes that Smith and Hickock are not anomalies. Outside of the stolid world of the Clutters and their friends and neighbors exists an

entire society of Smiths, Hickocks, Andrewses, and Wellses—all seemingly alienated from their fellow Kansans by virtue of their criminality but never really apart in other ways from the more respected farmers of Holcomb and Garden City.

Beyond these instances of shared background, Capote repeatedly demonstrates that, at heart, there are also other similarities between the killers and their victims. For instance, Herb Clutter is an absolute teetotaler, who shuns coffee, tea, and tobacco, as well as alcohol—he expects his family and employees to follow suit in avoiding alcohol and cigarettes (Capote 10). Perry Smith is not quite as moralistic about the issue as Clutter, but he shares the other man’s dislike of coffee, a beverage he also does not consume (Capote 14). In addition, even though Smith does drink some alcohol, Capote is careful to note that Smith “didn’t care what he drank, for he was not much of a drinker” (48). In establishing this similarity between the men, Capote is also emphasizing the longstanding “dry” reputation of Kansas, which was a forerunner of the Prohibition movement in the early twentieth century (Bader 134). Certainly Clutter’s unwavering refusal to drink establishes him as a quintessential 1950s Kansas farmer, in much the same way that his identity as a Republican and Methodist does, but the fact that these tendencies are paralleled by an alleged outsider blurs the distinction between who is a wholesome Kansan and who is not. Creeger notes the similarities established by the coffee comparison and adds more of his own connections between the family and the killers. He notes that early in the story, when Hickock honks to let Smith know he has arrived, the action is paralleled in Kenyon’s shouting to summon his sister; likewise, just as Nancy and a neighbor are obviously pleased with the pie they make that morning, Smith and Hickock feel accomplished with their work on Hickock’s car in preparation of their cross-state journey (Creeger 8). Creeger notes that these instances of similarity “remind us that no absolute demarcation exists between the world of Perry and Dick

and that of the Clutters—or of any other good bourgeois citizens” (8). For all of the differences between these characters, they all still have shared experiences, even seemingly minute ones, and in doing so, they also have a shared identity that transcends geographic region, social class, and background.

Creeger catalogs many other similarities between the Clutters and their killers or, at the very least, the killers’ families. He finds dark similarities between Herb Clutter and Smith’s father, Tex Smith. Though Clutter is, by most accounts, a kind man, he does betray prejudices in his attitude toward his daughter’s boyfriend. Clutter is never presented as rude toward Bobby, but he does repeatedly make it clear to Nancy that a relationship between her and Bobby was ultimately untenable because of her Methodist upbringing and his Catholic faith (Capote 8, 84). At one point, Nancy even confides to her best friend that her father acts as if her hesitance to stop seeing her boyfriend is a sign of betrayal (Capote 20-21). For Creeger, this side of Herb Clutter confirms his similarities to Smith’s own controlling father. As the incident with Bobby illustrates, “both [Herb Clutter and Perry Smith’s father] are loners, partly by inclination, partly because neither seems able fully to love or to elicit love” (Creeger 9). Creeger also presents Bonnie’s fragile emotional psyche as further proof of Clutter’s emotional distance, crediting him for much of her neurotic behavior (10). Contrary to the usual perception of kindhearted Kansas farmers, Clutter is depicted as a man who, though not cruel, is capable of being authoritarian and narrow-minded. In the portrayal of Herb Clutter as a staunch authoritarian, Capote is again undermining the bifurcation of the Kansas farmers into one category as wholly good and the criminals as wholly bad. In doing so, Capote is not necessarily branding Clutter a dastardly individual, but he is certainly illustrating that even among the seemingly wholesome Clutter family, there still exists a flicker of sinister behavior.

Kenyon is also singled out as an outsider with the potential for criminality, though ostensibly he should belong within the Kansas farm world where he was born and raised. Nancy's boyfriend, Bobby, describes Kenyon as being quite unusual. He observes that not even Nancy "or anybody, exactly understood [Kenyon]" (Capote 51). Creeger draws parallels between Kenyon and both Smith and Andrews, two death row inmates, and contends that Kenyon's delight in killing coyotes with his friends is a less-developed manifestation of the killer Smith becomes when he murders Kenyon and his family (10). Kenyon is also, in Creeger's mind, clearly connected with Andrews, the awkward intellectual who resided on Kansas's death row with Hickock and Smith. Like Kenyon, Andrews was "a loner—brilliant, myopic, physically ill-coordinated, and estranged" (Creeger 11). As with the comparisons drawn between Kenyon's father and Smith's father, these parallels indicate that criminality exists in rural Kansas just as much as it does anywhere else. It is not an attribute that is entirely foreign in this rural community, even in seemingly wholesome Kansas. In all of these correlations and comparisons, Capote is breaking down the reader's initial inclination to perceive criminality as something entirely divorced from the Clutters' world. Even in this prototypical Kansas farm family, dark impulses lurk, much in the same way that they also exist within Smith and Hickock. The Clutters are certainly not criminals in the sense that the killers are, but the same impulses are there. Just as the killers are not to be tossed aside and dismissed as anomalies, the Clutters, too, cannot be simply categorized as wholesome farmers. As Alfred Kazin concludes, however incongruous such a tie may initially seem, "[t]here is a connection between Mr. Clutter, who disdained evil and complexity, and the outsider, vagabond, pervert, who said to his pal; "Finish [Mr. Clutter] off. You'll feel better" (36). These characters, killers and victims alike, are all representative of some aspect of Kansas identity, whether that of the peaceful farmer or the vagabond. By

extension of Kansas's role as symbolic of America as a whole, they are all also emblematic of something distinctly American. Just as Capote noted in his interview with *Playboy* that Smith represented something inherently American, as did the Clutters, the criminality that Capote depicts is something that extends beyond Kansas and holds true for the country at large.

In addition to these similarities between the killers and their victims, there is the recurring undercurrent that the people of Finney County also share Smith's and Hickock's killer instincts. One motif that Capote repeatedly returns to is the townspeople's mistrust of each other when the crime remains unsolved, a hint of the town's own capacity for brutality. Though before the murders few in the town locked their doors, Capote notes that afterward the crime "stimulated fires of mistrust in the flare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers" (5). In the immediate wake of the murder, while the rest of the residents are numbed by the shock of such a brutal crime in their bucolic world, Mrs. Clare, the shrewd, sharp-tongued, eccentric postmistress, declares that the murderer could be the man who accidentally destroyed Clutter's orchard in a plane crash or "maybe it was you. Or somebody across the street. All the neighbors are rattlesnakes. Varmints looking for a chance to slam the door in your face. It's the same the whole world over" (Capote 69). Beyond her bluntness, Mrs. Clare hits on what is an essential theme for the book—these horrific acts that so stunned the community are not something limited to faraway places associated with such acts.

Essentially, Capote has not brought gothic violence to Kansas; rather, he has shown that it already exists there. Even the use of "you" implicates the reader and suggests that deep within him or her lurks these same impulses traditionally associated only with grotesques and degenerates. One of Mrs. Clare's cousins admits that she initially suspected the fragile, emotionally unstable Bonnie as the murderer and that even once this suspicion was dispelled by

the evidence, the townspeople all regarded each other with suspicion (Capote 70). In fact, this suspicion is repeated throughout the book by various townspeople (Capote 88, 153). In his analysis of violence within the text, Creeger contends that the townspeople do not “believe in murderous violence as a fact relevant to themselves” (14). However, the townspeople’s reactions to the crime indicate that they firmly do believe violence is relevant to themselves and their community, even if this fact may not have occurred to them before the Clutter murders. Curiously, it does not seem as if it occurred to the residents of Holcomb that, in the midst of the town they so prided on being wholesome, the culprit would undoubtedly be an outsider. If Creeger’s assertion about the townspeople finding the violence irrelevant to them were true, it would logically follow that such a manifestation of violence would not and could not be the work of a local. Instead, almost everyone assumed it had to be a fellow resident—a neighbor, a friend, a relative. The possibility of an outsider as killer did occur to the investigators but only because, as Dewey noted, the fact that two killers were present made it almost unfeasible to determine how both of them could be so enraged at the family, “[a]ssuming the murderer was someone known to the family, a member of this community; assuming that he was an ordinary man, ordinary except that he had a quirk, an insane grudge against the Clutters” (Capote 83). Despite the characterization by many of the townspeople that Finney County is a wonderful place to live, this tendency toward assuming the worst about their neighbors suggests that deep down they, too, believe that the darker impulses of human nature lurk within the seemingly wholesome and respectable. As these suspicions reveal, even for the average residents of this small Kansas hamlet, the illusion of Kansas as a peaceful, morally blameless place is not tenable in reality.

These doubts about the community are echoed in the fear that Smith and Hickock will be subject to a lynch mob once they are extradited to Finney County. Though Mrs. Meier, the



undersheriff's wife, tries to reassure Smith that "folks around here aren't like that" (Capote 253), her husband is not so sure and is concerned about the potential for violence against the two killers (Capote 252). Furthermore, Smith characterizes the local doctors, who are ostensibly supposed to evaluate him for mental competence to stand trial, as lugubrious voyeurs. When informed they had found him competent to stand trial, Smith retorts, "How would they know? They just wanted to be entertained. Hear all the morbid details from the killer's own terrible lips. Oh, their eyes were shining" (Capote 268). The characterization of the small-town doctors here are not of well-meaning (if old-fashioned) bumpkin doctors, as may be expected, but rather callous men driven by bloodlust of their own. Smith also seems quite convinced of the townspeople's malice, for he indicts the rest of the town, beyond just the doctors. During the trial, he confides in an old army buddy that "[t]hose prairiebillys, they'll vote to hang fast as pigs eat slop. Look at their eyes. I'll be damned if I'm the only killer in the courtroom" (Capote 289). For Hickock, this generalization extends beyond the town and to the state as a whole; he wryly comments upon learning two other murderers would join him on death row that "[the death penalty is] very popular in Kansas. Juries hand it out like they were giving candy to kids" (Capote 322). The repeated references to the locals' potential for violence is likely intended to engender sympathy for the killers, but this connection also serves to remind readers that it is not possible to identify who can be violent or who can be evil simply because of overt signs of criminality. This potential for violence also exists within the community of seemingly upright citizens. It is not an impulse limited to one group, nor can it be dismissed as simply not something Kansans do.

Indeed, despite the collective horror over the Clutters' murders, that crime was hardly the first in the county, and the various stories reveal a pattern of a hidden darkness within the town,

as well as the themes of criminality, sexual transgression, and racial identity that permeates *In Cold Blood*. Town elders recall how in 1920, a local ranch hand who was actually an AWOL soldier killed the local sheriff, and the suspect was subsequently shot down by the posse that found him the next morning. Due process makes no appearance in the scene that presented itself that morning some forty years before Smith and Hickock had achieved their own infamy in the area. In reminiscing about the end of the soldier turned sheriff-killer, one of the townspeople remarks that “[the suspect] didn’t get the chance to say how d’you do? On account of the boys were pretty irate. They just let the buckshot fly” (Capote 151). Despite the townspeople’s insistence that they are an area that respects law and order and religion, no mercy is shown upon this suspect when he is arrested, suggesting that the fears over a lynch mob awaiting Smith and Hickock upon their return to Kansas are not entirely unwarranted. Though Creeger’s claim that the townspeople do not consider violence “relevant” to them is problematic, he is correct in his assertion that ““without being conscious of doing so, [the community] powerfully desires the very violence it pretends, in some forms, to abhor” (14).

Dewey’s own recollections about the homicides he worked before the Clutter case further fit the pattern. Among his case files included the bizarre tale of local boy Wilmer Lee Stebbins, who claimed an out-of-state man had propositioned him inappropriately. In retaliation, Stebbins took the man’s money, beat him, and drowned him in a toilet before digging a grave. Apparently too paranoid to let the body lie, he was caught during one of many instances in which he dug up the corpse and reburied it in the countryside, a gothic detail Capote was sure to include (151-152). The notion of an outsider who arrives and is decidedly not a member of the community is highlighted here, but in a contrast to the stereotype of the wholesome rural Kansans being violated by menacing outsiders, the local man here is far more unhinged and dangerous, as

evidenced by the eccentric nature of the murder. Capote spends less time in the section discussing more straightforward cases that are limited to just local suspects and victims, like when “a pair of railroad workers robbed and killed an elderly farmer” or when “a drunken husband beat and kicked his wife to death” (151). Nevertheless, these instances demonstrate that the potential for evil exists within this area even without the presence of criminal outsiders. Though the Clutter murder case may have been unprecedented for its brutality and the amount of violence, there is a clear precedent for other acts of violence in the area—and contrary to what many may have asserted about the good nature of all their neighbors, not all of the killers were outsiders.

#### Genre, Region, and Historical Time Period

As Kazin notes, *In Cold Blood* is thematically tied to the author’s other work in its focus on “a home and family destroyed within a context of hidden corruptions, alienation and loneliness” (25). The shift in setting, though practical because of the true crime genre of the book, is telling in this regard. Much of Capote’s previous work was unabashedly southern gothic, and the depiction of these families and their demises could easily be dismissed by readers as relics of the Old South or the inherent aberrations of the South. This claim is one that has been made by some critics of the text. Tony Tanner complains that in Capote’s book “[b]ehind 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” (qtd. in Voss 46). However, *In Cold Blood*, with its similar themes but entirely different setting and its true crime pedigree, dispels these illusions. This text utilizes anti-pastoralism to complicate one traditional image of Kansas. Saying that Capote does so with the intention of shattering the traditional

wholesome perception of the state would be a misnomer; rather, he establishes, through a variety of connections and anecdotes, the similarities between the Clutters and the killers to demonstrate that a convenient categorization of Kansans as one simple category of people (whether bland farmers or violent freaks) is problematic and fallacious.

The South itself, the setting of much of Capote's other works, also carries its own social and cultural baggage in its literary portrayals—one of violence and depravity. Flannery O'Connor once complained that "anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic" (40).<sup>4</sup> With the Kansas setting of *In Cold Blood*, as well as its status as a true crime story, Capote is able to sidestep preconceptions that followed his other work, one being that his characters were freakish misfits because they inhabited a southern gothic world. *In Cold Blood's* Kansas setting allows Capote to present readers with the pastoralism they expect from the state in his depiction of the Clutters going about their final day. They are prototypical wholesome Kansans—harmless, morally upstanding, even a little boring—and their world is literally destroyed by chaotic grotesque outsiders. However, within the course of the text, the divide between the Clutters and their killers is blurred as Capote reveals that the wholesome Kansans are not always as they appear and neither are their seemingly alien killers. As such, the Clutters and Smith and Hickock share traits and experiences. Capote seeks to condemn neither group but rather to illustrate a universality that transcends regional stereotype. Because of the reader's likely assumption about Kansans—one that probably conjures images of the Clutters and not the men who killed them—Capote is able to avoid dismissals of his point if he were using a more

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<sup>4</sup> Fred Hobson provides further insight into the history of the association of the South with violence in "The Savage South: An Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image."

traditionally maligned region of the United States, while still staying true to older perceptions of the state of Kansas. Likewise, he is also declaring that not all unassuming Kansas farmers are devoid of some of the traits of these killers.

Considering the release of the book during the turbulent 1960s, *In Cold Blood's* message appears to have struck a chord with many readers who, in the wake of rising social tension regarding the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the increasing use of violence as a political statement, saw truth in Capote's message. As Ernest Mandel notes in *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*, the 1960s was a time when increasing numbers of Americans, precisely because of the growing disenchantment with institutions that had once been unquestioningly accepted by most Americans as "the good guys"—the government, the police, the military, etc—were increasingly willing to accept crime stories that presented criminals in a sympathetic light and questioned conventional "heroes" (76). Thus, Capote's contention that gothic criminality and darkness exists in everyone, not just murderers like Smith and Hickock, seemed much less subversive than if he had published the text only a decade earlier. In addition, as Mandel observes, the decade of the 1960s not only saw an increase in violence but it also saw a rise in "anonymous, gratuitous, and mass crimes" (93). What shocked the nation about the Clutter murder in 1959, when the crime took place—the savage randomness of a quadruple murder of an entire family by complete strangers with no apparent motive—seemed much more commonplace only a few years later. Because of the social changes Mandel notes, the growing mistrust of conventionality and tradition paired with an increase in shocking crimes in general, readers were much more willing to accept the validity of Capote's lessons about criminality when his book was finally published. To that end, *In Cold Blood* announces to its readers that malfeasance is not just limited to places like the gothic South or even to socially disadvantaged

Kansans outside the state's pastoral milieu. Indeed, because of the traditional, all-American reputation of Kansas, this exploration of violence also serves as an implication of the entire nation as a potential source of violence. If this state that symbolizes American values possesses criminal behavior and violent impulses, then America does too. It is, as Mrs. Clare astutely notes in *In Cold Blood*, "the same the whole world over" (Capote 69).

## Chapter Two: “Something Between Me and Dick”: Kansas Queerness in *In Cold Blood*

As Gary Richards notes in his study of sexuality in twentieth-century southern literature, the South was one of the only acceptable realms of depicting homosexual activity, even though southern writers of the Agrarian school of thought were determined to omit what they perceived as sexual deviance from the region’s literature. During this pre-Stonewall time period of the 1940s-1960s, homosexuality was often considered abnormal and undesirable, and this underlying homophobia, according to Richards, led non-Southern writers to “codification of [homosexuality in] the region’s literary production” while conservative Agrarian Southern authors simultaneously attempted to deny the presence of queerness in the region (22). Nevertheless, readers and critics from other parts of the country “quarantined the South as one of the few allowable sites of fictionalized deviancy, thus assuring nonsoutherners of their own relative normality,” and other writers from the South who were not associated with the Agrarian literary movement, including Capote and his one-time friends Carson McCullers and Harper Lee, among others, were more than willing to explore notions of queerness in their southern fiction (Richards 22). In Richards’s eyes, portraying the South as a realm of alternative sexuality is reassuring to residents of other regions of the country precisely because doing so creates the illusion that such activity does not occur in their own neighborhoods, even though such an idea is ultimately fallacious. This flawed perception echoes the traditional perceptions of the South as an acceptable place to portray brutal violence because it reassures readers that such things do not threaten them in their own home regions, as was discussed in the previous chapter.

Despite this common image of the South as a haven for nontraditional sexuality, which dates back to the early colonial years of the region, Fred Hobson, in “The Savage South: An

Inquiry into the Origins, Endurance, and Presumed Demise of an Image,” notes that since the early twentieth century, the South has also been perceived as fundamentally moralistic in its religiosity: a region at once “sexually promiscuous” and “sexually prudish.” This dichotomy of perception allows for an image of the American South that simultaneously regards it as a harbor of nontraditional sexual behavior and also a bastion of narrow-minded intolerance. As such, the South could and did feature in literature as a site of homosexual liaisons while also appearing as a site of strict adherence to extremely conservative religious norms and traditional notions of gender roles, especially for women. The precedent for the latter is undoubtedly a relic of antebellum attitudes that turned a blind eye to male sexual peccadillos, including adultery and interracial sex, but strongly opposed any indication of sexual impropriety in women. Michael Bibler argues, though, that the plantation literature of the South, including works spanning from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, possesses an innate queerness to it.<sup>5</sup> For Bibler, this queerness is not limited to overtly homosexual liaisons and relationships; instead, it also encompasses behaviors and relationships that are “a clear resistance to the heterosexual-ized regimes of the normal” (23). By this definition, any relationship that challenges heteronormativity can be categorized as queer, even if the relationship does not actually feature overt homosexuality.

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<sup>5</sup> Capote’s debut novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, is an excellent example of mid-twentieth century plantation literature. Though set in then-contemporary times, the novel’s setting in rural Alabama still features several recognizable hallmarks of plantation life, including the presence of a dilapidated mansion, African American servants, and white Southern characters descended from a once prominent, respected family. The novel is also an excellent exploration of queerness within this system, as the novel focuses on the protagonist’s burgeoning homosexuality, as well as numerous other queer characters. In addition, as a native Southerner who frequently wrote works set in the South, long after his family had relocated to New York City, Capote was undoubtedly familiar with plantation tropes.



As Capote demonstrates in *In Cold Blood*, this sense of queerness, involving both homosexuality and nontraditional gender roles, also extends to Kansas. Despite Kansas's reputation as a staidly conservative area of the country, its history was surprisingly progressive in regards to gender roles in the early twentieth century. As Thomas Frank notes in his study of Kansas morals and mores, *What's The Matter with Kansas?*, the state initially was regarded as quite progressive on issues like abortion and women's suffrage (90), though it also simultaneously maintained a reputation for being overly puritanical (Bader 15). Kansas then has a similarly conflicted image as the South in that it is also perceived as both radically more permissive than the rest of the country while also being more judgmentally traditional. The difference, though, is that Kansas is frequently seen as emblematic of America while the South is often perceived as taboo and detached from the rest of the country. By establishing the similarities between the two regions, Capote contends that America, at its heart, is queer. Just as Capote examines the contradictory images of Kansas in regard to violence in *In Cold Blood*, he also does so in regard to sexuality and gender.

In his book, Capote repeatedly deconstructs the notion that the South is the only region where such queerness exists while at the same time questioning the underlying validity of the norms that queerness also challenges. The people of Kansas, as portrayed in Capote's book, adhere to the stereotype of the South as possessing traditional views on sex and gender. As such, most of the families depicted in the text are prototypical two-parent homes that adhere to traditional gender roles, with breadwinner fathers and housewife mothers. The two main exceptions to this rule are Smith's dysfunctional rodeo performer parents, who were not Kansans anyway, and the family of Nancy's close friend Susan Kidwell, who is also not a native of the state. Capote notes that Kidwell comes from a broken home and lives with a single mother, but

they are native Californians (21). The families that otherwise appear adhere closely to then-contemporary gender norms.

Nevertheless, as Capote repeatedly illustrates in his text, rural Western Kansas has more than its fair share of unconventional sexuality and non-traditional gender roles, which also connects it to the popular perception of the South as a region of alterity. Smith and Hickock represent perhaps the most obvious example of these matters, their relationship being very much like a dysfunctional marriage, but they are hardly alone in the text, which includes other more seemingly traditional characters who also engage in non-standard gender roles. With these portrayals, Capote suggests that the South is not the only site for nontraditional sexuality, and misfit characters like Smith and Hickock are not the only practitioners. Even the most traditional of the book's stalwart Midwesterners, like Herb Clutter and Alvin Dewey, defy gender norms on occasion. In the book, Capote demonstrates the inherent queerness of both Smith and Hickock, but he also shows that many of the more traditional Kansans manifest hints of queerness by rejecting standard gender norms and the one character who embraces heteronormativity the most, Bonnie Clutter, is also the most clearly unhappy.

### Homosexuality in Capote

The homosexuality in the book has attracted some critical attention, but the focus of that scholarship has mainly been debating whether or not Capote muted that aspect within the text. In one of the more expansive discussions of the homosexual overtones of the book, Ralph Voss focuses much of his attention on the argument that Capote attempted to minimize the homosexuality inherent in Smith's and Hickock's interactions. Voss argues that the book "hints" at such a dynamic between the two but never conclusively depicts it for fear that the social

atmosphere of the 1960s would diminish sales of the book. In many critics' eyes, Capote may well have felt the need to maintain the argument that homosexuality was not pertinent to the book's overall message to ensure that his book was a critical and commercial success. Indeed, he did edit out two of the more overt references to homosexuality from his notes. In Capote's field notes, for example, Smith is described as looking like "a plump, rather unpleasant, and exceedingly tough lesbian" (Voss 104). In addition, in the original draft, when Smith talks about the black man he claimed to kill in Las Vegas, he claims the man was always naked and comments on the size of his member, before adding, "You couldn't help staring at it—you didn't have to be queer or nothing—it was just the biggest dick you ever saw" (Voss 105). Both of these lines were removed from the book before publication.

Beyond attitudes of the reading public, critical reaction to homosexuality in literature at this time often tended to be hostile, which would further explain Capote's reluctance to portray the two killers as overtly homosexual. In the pre-Stonewall context in which Capote wrote and published the book, the issue of critical backlash against any depiction of homosexuality was a very real threat to his book's reputation. In reviews of his autobiographical debut, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, which charted a young boy's gradual acceptance of his homosexuality, Capote was slammed by critics for what they deemed the morally corrupt content of the book, even when those same critics complimented his technical skill as a writer. In one review, Diana Trilling complained that Capote's obvious flair for language and style was negated by the protagonist's homosexuality, which she attributed to the absence of "more normal gratifications of his need for affection" (qtd. in Voss 102). In *Time*'s even more contentious review "Spare the Laurels," the reviewer complained that "for all [Capote]'s novel's gifted invention and imagery, the distasteful trappings of its homosexual theme overhang it like Spanish moss" (qtd. in

Richards 39). Voss posits that since Capote wanted *In Cold Blood* to be his magnum opus, his crowning achievement as a writer, he was determined to ensure the best possible critical reception of his book, which included toning down the appearance of homosexuality in his characters (103). As a result, Capote carefully managed the details included in his book. Capote also publicly insisted that there was no underlying homosexuality in the story. During an exchange with George Plimpton that was printed as “The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel,” Capote categorically denied that Smith and Hickock had a homosexual relationship, let alone attraction, with each other. In response to Plimpton’s question about the killers’ sexuality, Capote answered, “No. None at all. Dick was aggressively heterosexual and had great success [with women]. . . . Perry’s sexual interests were practically nil” (60). However, Voss contends that it is unlikely that Capote, Plimpton, or anyone reading the interview ever believed Capote’s assertion that no such dynamic existed between the two killers at all (100).

Though Capote denied that Smith and Hickock had a homosexual relationship with each other, evidence both inside and outside of the text appears to contradict this claim. Beyond the depictions of the pair’s interactions within the book, which often read as the interactions of a couple, complete with affectionate nicknames and a dynamic that frequently codes Smith as the traditional wife and Hickock as the traditional husband, J. J. Maloney argues that the relationship makes more sense when read as homosexual. Maloney, a crime reporter and former prison inmate, contends that “Capote thoroughly misunderstood the dynamics of prison sexuality,” especially the existence of “situational homosexuality,” in which men who ordinarily would not define themselves as homosexual engage in same-sex intercourse while in prison but revert back to heterosexuality upon release. According to Maloney, the relationship, including the

psychological dependence the two killers possess toward each other, seems much less peculiar if the two had been lovers while they were cellmates.

At the very least, Capote's depiction of their friendship certainly violates then-contemporary norms of homosocial interaction for heterosexual men, rendering their relationship queer by Bibler's definition. The most overt indication of the dynamics of their relationship are the affectionate nicknames Hickock has for Smith, such as "honey," "baby," and "sugar," which seem to alternate between sarcasm and something resembling sincerity. Regardless of Hickock's intention, the nicknames mirror the affectionate terms a spouse or lover would use for an intimate, not the relationship between two male friends who have no sexual interest in each other. As such, it also provides a direct means for the reader to detect the queerness of their relationship. For instance, when Smith expresses hesitation before the murder, Hickock responds: "Ain't that what I promised you, honey—plenty of hair on them-those walls?" (Capote 37). He uses other terms for Smith besides "honey," including "baby," but regardless of the term being used, this tendency makes their conversations, even about morbid topics, take on an air of domesticity.

Hickock often uses the nicknames when he is soothing Smith's nerves, which establishes a dynamic of Hickock as the prototypical man who comforts a more fragile female companion. Thus, when Smith indulges in his fantasies of treasure-hunting, Hickock reassures him, "Sure, honey, I'm with you. All the way" (Capote 100). Later when they are on the lam, with no shelter, no car, no food, and no prospects, Hickock consoles his friend with a term of affection that also makes the exchange sound like the interactions of a couple in a romantic relationship: "What is it, honey? That other deal? Why the hell can't you forget it? They never made any connection. They never will" (Capote 188). His apology after another incident of being late and knowing it

would worry Smith is also soothing and evokes the language of a comforting spouse, with Hickock telling Smith, “I’m sorry, honey. I knew you’d get the bends” (Capote 194). At one point, he accompanies yet another one of his apologies by affectionately patting Smith on the knee (Capote 46). Even after they are on decidedly more rocky terms with each other in jail, Hickock maintains the air of domesticity in their relationship by greeting Smith after his return from the prison hospital with “Welcome home, honey” (Capote 320). In spite of Capote’s insistence that Smith and Hickock did not have a homosexual relationship, they certainly do have a queer relationship, according to Bibler’s gauge of a connection that is “a clear resistance to the heterosexualized regimes of the normal,” which Bibler deems as “signify[ing] more than what homosociality alone can account for” (23). Rather than relating to each other on the usual homosocial level, their interactions instead betray an intimacy that crosses gender norms, even if it remains non-sexual.

The language Capote uses is not the only means by which he establishes Smith as the wife or female helpmate to Hickock’s husband figure—he also does so via the relative roles each of the killers have in the relationship. For example, in one scene, Hickock has left Smith to do laundry while he is raising money for them the best way he knows how, hot check schemes. As such, their roles in the relationship mirror that of a traditional marriage with Hickock the “breadwinner” and Smith the wife who does domestic chores (Voss 112). Then, as in numerous other places in the book, Hickock soothes Smith “in language suggesting a man consoling his spouse” (112). Finally, at the end of the scene, reunited at a restaurant where they plan their next move, Hickock reassures Smith that Florida is the next stop, adding, “How about it, honey? Didn’t I promise you we’d spend Christmas in Miami?” (Capote 195). Though Voss does not comment on the aforementioned line about Miami, he does include it in his own book while he

discusses the overall passage. As with Voss's analysis of the two's roles and language in previous scenes, here too Hickock relates to Smith in much the same way a traditional man and his wife would interact, with the male taking the dominant lead in their activities. Considering the prevailing societal attitudes before the Stonewall Riots of 1969, Capote's insistence on framing the two as a married couple encodes their relationship as homosexual, despite the author's refusal to identify them explicitly as such.

As further confirmation of this relationship within the book, others seem to hint at this dynamic between the two as well—and this dynamic is established between Smith and other men too. In Voss's reading of the text, he sees Hickock portrayed as the “seducer” of Smith, observing that the affectionate nicknames for Smith—“honey,” “baby,” “sugar”—are his efforts to “sweet talk” Smith for the purposes of using him as a killer at the Clutter home (107). The language used when Hickock decides that Smith is a natural killer and, by extension, a useful asset in this operation, implies their interactions are a courtship, with Hickock the initiator. Thus, Hickock “had proceeded to woo Perry, flatter him” (Capote 55). Voss also notes that, in this section, Hickock derisively refers to Smith as a “punk,” prison slang for a passive male sexual partner (Voss 107). He is not the only one to call Smith a “punk,” either. Indeed, Smith's former landlady in Las Vegas, after the KBI investigators question her about him, asks, “What you got against him—a nice little punk like that?” (Capote 176). Capote may have wanted to avoid explicitly identifying Smith and Hickock as homosexual, but he provides frequent linguistic clues to signal such an identity.

Hickock is also not the only man who “courts” Smith. Though it obviously makes him uncomfortable, Dewey is forced to light Smith's cigarettes and put them in his mouth, because Smith's hands are encumbered with cuffs, on the long ride from Nevada back to Kansas. Dewey

specifically notes that doing so is “repellant” because it was “the kind of thing he’d done while he was courting his wife” (Capote 232). Curiously, despite Capote’s vehement protests against a homosexual attraction between Hickock and Smith, he does concede that Smith loved another prisoner, Willie-Jay, though he stoutly maintained the relationship had never been physically consummated (Christensen 63). These various instances in the text indicate that Hickock is not the only one who views Smith as feminine—he is treated or perceived that way by others throughout the book. These various incidents affirm that Smith is not just feminized in his dealings with Smith; he is feminized in the world at large. As such, Smith’s identity is one that is inherently queer, even if Capote is reluctant to identify him as explicitly homosexual. In a further emphasis on Smith’s queerness, gender inversion also crops up in the physical descriptions of Smith. In the first mention of him, Smith is described as having “tiny feet . . . [that] would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady’s dancing slippers” (Capote 15). He also has “small and calloused but girlish hands” (Capote 119). Beyond his appearance, Smith’s mannerisms are also frequently categorized as effeminate. His handwriting is considered startling in its effeminacy; Capote observes that KBI detective Harold Nye was taken aback by “[t]he ornateness of it, the mannered swoops and swirls” (176). He is further feminized upon his return to Kansas when he is jailed. While he is awaiting trial, Smith is relegated to the women’s section of the jail, to keep him and Hickock separated from each other (Capote 252). Capote’s depiction of Smith as feminine certainly does not seem coincidental, regarding how it is reinforced so many different times in the text.

The most explicit connection of their relationship with that of a marriage is from Hickock himself, immediately before their arrest. As Smith is inside a post office picking up the personal



possessions he had shipped to himself while on the run, Hickock broods about their situation and his next move, which includes:

Goodbye, Perry. Dick was sick of him—his harmonica, his aches and ills, his superstitions, the weepy, womanly eyes, the nagging, whispering voice. Suspicious, self-righteous, spiteful, he was like a wife that must be got rid of. And there was but one way to do it: Say nothing—just go. (Capote 214-215)

The entire characterization of Smith and his relationship to Hickock in this passage is defined in feminine terms. Beyond the overt references to him as a wife and his feminine appearance, Smith is presented with the same personality as a shrewish woman, with his endless complaints and critiques. In his litany of problems with Smith, Hickock apparently realizes that he did not truly know Smith until their time on the lam, and Smith seems to have had a similar epiphany about Hickock because he too sadly reflects once they are in hiding that “if he knew Dick, and he did—*now* he did—[Dick] would spend it right away on vodka and women” (Capote 119). As such, their relationship almost seems like a parody of the starry-eyed young couple that marries before they know each other well and before either is ready for such a commitment. Usually this trope involves the breakup of a marriage, but Smith’s and Hickock’s story follows a decidedly more somber trajectory in which, after a brief stint as cellmates together, the two team up on a brutal multiple homicide and then only truly spend extensive time together while evading authorities on a bizarre trek across North America.

In the evoking of the marriage image of their relationship, Capote is also further reinforcing the queer nature of their relationship. By putting the words “wife” into Hickock’s own mouth in reference to Smith, Capote indicates that he does want his reader to detect something atypical in their relationship, something outside the realm of the standard male

homosocial friendship, even if he does not want their interactions to read as too overtly homosexual, for fear of the backlash the book may receive. Because of the portrayal of Smith and Hickock as a couple, no matter how veiled, Voss theorizes a reading of their relationship that borrows heavily from J.J. Maloney's own 1999 interpretation of the crime in *Crime Magazine*, which argues that the Clutter homicides were prompted by Smith's sexually-charged possessiveness toward Hickock. In his own similar take on the theory, Voss argues that Smith's killing of the Clutters was caused, not by the psychotic break Capote suggests happened to Smith when he was confronted with the chance to avenge his life of misery against a helpless representative of all the authority figures he had hated, but rather by the realization that he had been courted by Hickock for the crime yet was being cast aside for Nancy, whom Smith alleged Hickock had every intention of raping that night (Voss 114-118). Crucially, Voss notes that right before Clutter's murder, what happened that night between the two killers was, in Smith's own words, "something between me and Dick" (qtd. in Voss 118). In this reading, Smith is not the personified vengeance of the suffering underclasses. Instead, he has become the proverbial woman scorned. Even if Voss's theory is not what happened that night, Smith and Hickock clearly have a dynamic that is not simply a homosocial friendship. Despite Capote's insistence to the contrary, he still depicts the two as a couple in numerous ways, which reinforces my reading of them as outside the boundaries of the mainstream within the context of 1950s Kansas and America. In these portrayals of the interactions between the two men, Capote clearly establishes their queerness for the reader; however, instead of using this aspect of their relationship to criticize them, Capote also shows that the more prototypically "normal" characters are also queer, which will be discussed more in-depth later in this chapter.

### The Positives of Queer Freakishness in Capote

Some critics in the initial reviews of *In Cold Blood* did notice and comment on this aspect of the text despite Capote's denials, including William Phillips, who, incidentally, criticized the muted nature of the relationship but still noted that there is enough of an unmistakable homosexual undertone, with "their quibbling, jealous, dependent relationship, like that of a very old or very young couple." Stanley Kauffmann also wrote critically of the depiction of Smith and Hickock's coupling, complaining that homosexuality is never overtly broached in the book, though it seems undeniably present in Hickock's affectionate nicknames for Smith and the "strange feminine jealousies between them," as well as the fact that Smith and Hickock were in the same room together while the latter had sex with a Mexican prostitute. In commenting on that particular episode, Kauffmann snipes "No Freudian sage is needed to reveal the girl as a surrogate." Regardless of how overt the homosexuality is in *In Cold Blood*, most modern critics find Capote's portrayal of his gay characters in his other works disappointing, as well, though he himself was openly homosexual at a time when to do so could be detrimental to one's career. Indeed, most contemporary criticism of Capote's works beyond *In Cold Blood* that feature homosexual characters expresses dissatisfaction with a perceived trend in which homosexuality is associated with "freakishness, affectation, and effeminacy" and is marked by a "nonliberational" attitude toward embracing one's homosexuality; that is, embracing one's homosexuality is not portrayed in Capote's work as "lead[ing] to mutual salvation or even help" (Christensen 62, 63). Fahy seconds this analysis, commenting that despite Capote's own personal life, his work betrays mixed emotions about the matter. Fahy notes that especially in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* homosexuality is frequently associated with "freak shows," "unusual bodies[,] and the deformed casualties of heterosexual love" (160). Indeed, according to Fahy, the

only character in the novel who is not somehow physically “deformed” or grotesque is the adolescent protagonist, Joel Knox (162). Less overtly, this connection between sexual nonconformity and the grotesque is carried over in *In Cold Blood*, according to Fahy. Thus, in addition to the implied homosexuality between the killers, both are also rendered physically grotesque by separate automobile accidents, one that crippled Smith and the other that mangled Hickock’s face (Fahy 168, note 17).

Fahy’s inference that the presence of grotesque homosexual characters means they are imbued with negative qualities in Capote’s work is mistaken, however. Ordinarily the identification of someone as grotesque is an indication that the person in question is to be feared, shunned, or avoided. However, these expectations are subverted with Capote. Capote’s southern gothic work, including texts before *In Cold Blood* like *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and “A Tree of Night,” always established Capote as being on the side of the grotesque characters. Indeed, in his work, grotesqueness is not a signal for derision. Instead, derision is to be reserved for those who cannot accept and love the grotesque person. For example, in “A Tree of Night,” the protagonist, Kay, seems afraid of the grotesque “wizard man” who shares her train compartment. Her refusal to accept this man is not meant to engender sympathy or praise for her; instead, her actions are intended to cause readers to judge her because she is incapable of loving the grotesque. For Nance, Capote characters must be willing to regard the grotesque with “uncritical acceptance” because to do so puts them more in touch with the dark recesses of their own selves, which Capote sees as a positive because, for him, to do so was simply a matter of accepting reality (17). In “The Headless Hawk,” Vincent is fascinated with the unconventional D.J., and he admits that his love for not just her but all the others he has loved, including several men, is driven by their possessing “a little something wrong, broken” (Capote 96). Vincent even

specifically identifies “carnival freaks” as the root cause of this affection, which dates back to his childhood (Capote 96).

Vincent and D.J. also function as two of the more overtly homosexual characters in Capote’s works because, even though they have a sexual relationship together, both of them are revealed to have had homosexual relationships in the past. Thus, when reflecting on past lovers, Vincent recalls “poor Allen, he’d thought [their affair] was to be forever” and “Gordon, too. Gordon, with the kinky yellow hair, and a head full of old Elizabethan ballads” (105).

Meanwhile, D.J. is distraught in recalling when the woman she loved, Mrs. Hall, left to marry a man. D.J. directly tells Vincent, “Sometimes I think if she’d known how much I loved her—why are there some you can’t ever tell?—I think maybe she wouldn’t have married, maybe it would’ve been all different, like I wanted it” (105). Again, as with the character in “A Tree of Night,” Capote’s describing someone as grotesque or freakish is not meant to imply that he or she is to be judged as undesirable; instead, the grotesque in Capote’s stories are overwhelmingly intended as likable and even desirable. The very fact that society codes these people as detestable is what makes them appealing for Capote.

In another story, “Shut a Final Door,” Capote uses the treatment of a gay man by the unlikable main character as a further sign that the latter is not a sympathetic protagonist. In this scenario, the character, Walter, initially does not seem to realize that he has given a man the wrong impression of his interest. However, once he does realize what is happening, rather than dissuading the other fellow, Walter flirtatiously smiles and eggs the latter into continuing to follow him. The scene culminates with Walter slamming a taxicab door in the other man’s face and laughing as the victim of the prank is left, hurt and confused, on the pavement. Even Walter seems aware of how cruel he has been, recalling “I turned around and gave this guy a long, long

look, and he came rushing up, all smiles. And I jumped in the cab, and slammed the door and leaned out the window and laughed out loud: the look on his face, it was awful, it was like Christ. I can't forget it" (Capote 125). At a time when homosexuality was still illegal in many areas and often judged as immoral, it is significant that in this instance, the gay character is not demonized—instead, it is his heterosexual tormenter who is implicitly judged for being cruel toward him. Indeed, even in other stories where the homosexual characters seem grotesque, they are not portrayed as evil or bad for that reason. The outward physical grotesqueness of these characters is more symbolic of how people perceive their underlying homosexuality rather than how Capote sees the issue. He is not merely replicating the notion that these people are grotesque. Instead, he is tweaking this perception and showing that queerness itself is desirable, in spite of how it is frequently characterized as grotesque by others. The fact that the homosexual characters are grotesque in Capote's work is not an indictment of them, at least not in Capote's eyes—rather it is an indictment of societal attitudes toward grotesqueness.

In a larger context, by placing the grotesque homosexuals outside of the South, Capote is further subverting the underlying assumption that the South is where America banishes its grotesques. The parallels between Smith and Hickock with Capote's other grotesque homosexual characters reveal that such impulses and feelings cannot be relegated to an abject part of society—they are present even in other characters who would otherwise be deemed "normal." As such, the numerous ways in which Capote singles out the killers, especially Smith, as feminine and/or homosexual is meant to reinforce their queerness but not in a negative sense. One can certainly argue that the depiction of Smith as an effeminate killer is problematic in that it reinforces the association between queerness and deviancy. However, as Sarah Gleeson-White notes in her own examination of queer grotesques in the work of Carson McCullers, a fellow

southern gothic writer and one-time friend of Capote's, attempts at subverting the negative stereotypes surrounding homosexuality at this time often resorted to using those same tropes because of "the difficulty of accessing a new language and a new body of images with which to represent grotesque desires" (38). This problem of finding the language to subvert these stereotypes seems a more likely explanation for Capote's portrayal of his queer characters, especially given the constant emphasis on the violent criminality of other characters who are not coded as queer, such as the Kansas townspeople, and the depiction of other characters who have queer tendencies but who are upstanding citizens, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Capote's inclusion of queerness and criminality existing apart from each other indicates that he does not intend the portrayal to be one of queerness automatically indicating deviance or violence. Rather, it is a more encompassing criticism of Americans at large, which asserts that criminality and non-traditional sexuality cannot be merely dismissed as something possessed only by the emphatically queer and socially unacceptable, such as Smith.

The portrayal of Smith as essentially feminine also mirrors other characters in Capote's southern gothic works, especially the homosexual males in Capote's debut novel, *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*. Perhaps in none of his other works is the issue of sexuality and gender as central as *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, for it is the dominant concern, even from the beginning. Joel, similarly to Smith, is also identified as inherently queer from the beginning of the book. Like Smith, protagonist Joel Knox is immediately identified as effeminate in appearance, from the lens of the more masculine café-owner he encounters after arriving in town. The older man "had his notions of what a 'real' boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned . . . and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes" (Capote 4). Later when Joel sings with Idabel and Florabel, the text notes they are all sopranos (Capote

30). This detail certainly could just be a reminder that Joel is still a prepubescent boy; however, considering the frequent identification of him as effeminate, the detail serves as just another reminder of how un-masculine or un-boyish he is. Joel is directly coded as queer, which bothers others throughout the text. Nevertheless, in depicting those who disapprove of Joel because of this inherent part of his personality, Capote is clearly condemning this attitude of judgment. Joel himself is a likable, sympathetic protagonist whose behavior is only objectionable by societal standards of gender norms.

Joel himself has several moments where he tries to be more prototypically masculine, though these efforts almost always fail. For instance, when he first arrives at his father's home, he stands up straight, "prepared to make the best, most manly impression possible," though this is ultimately humorously undermined when the door is answered by his father's second wife, who has "the vague suggestion of a mustache fuzzing her upper lip" (Capote 35). He also tries, in a spectacularly thwarted effort, to initiate a heterosexual connection with Idabel, tenderly kissing her on the cheek after they had bathed together in the creek. She responds by pulling his hair, and he in turn retaliates by fighting back (Capote 108). The family's cook Zoo Fever also stages her own intervention, of sorts, cutting his hair because she "can't have you runnin round here lookin like some ol gal: first thing you know, boy, folks is gonna say you got to wee wee squattin down" (Capote 93). On occasion, Joel seems determined to escape his queer identity and embrace the heteronormativity that characters like Zoo Fever are trying to foist upon him. However, the portrayal of Joel's struggles to be "normal" suggests that these efforts are futile because Joel is not and never can be, according to then-contemporary understandings of the word. Joel's innate difference from other men, which is noted by other characters and is a point



of contention for them, also ties him to Smith. Joel cannot escape his own queerness any more than Smith can.

For most writers of this time period, Joel's inability to follow conventional moral norms would single him out as freakish or distasteful, but that is never Capote's intention in depicting queerness because Capote himself always preferred the queer and unusual to whatever society deemed "normal." Numerous commentators have noted that, for Capote, there is nothing worse than being normal. Accordingly, Nance declares in *The Worlds of Truman Capote* that "[the author's] impulse, from 'A Tree of Night' to *In Cold Blood*, is to accept and understand the 'abnormal' person; it has been, indeed, one of the main purposes of his writing to safeguard the unique individual's freedom from such slighting classifications as 'abnormal'" (17). Thomas Slayton Johnson also acknowledges this tendency in Capote's work, noting that "[t]here is room for the misfit, the unfortunate, but no room for the average or uncomprehending" (131). Indeed, Johnson expresses doubt that Capote could find true sympathy for the ordinary and normal people of the world: "Capote's sympathy and sensibilities encompass the downtrodden, but they do not encompass, in fact they violently reject, the everyday" (130). Capote's friend John Knowles also commented on this recurring theme and conceded that it applied to *In Cold Blood* as much as it did Capote's earlier work: "The theme in all of his books is that there are special, strange gifted people in the world and they have to be treated with understanding" (qtd. in Plimpton 175). As such, the fact that Joel ultimately resists others' efforts to make him more conventional—and also is unsuccessful in his own bids to be normal—are a credit to him. Likewise, the depictions of Smith as being detached from traditional standards of masculinity are not intended to discredit him in Capote's eyes—indeed, Smith is portrayed quite sympathetically

in the book and is the story's protagonist. As such, the portrayal of his queerness is merely a continuation of Capote's assertion that such difference, queerness itself, is alluring.

### Gender Role Subversion in Capote

Furthermore, queerness is also not just limited to grotesque criminals in the text. Given Smith's and Hickock's status as outsiders, it is not difficult to see why they are strongly associated with the idea of alterity in their sexuality and gender roles, mirroring earlier Capote stories about outsiders. Nevertheless, the more wholesome residents of Holcomb and Finney County have more in common with them in this realm, a connection that calls into question the entire divide between the killers and the other Kansans. Despite his outward presentation as a prototypical man's man, even Herb Clutter has his domestic side. Capote notes that Clutter was a talented baker: "[N]o woman in Kansas baked a better loaf of salt-rising bread, and his celebrated coconut cookies were the first item to go at charity cake sales" (9). The indomitable postmistress Mrs. Clare also defies conventional gender expectations. Capote describes her as "caustic, somewhat original, and entirely imposing" and also notes that she is a "trouser-wearing, woolen-shirted, cowboy-booted" woman (67). Indeed, Mrs. Clare is mannish enough that many of the men she knows treat her as one, jovially slapping her on the back as they joke with her (Capote 231). The Deweys themselves share a surprisingly modern division of labor in their house, as they rotate cooking and dish-washing duties, an arrangement that led some of his law enforcement cohorts to tease him: "Looka-yonder! Here comes Sheriff Dewey! Tough guy! Totes a six-shooter! But once he gets home, off comes the gun and on goes the apron!" (Capote 105). In doing so, Dewey is just as domesticated as Smith is in doing the laundry for himself and Hickock. More importantly, though, neither Mrs. Clare nor Alvin Dewey are inherently unhappy

due to these arrangements. In fact, both of those characters are among the more down-to-earth of the Kansans presented in the text, though they are not necessarily traditional in their gender roles. The queerness of Smith's and Hickock's relationship here, especially the gender role swapping evident in much of Smith's behavior, is revealed to be not as atypical as it initially may appear, precisely because these otherwise "normal" Kansans also engage in nontraditional gender roles.

This questioning of traditional gender roles exists in Capote's other southern gothic work, as well. In *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Joel's eventual friend Idabel is also immediately established in her gender-bending, but this detail does not seem to cause her any anguish, though others judge her harshly for it. From the moment she first appears, she is described in masculine or boyish terms. She has a "boy-husky" voice and is warned by the owner that she is not welcome until she starts wearing girl's clothing, to which Idabel storms out and insists she will not be back (Capote 21-22). Even before she is introduced, she is described as a "freak" for her refusal to wear what is considered gender-appropriate clothing (Capote 17). Her expressed desire to farm violates all manner of social norms, including gender norms, as noted by her sister: "Whoever heard of a decent white girl wanting to be a farmer?" (Capote 81). Later, when Joel hesitantly joins her in skinny-dipping, she eviscerates him for his embarrassment, confiding that she does not consider herself female and that "I want so much to be a boy" (Capote 106). The description of her without clothing only drives this point home further because, despite hints of her impending womanhood, she remains "boyish" in build (Capote 107). Though Idabel is repeatedly condemned by many in the community for her insistence in acting and dressing like a boy, she remains remarkably assured and comfortable in her own skin. Much like Smith and Joel, Idabel is coded as queer, but she does not seem to mind.

Even more to the point, Capote champions her for not minding. The hypocrisy of conventionality is perhaps best illustrated in the circus scene of the novel, when Joel and Idabel encounter Roberta Lacey, who scolds Idabel for her rejection of femininity. Roberta dismisses Idabel as “peculiar company” for the boy, pointing to her affinity for male clothing and violence (Capote 153). Nevertheless, Roberta is hardly presented as a paragon of femininity, for she delivers this litany while she fondles the hairy wart on her chin (Capote 153). Roberta is depicted as just as unnatural as a woman in her physical appearance; nevertheless, that fact does not stop her from critiquing Idabel on a matter that she is in no position to criticize. Just as Joel ultimately embraces his homosexuality at the end of the novel, Idabel too accepts her queerness, as she plainly falls in love with the sad circus performer, Miss Wisteria, at first sight (Capote 155), and it is eventually revealed that they have run away together at the end.

Because Miss Wisteria is a little person and circus performer, she also could be categorized as yet another example of Fahy’s contention that Capote always portrays homosexuality within terms of circus freaks and unnaturalness. However, Miss Wisteria’s “freakishness” is not presented as a bad thing at all. Indeed, she accepts Idabel as she is and is portrayed as a likable and sympathetic character, despite the fact that she literally is a circus freak. Just like more non-traditional characters in *In Cold Blood*, such as Alvin Dewey and Mrs. Clare, Idabel and Miss Wisteria serve as examples of someone who is happy and comfortable in her own skin, despite societal expectations. Dewey and Mrs. Clare may not be as extreme of an example as Idabel, but they are still depicted as functioning within their community. Dewey endures some teasing about his sharing domestic chores with his wife, but otherwise he is an accepted member of the community. Likewise, Postmistress Clare and Herb Clutter were also well-liked within the town. Their gender non-conformity is certainly not as striking as Idabel’s,

but it still is certainly present. Fahy is correct that Capote's approach is not liberational, especially for openly homosexual characters; however, that does not mean he is not sympathetic to these characters' plights. Given the historical context of these works, which occurred before the Stonewall Riots and the advent of more accepting and public acknowledgements of the gay community, the non-liberational aspects of these works do not necessarily derive from Capote's indifference so much as a nod to the realities of the time. When examined for elements of queerness, in addition to overt homosexuality, Capote's work may still not be liberational, though it certainly is more encouraging than Fahy acknowledges. Indeed, his illustration of queerness in otherwise traditional characters indicates that queerness was an inherent aspect of America that was not limited to the grotesque and the deviant, though such a departure from traditional norms was often only accepted when its manifestation was relatively muted.

The contrast of queerness in comparison to heteronormativity is also illustrated in *In Cold Blood* by the plight of Mrs. Clutter. She very much fits the mold of what would be expected of a woman of her time and place, a passive farm wife, and her existence even before the murders is depicted as profoundly unhappy. Her exact condition is never spelled out in the text, though it is noted that Bonnie is "nervous" and "suffered 'little spells,'" and Capote forthrightly states that she spent time in several state psychiatric institutions (Capote 7). Nevertheless, her symptoms—"the tension, the withdrawals, the pillow-muted sobbing behind locked doors" (Capote 7)—sounds much like a form of depression, probably postpartum depression, as her symptoms occurred after each of her children were born and significantly worsened after the birth of her youngest child (Capote 27). During one of her excursions from home for treatment of what ailed her, a doctor had recommended that she stay in Wichita, Kansas, for a while, working and living on her own. The experience was a beneficial one for Mrs. Clutter, who thoroughly enjoyed her

newfound independence but eventually left it out of a profound sense of guilt precisely because she did enjoy it (Capote 28).

Bonnie Clutter is certainly portrayed as neurotic in the text, but the root of her emotional distress seems to be the very expectations foisted on her as 1950s housewife and mother. When she escapes this existence and establishes a modern lifestyle for herself in Wichita, she flourishes. She however feels unable to pursue what feels liberating to her—what is a form of queerness of its own sort if only because it challenges the heteronormativity her community and society expects—and returns to a lifestyle that clearly makes her unhappy. Her killers are portrayed as nontraditional in the realm of sexuality, which in many works of this time period would seem an indictment of them, but Capote also portrays the story's heroes that way. Smith and Hickock are not to be loathed for their queerness any more than Dewey and Mrs. Clare are. In the cautionary tale of Bonnie Clutter, Capote further questions the very existence of the gender roles and attitudes toward sexuality that condemn Smith and Hickock on that note. Mrs. Clutter's obvious unhappiness in her traditional life serves as a stark indictment of this system.

Furthermore, the representations of sexuality and gender roles in the text reveal that, contrary to popular imagination, the American South is not the only region for queerness. The popular image of Kansas is one of blandness and moral conservatism, despite the state's early reputation for extreme progressivism. The bifurcated image of Kansas reflects that of the South, which is also widely perceived as a region of queerness but also moral conservatism. Though the American South is often perceived as the site of allowable queerness, in much the same way that it functions as a region where degenerate violence is also allowable, Capote uses his true crime story to suggest that such simple categories of behavior and region are fallacious. Queerness is not something that can be banished to the South or to those who are dismissively categorized as

“freaks”—it also exists in the plains of Kansas among the blandly traditional like Alvin Dewey. Furthermore, heteronormativity, as represented by the sad life of Bonnie Clutter, is depicted as profoundly soul-crushing. Though Fahy may contend that the “freakishness” of Capote’s homosexual characters leaves much to be desired, this very quality is what that author finds so admirable in them. For Capote, “freakishness” and, by default, queerness is desirable to the alternative of bland heteronormativity. Bonnie Clutter is perhaps the best indication of his reasoning on this subject. Instead of embracing the brief period of time in which she does engage in queerness, her escape to Wichita from the traditional gender expectations foisted upon her as a farm wife, she returns to the everyday, ordinary world of the Clutter farm and is destroyed by it, as evidenced by her emotional disturbance and numerous manifestations of neurosis. In contrast, the members of the community who are less hidebound by such expectations, such as Detective Dewey and Mrs. Clare, are portrayed as well-adjusted and ultimately satisfied with their lives. Capote may well have intentionally muted the portrayal of homosexuality in *In Cold Blood* to ensure that the book sold, but he still highlights the queerness of his characters. Though many readers, especially when the book was released in the 1960s, may have been inclined to dismiss Smith and Hickock because of their grotesqueness and queerness, the counterpoint of prototypically Kansans engaging in similar instances of gender role reversal and the contrasting sadness of Mrs. Clutter’s life indicate that the two killers are not to be judged harshly for their diversion from conventional attitudes toward sexuality and gender.

Chapter Three: “These Were Phantoms, the Ghosts of the Legally Annihilated”: Southern Gothic Imagery of Race, Capital Punishment, and Sexual Violence in *In Cold Blood*

According to Justin D. Edwards, one of the truly distinguishing aspect of American gothic literature from its European cousins is the role of race in the stories (xvii). He is certainly not the only critic who identifies race as a central concern for American gothic work. In his own discussion of crucial distinguishing elements of nineteenth century American gothic texts, Allan Lloyd Smith also considers race a defining element of the genre (163). In light of the American South’s longstanding, tumultuous history of racial discrimination and violence, race also plays a defining role in southern gothic literature. The specter of slavery haunts the work of William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom, Light in August* and “Dry September,” among other texts, in his depictions of African Americans in the South, but it also is a prominent concern in the works of other southern gothic writers, including Harper Lee, Erskine Caldwell, and Charles Chestnutt.

Though Truman Capote wrote many southern gothic works, at first glance race does not seem to play an overt role in his stories, despite the presence of African American characters. In fact, there is little scholarly attention directed toward race in any of Capote’s work, including *In Cold Blood*. As Thomas Fahy explains in his introduction to his own book on the writer, “Capote’s writing has rarely been discussed in relation to Cold War culture, and this oversight can be attributed in large part to the tendency among scholars to view his work ahistorically” (8), which helps explain the presence of few articles devoted to examining race in Capote’s work. Fahy notes that the two most frequent critical standpoints for viewing Capote’s work are “biographical and New Critical” (9). There are several likely reasons for the dearth of scholarly



attention on the social significance of Capote's work, with the most paramount being the author's own advertisement of his texts' appeal. With *In Cold Blood*, he hyped the text's novelty genre and factualism, as well as his own personal involvement, so it is only natural that subsequent critics have exerted considerable effort into examining the accuracy of his claims and analyzing the book within these parameters. In addition, many other Southern writers, such as Faulkner or even Capote's childhood friend Harper Lee, focus more overtly on race relations in their texts. Capote's attention to these matters tend to be much more subtle and, thus, less likely to attract scholarly attention. Nevertheless, race in Capote's work does merit further scholarly attention because, though racial concerns may not be approached as directly in other southern gothic works, it is an issue that Capote repeatedly draws attention to, quiet though his focus may be.

The significance of Capote's presentation of racial tension in *In Cold Blood* is heightened by its release in 1966. At the time, the American South, as well as the United States as a whole, was embroiled in the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement protests. In between the initial murder of the Clutters in 1959 and the release of the book early in 1966, efforts to stop segregation had exploded into the national spotlight as a number of landmark events unfolded, including the initial sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960, the Freedom Rides that started in 1961, the Freedom Summer drive for voting rights in Mississippi in 1964, and the Selma March of 1965, which featured police attacking unarmed protestors. Though Capote is not an author frequently thought of in discussions of civil rights and literature, the fact remains that he was extremely sympathetic to the African American struggle for equality. Some critics posit that many gay writers in the mid-twentieth century felt a connection with the African American community because of their shared struggle for rights. As David Bergman explains in his own examination

of gay attitudes toward the black struggle for equality, this connection seemed natural for many in the gay community because “[n]ot only are both groups legally and socially stigmatized but early sexology often constructed homosexuals as a different race, biologically separate from heterosexual” (79). Capote may very well have perceived a link between his own sexuality and the Civil Rights Movement; his sympathies started early, during his childhood in segregated Alabama. As an adult, he would gleefully recall how he enraged the local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan by inviting a black servant to a Halloween party and how the subsequent Klan protest march failed (Fahy, *Understanding Truman Capote* 3). Furthermore, as he explained to Cecil M. Brown in “Plate Du Jour,” an interview that focused specifically on Capote’s thoughts on race relations, he considered the uncredited white re-appropriation of black contributions to the arts, especially in music, as “the rip-off of the century” (39). Capote was clearly bothered by the racism that infected his home region, but *In Cold Blood* depicts how this issue is not an exclusively southern problem. At a time when violent attacks on African Americans and Civil Rights workers were happening in the South, the actions portrayed in Capote’s text illustrate that racism, even in less violent manifestations, is not limited to the American South. It exists also in the American Heartland in Kansas, a state stereotyped as an abolitionist stronghold.

For instance, despite its Kansas setting, *In Cold Blood* relies on traditional southern gothic imagery of the horror of hanging to convey his characters’ fear of this form of execution. The focus is especially on the gruesomeness of the act of hanging, rather than merely a fear of death or even just apprehension about the public nature of an execution. Thus, one of the chief witnesses against the two killers, who was one of Hickock’s former cellmates, Floyd Wells, is described when giving his testimony. In the scene, Smith and Hickock’s attorney is cross-examining him about his foreknowledge of the crime, including the fact that he was the one who

told Hickock the Clutters had a safe, the ostensible impetus for the crime that followed. In response, “Wells plucked at his tie, as though the knot was suddenly too tight” (Capote 283). The image of a “knot suddenly too tight” around Wells’s neck is strongly suggestive of the act of hanging. Even more pertinently, the allusion to hanging occurs as Wells is simultaneously helping condemn Smith and Hickock to the gallows while he is also being castigated by the defense attorney for his own role in the crime. Thus, the specter of the hanging looms ominously over Wells in this scene as he figuratively tightens the noose around Smith and Hickock’s neck and escapes the hangman’s noose himself, a fact he acknowledges with his reaction to the tie.

This imagery of the fear of hanging is repeated in regard to Smith specifically. While on death row, he attempts to starve himself, informing his one-time partner-in-crime, “You can wait around for the rope. But not me” (Capote 318). In this disturbingly slow form of suicide, Smith does not want to avoid death; in fact, he chooses a much slower form of death precisely to avoid the hangman’s noose. In the midst of Smith’s suicide attempt, Capote also details a hallucination that the former had during this time period, which will be discussed more in-depth shortly. Smith’s nightmarish hallucination entails him performing before a crowd of men, mostly African American, whom he quickly realizes are fellow victims of capital punishment. The dream culminates in an image that underscores the inherent humiliation of this form of death: “urinating, defecating, Perry [Smith] entered eternity” (Capote 319). Beyond establishing Smith’s desire to avoid the rope, even if it means slowly starving himself to death, Capote also reinforces this aversion by populating the nightmare with fellow condemned men and highlighting the inherent ugliness of this form of death with his mention of Smith losing control of his bodily functions.

In addition, Capote also invokes the traditional image of white women being violated, but in doing so, he deconstructs the usual associations of this trope by having a non-white character be her rescuer, not her attacker. In his presentation of race in the book, Capote, as he does with his invocation of pastoralism, gender roles, and sexuality, uses the book to critique societal expectations about the subject. His portrayal of racial concerns centers almost exclusively on Perry Smith, one of the killers. Among a sea of predominantly WASP-ish characters, Smith stands out as the lone biracial person in the story, as his mother was Native American.

Nevertheless, Capote illustrates why it is problematic to engage in racially-based assumptions through Smith, a man who is both on the receiving end of much racism but who is also not above engaging in the same behavior himself. In his examination of race in the story, Capote presents the same basic argument he advances about criminality and queerness—that the South is not the sole region in the country where problems exist. Just as violent misfit criminals do not only originate in the Delta and just as queerness is not only banished to below the Mason-Dixon line, racism does not exist solely in the South. Considering that this book was released during the height of the Civil Rights movement, *In Cold Blood* served as a subtle reminder that racism was not a southern problem exclusively, even if it was most explicitly manifested there. Rather, racism is an American problem, as evidenced by the fact that it appears in that most American and seemingly placid of states, Kansas.

### Race in Capote's *In Cold Blood*

One of the strategies Capote uses to highlight race in the book is drawing attention to the numbers of African Americans in Kansan jails, while still highlighting how a disproportionate number end up executed by the state. Considering the book's historical context, during the height

of the Civil Rights Movement, this detail hardly seems unintentional. By highlighting the inherent racial disparity in the Kansas penal system, Capote is able to demonstrate to readers that racism is not solely endemic to the American South. In the final section of the book, which focuses on Smith and Hickock on death row, Capote provides statistics on the race of Kansas prisoners. Of the approximately eighteen hundred prisoners at the Kansas State Penitentiary for Men, Capote notes that the wardens keep a meticulous daily total of the inmates' races: "White 1405, Colored 360, Mexicans 12, Indians 6" (309). With these totals, 78.7% of the prisoners are white and 20.1% are black, with the remaining 1% listed as either Hispanic or Native American. Nonetheless, the racial identity of the African American prisoners is highlighted in Smith's highly gothicized nightmare about jail. The dream starts cheerfully enough, with Smith performing on a stage, a lifelong goal, before he realizes that his audience is not clapping. The audience is "mostly men and mostly Negroes," and Smith soon understands that they are not responding to his performance because "these were phantoms, the ghosts of the legally annihilated, the hanged, the gassed, the electrocuted—and in the same instant he realized that he was there to join them" (319).

Undoubtedly, the main purpose of the above passage is to solidify Smith's identification as a condemned man, but the overt juxtaposition of the race of the other inmates with Smith hardly seems unintentional. Thomas Fahy, in his book *Understanding Truman Capote*, contends that the white clothing Smith wears in the dream indicates that he himself possesses a "desire for whiteness," even though the dream's ending inevitably connects him with his African American audience (128). Smith certainly expresses frustration at being held back from his goals, but he never seems to desire for "whiteness" specifically, as Fahy contends. In fact, though he mentions racism he suffered as a child, Smith nowhere expresses shame concerning his mother's heritage.

Fahy does not delve in-depth into what constitutes Smith's "desire for whiteness," though he suggests that Smith's night in "the Clutter home, which embodied the white suburban middle-class ideal" revealed to the former "the full extent of his marginalization" (128). Smith may very well have been jealous of the Clutters and desire for a middle class existence is a recurring theme in the text, but Hickock is the one actually depicted as more actively envious of his socioeconomic betters. For instance, when they are on the lam in Miami, Hickock is exceptionally jealous of a well-to-do man who is vacationing on the beach with an attractive blonde because he realizes that "[a]ll that belonged to him, Dick, but he would never have it" (Capote 201). This realization is so upsetting to him that his "day was ruined" (Capote 201). Smith, in contrast, actively daydreams of acquiring wealth, normally through fantastical schemes, such as finding lost treasure, but he never seems as set on achieving "the white suburban middle-class ideal" that Fahy envisions as an incentive for wanting to be white. Indeed, while at the Clutter home, Smith felt profound shame for Hickock's behavior as the latter lorded the fleeting sense of superiority he had gained over the family and also for his own role in the attempted robbery: "It made me sick. I was just disgusted. Dick, and all his talk about a rich man's safe, and here I am crawling on my belly to get it" (Capote 240). Contrary to Fahy's assertion, Smith is not depicted as overtly possessing a "desire for whiteness" and the tangible economic middle-class existence that entails.

Though the text never truly depicts Smith having "a desire for whiteness," Fahy is correct in acknowledging how the scene connects Smith to other minorities within the prison. In that passage, Smith is not only identified as a future victim of capital punishment, but Capote is also very specific in identifying the sheer quantity of black victims, which is especially jarring when contrasted with his previous statistics on the race of Kansas prisoners. By drawing attention to

the disproportionate number of black men who have been victims of capital punishment, Capote is subtly but definitely pointing to a problem in the American justice system. Indeed, Capote is quite explicit in identifying these men as killed by the official—and legal—mechanisms of the state with his direct mention of the men as “legally annihilated.” They are not victims of lone vigilantes, as is the usual perception of lynching victims, but rather of the state of Kansas.

In the mid-1960s, when this book was released, the Civil Rights Movement was drawing attention to racial inequality, most notably in the American South but also in the country as a whole. By specifically highlighting the issues of race and incarceration, Capote is demonstrating to readers that there is an institutionalized racism in America that extends far beyond the more overt instances of racism associated with the Jim Crow. Even in Kansas, a state championed for its role in the abolitionist movement and stereotyped as the quintessence of wholesome Midwestern America, these issues exist. Capote’s implied criticism of this institutionalized racism is further emphasized by his inclusion of the morbid means of execution wielded by the state. In a southern gothic context, the mention of hanging denotes the specter of lynchings, though in this instance the culprits are not marauding white southern vigilantes but rather the Kansas justice system. Furthermore, Smith’s inclusion in this group of condemned, executed men and Hickock’s absence is telling, for the scenario solidifies Smith’s role as the racial outsider.

Throughout the text, Smith’s racial identity is consistently contrasted with that of the other inhabitants of Kansas. Given the southern gothic imagery evoked in the haunting nightmare about jail and in the text in general, the depiction of Smith’s racial identity is especially pertinent, for it presents yet another opportunity for Capote to challenge societal expectations. In previous chapters, I have examined how Capote subverts conventional attitudes about criminality

and sexuality/gender by illustrating how nontraditional behaviors and attitudes exist even among the most respected Kansans. In his portrayals of race, Capote also questions societal ideas, but he does not do so in necessarily the same way. His critiques of conventional behavior, until this point, have encompassed a wide range of characters; however, in his examination of race, his focus remains almost solely on Smith. The main critique he presents is a debunking of the traditional image of the predatory masculine racial minority who sexually threatens the innocent white maiden.

As Andrew B. Leiter explains in his analysis of this trope, within his book *In The Shadow of the Black Beast: African American Masculinity in the Harlem and Southern Renaissance*, this trope was rooted in the belief that “if black men were not controlled—meaning segregated and constantly reminded of white supremacy—they would inevitably revert to their bestial nature and rape white women” (3). Even more significantly, according to Leiter, the trope also depends on the cultural perception of southern white women as symbolic of the South itself; thus, “the rape of white women was not just a metaphor for, but synonymous with, any progress by the African American community” (4). This trope was not only repeated in fiction by both black and white authors, including James Weldon Johnson, Faulkner, Caldwell, and Richard Wright, but it was also the reasoning used in numerous real-life lynchings. Indeed, Johnson himself narrowly avoided being lynched when he was spotted with a woman local whites mistakenly assumed to be Caucasian (Leiter 1). The imagery of the “black beast rapist” was so pervasive that the trope was not limited to “African American and southern white authors who portrayed these anxieties” (Leiter 8). Indeed, as Leiter observes, this imagery “surfaced frequently in the lives and fiction of authors who are not traditionally considered to be particularly concerned with racial issues” (8). By evoking and then subverting this trope, Capote is critiquing the underlying assumptions about



racial minorities, but he is also better able to make this argument when the book was published, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, as advances against institutionalized racism continued, especially in the South.

Nevertheless, the basics of this trope are present in Detective Alvin Dewey's reminiscences of past cases, which include a brief description of a murder in which a Native American from the neighboring state of Oklahoma stabbed to death a white waitress with a broken beer bottle in a hotel room. The notes in the case file, which Capote quotes, are terse, but the race of both suspect and victim are clearly identified: "John Carlyle Polk, a Creek Indian, 32 years of age, resident Muskogee, Okla., killed Mary Kay Finley, white female, 40 years of age, a waitress residing in Garden City" (151). Further details are omitted, but the average reader does not need additional information to deduce the implications of the case: A white woman was murdered while in the middle of some sexual encounter with a non-white male. This fragmentary detail occurs midway through the book, while the killers are still on the loose. In Capote's structuring of the story, readers are familiar with the killers by this point, having traced their steps to the Clutter house that night and then followed them on the lam across the country, though the full story of what happened inside the house has not yet been revealed. As a consequence, this anecdote in the middle of the text, before the full account of the murder is revealed, hints at what could have befallen the Clutter women on that night when their home was invaded by the half-Native American Smith.

However, during Smith's confession, this trope is inverted when it is revealed that Hickock, not Smith, is the one who posed a sexual threat to Nancy Clutter. Smith confesses that Hickock had intended to rape Nancy, but Smith stopped his cohort, warning Hickock, "Leave her alone. Else you've got a buzzsaw to fight" (243). The anecdote, with Smith referring to himself

as a “buzzsaw” to indicate how determined he is to stop his partner, may seem like an attempt on Smith’s part to denigrate his associate and to make himself look more palatable before the trial, but by the time the confession occurs, approximately two-thirds of the way through the book, the reader has encountered many descriptions of Hickock’s sexual perversions, including his interest in younger girls, so Smith’s confession, at least within the context of the book, rings true. Later in the text, Hickock corroborates Smith’s account, admitting, “I think the main reason I went there was not to rob them but to rape the girl. . . . But Perry never gave me a chance” (278-279). In his examination of the racial aspects of American gothic literature, Edwards observes that the basic trope of sexual assault upon a woman took on a further racial aspect in American literature, which reflected and engendered “a fear of interracial rape and violent miscegenation” (57). But this is not what happens in *In Cold Blood*. Certainly the threat of sexual violation lurks but not in the traditional form usually presented. Instead, Capote reveals how problematic this trope of the minority rapist is by showing that in a true crime case like the Clutter murder, these assumptions simply did not hold true on any level. Smith, whom Capote at one point bills “an uneducated, homicidal half-breed”<sup>6</sup> (288), presents no sexual threat to young Nancy.<sup>7</sup> In fact, a repeated plot

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<sup>6</sup> Capote’s decision to describe Smith in these terms seems a rhetorical one, for the quotation occurs from the implied perspective of one of Smith’s only friends, an Army buddy named Donald Cullivan. Though a well-to-do engineer who had not seen Smith in years, after learning of the murders he volunteered to serve as one of Smith’s character witnesses. As such, when the narration bills Smith “an uneducated, homicidal half-breed,” it seems calculated to portray the shock Cullivan’s friends experienced when the latter remained loyal to Smith, despite the charges brought against him.

<sup>7</sup> Smith’s sexuality is a complex issue, further complicated by the fact that Capote is the only real source for information. It would be an exaggeration to claim Smith is presented as asexual, for there are periodic mentions of a former girlfriend and his affection for another fellow prisoner; however, Smith is certainly also presented as quite guarded in his sexuality. As discussed in chapter two, Capote may have had a vested interest in downplaying Smith’s sexuality, especially if he was homosexual, to preserve the book’s chances for commercial success in the mid-1960s. Capote does not seem to consider Smith’s sexuality as deriving from his racial background, though. Instead, Capote often explains Smith’s sexuality within the terms of Smith’s own

point is his disgust for sexual incontinence, as he more than once explains that he “despise[s]. . . . [a]nybody that can’t control themselves sexually” (243).

Meanwhile, Hickock, who ordinarily would be stereotyped as the one saving Nancy Clutter from Smith’s advances because he is the white Kansan in the criminal duo, is revealed to be the true threat to white women, as his fondness for underage girls becomes readily apparent during their time on the lam. Most significantly, during Smith’s and Hickock’s Christmas Day visit to Miami, Hickock is portrayed unsuccessfully trying to seduce a twelve year old girl on the beach. During the scene, Hickock himself embarrassedly reflects on his sexual interest in young girls, admitting he had had sex with “eight or nine” such girls in his lifetime (201). After the presentation of Hickock’s thoughts, the point of view shifts from Hickock to Smith, who is blatantly offended once he realizes what Hickock is trying to do, especially seeing as how “they almost had a fist fight when quite recently [Smith] had prevented Dick from raping a terrified young girl” (202). With the emphasis on Hickock’s recidivist molestation tendencies and impulses, the book further deconstructs the idea of the black rapist because not only is the racial minority character innocent of this crime—indeed, he actively works to protect two different girls, the unnamed girl on the beach and Nancy Clutter—but his white accomplice is shown to be a recurring predator who potentially presents a threat to all women.

Smith is undoubtedly Nancy’s rescuer from Hickock’s advances, but the case is more complex than a simplistic showdown between two criminals. Though Smith presents no sexual threat to Nancy, he still had no problem with putting a bullet through her head. In addition, Smith himself is not always very open-minded. He makes bigoted comments, such as declaring that he

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personality. In his interview with George Plimpton, when asked about the two killers’ sexuality, Capote noted that Smith “was such a little moralist” (61), and many of Smith’s actions do seem dictated by his own idiosyncratic moral code throughout the book.

did not believe Hickock's hot check schemes would "fool a day-old nigger" (97). He also lied to Hickock and claimed to have killed a black man, which initiated Hickock's interest in Smith to begin with as a partner in crime. When Smith later expressed regret over the Clutter crime, Hickock reminded him about his alleged previous victim. Smith responds by dismissively pointing out that in that case his victim was black, so "[t]hat's different" (109). Nevertheless, Smith himself is frequently cast in this racial category by others, even before his nightmarish dream about condemned inmates. During his childhood, he ruefully recalls how one of the nuns at an orphanage was cruel to him because his mother was Native American. He claims that as a consequence, the nun would "call me 'nigger' and say there wasn't any difference between niggers and Indians" (132). Even when he is not being identified with African Americans, Smith is still considered racially different from the Caucasian Kansans who populate the rest of the text. Thus, when witnesses are questioned about Smith and Hickock's hot check spree shortly after the murders, one of the shopkeepers describes Smith as possibly "a foreigner, a Mexican maybe" (167). Smith's identity as racially distinct from the other characters is made clear throughout *In Cold Blood*; thus, his role in protecting Nancy from sexual assault, rather than perpetuating it, is a significant challenge to this longstanding gothic trope. Just as Capote has focused throughout the book on demonstrating how behavior attributed to maligned groups cannot be limited to one subset of people, his presentation of the inverted racial dynamics between Smith, Hickock, and Nancy Clutter illustrates how violence against women cannot be solely attributed to one group of men. In depicting Hickock's predatory actions toward numerous young women, Capote is demonstrating that seemingly all-American Kansas farm boys like Hickock are just as capable of violence against women as more maligned groups traditionally accused of these behaviors.

### Kansas's Racial Past

In much the same way that Capote explores a more complex image of Kansas than what the public usually associates with the state in regard to criminality and sexuality, the issue of race and Kansas in the book is significantly more complex than it is in the public imagination. For most Kansans—and many Americans—the state is viewed as a racially neutral or even progressive land. Indeed, as James Leiker notes in his study of racism in Kansas, many locals are proud of the state's origins as a staunch abolitionist territory in the violent years before the Civil War (216). Even Thomas Frank, who is quite outspoken in his condemnation of his native state's conservatism, pleads that whatever else the state is, one cannot accuse Kansas of being racist. In fact, he is quite adamant on this point, insisting

The state may be 88 percent white, but it cannot be easily dismissed as a nest of bigots. Kansas does not have Trent Lott's disease. It is not Alabama in the sixties. It was not tempted to go for George Wallace in 1968. Few here get sentimental about the Confederate flag. Kansas may burn to restore the gold standard; it may shriek for concealed carry and gasp at imagined liberal conspiracies; but one thing it doesn't do is racism. (170)

However, this perception of Kansas is overly simplistic and ignores the state's history. Frank may be correct that his fellow Kansans are not prone to overt displays of racism, such as waving Confederate flags, but a lack of blatant racism does not automatically equate to a lack of racism. In much the same way that other regions besides the South demonstrate more subtle modes of racism, Kansas is not exempt from a legacy of racism, simply by virtue of its geographic location. Indeed, Leiker goes on to argue that, according to more recent historical scholarship of early Kansas history, many of the “abolitionist” settlers in the state were not there because they opposed slavery on moral grounds as reprehensible toward African Americans but rather because

they thought it devalued white workers (220-221). Likewise, many Kansans are proud that the Brown versus Board of Education ruling, which abolished school segregation, originated in their own Topeka. However, they ignore the fact that the court case happened because school segregation existed in Kansas in the first place. Such discrimination is a part of Kansas history and is not limited to the American South.

As further evidence of the dichotomy between the perception of Kansas and reality, Leiker points to a 1933 article that discusses race and lynching in the state. Though the article's author acknowledged that, statistically,

of the 206 victims of lynchings in the state up to that time, 38 had been black men. The author claimed rape to be the third most likely cause of lynchings (after horse-stealing and murder), but in instances where rape was the primary cause, lynchings of blacks outpaced whites four to one, at a time when blacks' share of the population seldom reached 5 percent. (qtd. in Leiker 218)

Despite the statistics the author presented, she still concluded "the race problem cannot be considered an especially important factor in the state" of Kansas. (qtd. in Leiker 216). As this example shows, Kansas did have a race problem, though its existence was rarely acknowledged. For Leiker, history repeatedly demonstrates that Kansas was not a paragon of tolerance in regards to its African American citizens, despite the state's reputation for progressivism. Also, as Leiker notes in his article, even when white-black relations in Kansas were calm, intense hatred and discrimination toward Native Americans existed early in the state's history, despite Kansas's reputation as a bulwark of abolitionist sentiment (218). Leiker posits that in Kansas, as with many Western states that had a relatively small African American population, Native Americans replaced blacks as the "main pariah group," so blacks by default enjoyed more privileges, at least for a time (223). These statements are not to deride Kansas's role in the anti-slavery movement,

for the state certainly did house numerous outspoken abolitionists, as Leiker himself is quick to point out (221). Instead, this information serves as a reminder that in much the same way that it is problematic to dismiss all Kansans as wholesome country bumpkins or conservative traditionalists, it is also problematic to ignore the racist aspects of the state's past to focus solely on its traditional image as a bastion of abolitionist pride.

This issue is hardly one exclusive to Kansas, though. As Jeanne Theoharis explains in her examination of racism outside the South, contrary to the popular understanding of segregation being an exclusively southern problem, this form of discrimination existed across the country. Though the struggle for equality in places as disparate as Boston and Los Angeles were covered by then-contemporary news sources, Theoharis contends that modern historical memory has forgotten many of the events that occurred prior to the 1965 Watts Riot because to do so is “strangely comforting for it provides—as it did in the 1950s and 1960s—a moral version of history” that safely considers racism a southern manifestation, not a problem endemic to America itself (68). Allison Graham concurs with this view, insisting that, according to this framework, “racism could be effectively understood as a cultural aberration rather than a national deformity” (145).

In Capote's text, the issue of race is presented in a complex manner, which has been almost completely ignored by many scholars examining the work because of the previous critical emphasis on responding to Capote's style and claims of accuracy and inventing a new genre with the nonfiction novel. As such, there is no clear-cut “good guy” in the attempted rape of Nancy Clutter. The racist image of the sinister non-white man who violates white female chastity is subverted, but Smith is hardly the proverbial knight in shining armor. Even though Capote frequently draws attention to Smith's own biracial status, Smith is capable of racism himself, as

evidenced by some of his comments. Likewise, many of the people of Kansas are not explicitly depicted as racist. They assume Smith is not one of them, so to speak, but they do not direct racial slurs at him. The racism of Kansas, as presented in Capote's book, frequently appears to be a more subtle but institutional version of it, as evidenced by Smith's haunting jail dream. Despite the state's majority white population and even the fact that most of the state's prisoners were white, most of the men Smith saw in his dream—men who were explicitly identified as condemned to death—were black.

The juxtaposition summons images more in line with southern lynchings than an abolitionist paradise. Leiker contends that when Kansans claim their state is "different from the South," they ignore the state's history of racial unrest; however, he does concede that the state certainly does manifest its own Western sensibilities toward race, which are inherently different from northern and southern views and often more racist toward Native Americans (222-223). Historians have been more open than literary scholars to defining Kansas as sharing similarities with the South, at least on the subject of race relations. Brent M. S. Campney agrees with Leiker in his characterization of Kansas's history, contending that the state's history has been defined by race from the beginning due to the contentious and complex abolitionist issue that dominated its history as a territory. In keeping with Kansas's dual image as an egalitarian haven and as a throwback to southern racism, Campney argues that, at least until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the image of the South is evoked both "to obscure, dismiss, and justify incidents in Kansas, enabling commentators to cultivate a sort of historical amnesia, to deem each successive episode an anomaly, the exception that proved the rule of midwestern virtue" but it also provided a potent motivation for other Kansans to oppose racism for fear of being perceived like the South.



### Race in Capote's Other Southern Gothic Work

In Capote's southern gothic works, race occasionally crops up as a topic of discussion. When it does, Capote quietly examines societal attitudes about race, but it is rarely the focus of any one story. Thus, in "Children on Their Birthdays," when protagonist Miss Bobbit and Sister Rosalba get in trouble for defying societal conventions, the focus of the rest of the characters is on Miss Bobbit's misbehavior. The text directly notes that "no one cared" about Sister Rosalba's misdeeds simply because she is "colored" (148). The star of the story is Miss Bobbit; thus, the story itself is more concerned with her defying social norms, which is presented sympathetically. As such, Capote's quick note of the indifference to Sister Rosalba's deeds stands out as a quiet critique of these racist attitudes; nonetheless, it forms a very small part of a story otherwise not concerned with race relations.

A stark contrast to this attitude, though also expressed quietly, is in Capote's New York-based "Master Misery." The story, again, is primarily occupied with the activities of its white characters, but the opening scene features the female protagonist Sylvia commenting nonchalantly on the attractiveness of an African American butler she encounters. She comments directly on his looks: "His beauty touched her: slender, so gentle, a Negro with freckled skin and reddish, unreflecting eyes" (155). The story was published in 1949, when interracial relationships would still have been considered scandalous even above the Mason-Dixon line. Though nothing ever results from her observation, the tone of her comment conveys that her opinion need not be considered startling or outlandish. Certainly one can debate whether the African American butler is being objectified precisely because Sylvia deems him exotic, but her sentiments, as expressed in the story, are presented as ordinary and not warranting outrage.

Likewise, in *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, Randolph's long-gone love interest Pepe is also presented as exotically handsome, in no small part due to his Hispanic ethnicity. At one

point, Randolph comments that Pepe's "Indian skin seemed to hold all the light left in the air" (118). As with Sylvia and the black butler, Randolph may well be engaging in objectifying his exotic love interest, but Capote's emphasis seems to be on making interracial romances and attractions seem less provocative than they ordinarily would be considered. Indeed, with Randolph, readers may skim over the implied interracial attraction because they may be more distracted being outraged over the overt homosexuality present.

In point of fact, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* offers several quiet moments of critique of attitudes toward race in the South, though they are heavily subordinated to the primary emphasis on Joel's acceptance of his homosexuality. Most pertinent to any discussion of *In Cold Blood*, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* features what initially seems to be a throwaway description of the local town, but it betrays the same concern about race and imprisonment that Capote explored years later in his true crime book. Despite the comment that there are few prisoners in the local jail, Capote also notes that the local jail in his fictional debut novel "has not housed a white criminal in over four years" (14). Though almost all of the characters of the story who dwell in the town are white, the jail's statistics clearly ignore that fact. This detail is a reflection of the racially-charged injustice that afflicted many southern towns during the Jim Crow period, but it also indicates the same institutional racism that exists in Kansas, according to *In Cold Blood*, where a relatively small percentage of African Americans reside, though they comprise a significant minority of the prison population and a large percentage of the men who have been executed by the state.

*Other Voices, Other Rooms* also previews the issue of sexual violation, though in a far more tongue-and-cheek manner. Next to the jail without white convicts is an abandoned house that once allegedly belonged to "three exquisite sisters . . . raped and murdered here in a

gruesome manner by a fiendish Yankee bandit who rode a silver-grey horse and wore a velvet cloak stained scarlet with the blood of Southern womanhood” (14-15). Though the story features the violation of southern white women, here the culprit is not a black man. It is true that the offender is a hated outsider—a “Yankee”—but he does not match the racial profile usually presented in southern gothic as the main threat. Indeed, the idea that there is a threat is called into question because, as the text notes, the horrific story is not necessarily true. The narration introduces the tale with the phrase “it is said,” which is vague as to who says this story or who has firsthand knowledge of the rapes and murders. The likelihood that the story is false is also hinted at with the over-the-top description of the cloak the offender wears. Though the story is likely false—or at least highly exaggerated—the story clearly plays a central role in the town’s imagination and understanding of the Civil War. The fact that the offender is directly identified as a threat to southern womanhood identifies this concern as a central one for the community.

However, such vague threats and fantastical stories are juxtaposed with the very real rape and brutalization of Joel’s family’s black cook, Zoo Fever.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the raped and murdered white women in the story, who may be fictionalized within the context of the story, Zoo’s gang rape is presented as true. She tries to describe the experience to young Joel, in which she was raped by three white men, but his response is to cover his ears and regret her return. He

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<sup>8</sup> One could debate whether or not Zoo Fever’s name itself is racist. In the book, the members of the household call her Missouri; however, after deciding that she and Joel are friends, she specifically asks him not to call her that. As she explains, “Zoo’s my rightful name, and I always been called by that till Papadaddy let on it stood for Missouri, which is the state where is located the city of St. Louis” (Capote 47). She also notes with scorn that her employers insist on calling her Missouri because “they so proper” (Capote 47). As such, Zoo Fever herself does not seem to find her name racist, though the name does serve to exotify her, in much the same way the descriptions of the African American butler in “Master Misery” and Pepe in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* exotify those characters. Perhaps more than anything, the name demonstrates how her white employers remove her own personal agency in calling her a name (Missouri) that she does not consider her own.

declares that “she ought to be punished,” though it is unclear what she should be punished for (175). Unlike the concern expressed for the violated virtue of the three white women, who maybe fictional, Zoo Fever’s very real assault is dismissed by the one character who learns of it. Within the novel, it is of no consequence that a young black woman has had her virtue violated by white men, though a corresponding story of the same happening to white women is considered a cause of despair. In “Violating the Black Body: Sexual Violence in Truman Capote’s *Other Voices, Other Rooms*,” Thomas Fahy does discuss the rape of Zoo Fever in far more detail than other scholars, who tend to ignore the scene. Though he does not draw comparisons between the story of the white sisters in the beginning of the book and the eventual fate of Zoo Fever, Fahy notes that Capote himself was sympathetic to the suffering of African Americans in the Jim Crow South and that the scene serves “to condemn the practitioners of such acts” as well as “to express moral outrage over white America’s willful blindness to the problem of sexualized violence against black women” (31). This incident in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* serves as a preview, of sorts, of the same idea being explored more in-depth in *In Cold Blood*. The rapes presented in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* show that white female virtue can be violated by white men, as opposed to the stereotype of the black male rapist, and that black female virtue can also be violated. *In Cold Blood* drives these points home even more because, not only is the white suspect the attempted rapist, but he is also thwarted by the racial minority character who, according to this trope, would have been the offender.

### Conclusion

This theme of exploring the presence of darkness in the American Heartland, as typified by the Kansans of *In Cold Blood*, recurs throughout the book in regard to several themes. This

thesis has examined how Capote explores popular perceptions regarding criminality, sexuality, and race in regard to the Kansas setting of *In Cold Blood*. Though the popular image of Kansas at the time was one of a wholesome, traditional, conservative state, Capote shows that elements of criminality and queerness, which reside rather blatantly in the two misfit criminals, are also present in the bland, seemingly normal Kansas farmers. In addition, Capote upends traditional narratives of sexual assault and race by casting his biracial character not as the violator but rather as the savior of the young white girl who is sexually threatened. Even then, though, Capote complicates the narrative further by having her savior then murder her in cold blood.

Beyond showing the commonalities between the criminals and the law-abiding citizens of Kansas, Capote also draws comparisons between Kansas and the American South. Traditionally, the South has been perceived as a separately dysfunctional region of the country, one in which it was acceptable to explore the taboo, including elements of violence, queerness, and racism, because to do so would not indict the rest of the nation. As Allison Graham explains in regards to cinematic depictions of the South, though her statement certainly is true in regard to other portrayals, including literary ones: “the South is America’s past, its Oedipal nightmare, its site of criminal revelation” (161). However, *In Cold Blood* explores these issues commonly associated with the South and shows that they are present also in the metaphorical and literal center of the country and in seemingly stalwartly Midwestern characters. Capote, thus, reveals that such a strict division of behavior and reputation by region is highly problematic because it is simply untrue. Despite the common perception of southern exceptionalism in regard to these issues and the region’s frequent identification with the taboo, Capote’s work illustrates that violence, queerness, and racism are no more restricted to the South than they are absent from the rest of

the country, facts that were being driven home to Americans across the country during the tumultuous 1960s.

As Fahy astutely observes in his book about Capote, *Understanding Truman Capote, In Cold Blood* largely “reflects attitudes shaped by the 1950s, not the 1960s,” seeing as the crime itself took place in 1959 (114). Capote’s critique of traditional American life certainly does challenge a wide range of views associated with the 1950s, including assumptions that violent criminality is a trait of only those who are innate criminals, that homosexuality and nontraditional gender roles are abnormal and practiced only by societal misfits, and that racism is a social problem confined to the South. In confronting these assumptions, Capote not only portrays how these various issues are at play even in the most seemingly wholesome corner of the country, but he also calls into question the underlying premises. His depiction of the violent underlying impulses among Kansas farmers in the very heart of the American Heartland deconstructs traditional notions of bucolic pastoralism while his acknowledgement of queerness among those same Kansas farmers critiques the rigid gender standards that deem their relatively innocuous behavior as queer and offensive to begin with. In addition, his subversion of the black beast rapist trope questions the underlying logic that automatically assumes white men must protect white women from black men.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, Capote’s work throughout his career frequently championed the strange, the misfit, and the unusual, categories he considered far more desirable than the ordinary, the everyday, and the commonplace. In his discussion of Capote’s work, William Nance commented, “Capote’s impulse, from ‘A Tree of Night’ to *In Cold Blood*, is to accept and understand the ‘abnormal’ person; it has been, indeed, one of the main purposes of his writing to safeguard the unique individual’s freedom from such slighting classifications as

‘abnormal’” (17). Perhaps motivated by his own experiences of being perceived as “abnormal,” especially by his family because of his homosexuality, which manifested itself early, Capote was deeply invested in championing and defending those who society would rather ignore or pretend do not exist. *In Cold Blood* does not shy away from the darker impulses that exist in its dysfunctional criminal protagonists, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, both men unable to fit in society. Nevertheless, in his examination of shared commonalities between them and their victims and other Kansans, Capote demonstrates that their isolation from conventional society is unfair because respected members of that community are the same. In doing so, Capote’s book calls for a re-examination of what constitutes American identity, especially as perceived in the staid 1950s, though the book’s delayed release in 1966 ensured that readers were more willing to accept these criticisms in a decade where questioning institutions and conventional assumptions was encouraged.

Capote’s book functions simultaneously to urge for more tolerance in regard to perceived differences while also indicting America collectively for the issues explored within the text. Likewise, in his presentation of these elements within his seemingly ordinary characters, Capote is also indicting his reader and asking them to ponder the uncomfortable question of how much they really differ from Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. If the straitlaced Kansas farmers of the book are more similar than different from Smith and Hickock, Capote seems to be asking, are the readers who voyeuristically follow the murderers and peer into the crime scene so very different from the killers or even the town doctors that Smith condemned for wanting to hear the details of the case purely for perverse enjoyment? This comparison cuts both ways. In a sense, this realization is intended to be chilling, an acknowledgement of an innate darkness within humankind, a very gothic notion to explore. However, given Capote’s sympathy for society’s

rejects, this realization is also intended to elicit audience sympathy for these men guilty of a heinous crime as readers acknowledge their own similarities with these men.

As Capote demonstrates in his portrayal of the violence and suspicion that permeated the small town of Holcomb, violent criminality is not limited to these convicted killers—it is also shared by the local townspeople. This realization is not a condemnation of the locals so much as it is an acknowledgement that these impulses exist within all Americans, even if they are never exhibited as overtly as they are on Smith and Hickock. Likewise, Capote’s identification of queerness among the wholesome Kansans, which also ties them to the killers, is not intended as a slur; instead, it is a further example to establish how universal subversion of societal norms and expectations really are. The depiction of racism, though subtle, in the book also serves to remind readers that this problem exists in locales not commonly associated with it and, as such, presents a universal concern for all Americans.

When the Clutter murders occurred in 1959, Americans were much more likely to envision their fellow countrymen as being like the Clutters—conventional, white, and middle-class. Capote’s text deconstructs this automatic assumption about national identity by demonstrating that issues commonly displaced to abject segments of society, such as criminality, queerness, and racism, exist within the American Heartland, among even the most prototypically wholesome Americans. *In Cold Blood* demonstrates the underlying problems in the uncomplicated 1950s perception of America, a criticism substantiated by the turmoil of the 1960s as increasing numbers of Americans were more willing to acknowledge how flawed this view of American identity was. Thus, when the blunt postmistress Mrs. Clare cantankerously posits about the identity of the killers, “maybe it was you” (Capote 69), she is not merely referencing the unnamed questioner who asked for her opinion on the topic. She is also



referencing the reader and all the other Americans who may never have considered themselves as having any similarities to men like Smith and Hickock, yet these commonalities exist just as much as they do between the killers and the Kansans within the book itself. Within the pages of *In Cold Blood*, Capote is, in effect, putting his readers, and by extension, American identity itself on trial.

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