

True Storytelling:

Fiction and Nonfiction in

In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song

by

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## Abstract

The late 1960s through the early 1980s was a time of increased literary involvement of a 'new' form, that of the "New Journalism." Truman Capote's In Cold Blood was one of the first to overtly engage true events in a story that celebrated the use of narrative conventions of fiction. Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song was one of the final texts of this movement, published in 1979. Mailer's book centers on the same ostensible real-life event – that of murder without motive in a sleepy, Midwestern town – but reaches very different conclusions about the interaction of fiction and nonfiction.

Capote seeks to clean and sweep the chaos left in the wake of Holcomb's Clutter murders. He explains situations and characters to help us understand how this crime could occur, allowing his reader to work through the textual puzzles that he already holds the answers to. It is a narrative of the unquestioned, final story, one that drops an authoritative 'The End' on the last page. Capote moves from a realm of chaos, which he introduces in the first pages, and uses to generate energy for the rest of the story, to one of an ordered peacefulness, and a restored faith in the world.

Mailer's narrative goals are quite different: while Capote only briefly introduces chaos, Mailer allows it to diffuse throughout his entire text, presenting us with literally hundreds of versions of the same series of events. It is his object to demonstrate how these actors sort out this chaos, creating their own individual order.

This thesis seeks to explore how stories both influence behavior and influence interpretation of real-world events. It also considers how Capote's "true account" fundamentally differs from Mailer's "true-life story," and yet explores why these two very different texts are also inextricably linked.

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Short Titles

Blood: Capote, Truman. In Cold Blood: A True Account of Multiple Murder and its Consequences. New York: Random House, 1965.

Song: Mailer, Norman. The Executioner's Song. New York: Random House: 1979.

## Introduction

Norman Mailer called In Cold Blood a ‘failure of the imagination’ ... now I see that the only prizes Norman wins are for that very same kind of writing. I’m glad I was of some small service to him.

Truman Capote, 1980

In the mid-1960s, significant literary attention began to be devoted to a ‘new’ type of literature, called “New Journalism” or the “nonfiction novel.” Both of these names refer to a text that indulges in the hallmarks of fiction – including metaphor and symbolism, setting of a tone or mood, and using free indirect discourse – while remaining faithful to the facts of a true event. The “New Journalism” movement not only included some of the best writers of our age, including Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Hunter S. Thompson, but also rekindled a critical dialogue regarding the binary of fiction and nonfiction: where, precisely, does one draw the line?

Despite the enthusiasm for this ‘hybrid’ form, as Tom Wolfe expressed when he predicted it would “would wipe out the novel as literature's main event” (Johnson 12), the idea of a “nonfiction novel” is certainly not new. History is crowded with texts that are neither wholly imaginary nor wholly factual:

The use of alternative styles is not a new idea entirely...John Hersey’s Hiroshima, published in 1946, was a brilliant tour de force in journalistic writing, [as is] Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle, or much of nineteenth-century naturalistic fiction. (Johnson 47)

For more examples of historical “nonfiction novels,” we could look to the works of Daniel Defoe, the histories of William Shakespeare, or even the Bible. The emphasis is thus not placed on the ‘newness’ of this form, but its explosion of popularity during the mid to late twentieth century.

When Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood was published in installments in *The New Yorker* in 1965, there was an incredibly responsive critical debate regarding how to categorize this text. Critic Robert Langbaum rejects the claim to ‘nonfiction,’ but allows that “as it stands, In Cold Blood is first-rate entertainment” (Langbaum 120). However, according to Rebecca West, it is the book’s elements of fiction that work against it; by writing a cohesive “pretty book,” Capote’s Blood “may be regarded simply as a literary *tour de force* instead of the formidable statement about reality which it is” (West 108).

Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song is itself part of this critical discussion regarding what constitutes ‘reality,’ albeit a response lengthier and more varied than the typical scholarly essay. Mailer acknowledges Capote’s text in several ways. Song’s most overt similarity with Blood is the subject matter: both operate around the event of a murder sans motive in a small Midwestern town. But there are many other indicators that Mailer had Capote in mind while writing Song. For instance, Capote includes an epigraph by the poet Francois Villon, which reads “Frères humains qui après nous vivez, / N’ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis, / Car, se pitié de nous povres avez, / Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercies” (1). Perhaps this poem is obscured in its original French because it hints too strongly at the book’s outcome. Translated, it reads “O Brother men who live, though we are gone, / Let not your hearts be hardened at the view, / For if you pity us you gaze upon, / God is more like to show you mercy too” (Miller 12). This speaker of this poem is

one who has been executed – indeed, Villon himself was an oft-jailed 15<sup>th</sup> century thief – much like Capote’s character Perry, whose narrative attention throughout the text generates much sympathy.

Mailer’s epigraph, however, does not invite an identification or sympathy with the criminal, but rather inspires a fear and distance: “Deep in my dungeon / I welcome you here / Deep in my dungeon / I worship your fear / Deep in my dungeon / I dwell / I do not know / If I wish you well.” (1) This poem’s source is named as an “old prison rhyme,” but Mailer notes in his afterword that he, in fact, is its author: “Finally, one would confess one’s creations. The old prison rhyme at the beginning of this book is not, alas, an ancient ditty but a new one, written by this author” (1052). This choice of epigraph announces Mailer’s departure from a Blood-like story: his text will involve not a sympathetic murderer, but an obscured, threatening one. Mailer follows through on his promise; the sympathetic characters are the ones telling of the murderer Gary Gilmore, not Gilmore himself. Gilmore is not allowed, even in such a massive book, any textual space to express his point of view, or justify his story, as Perry does in Blood.

The title Capote’s epigraph illuminates both position and Mailer’s response. Villon’s poem translates to “The Ballad of the Hanged” in English – an inversion of perspective from Mailer’s title of The Executioner’s Song. These two perspectives are really a question of how to approach the ‘real world,’ how to describe true events, a point on which the two authors fundamentally disagree. Capote, after years of research on the Clutter murders, chooses from the thousands of potential shapes this story could have taken to deliver a single, cohesive narrative. This isn’t to say that Capote’s text flouts the factuality he so insists on; rather, it is a creative process to draw upon some facts and not

others. This selection procedure should not be seen as inherently 'fictive'; indeed, this is the very same process lawyers use to put forth a case of 'truth,' selecting the best possible defense from a collection of facts. However, it also allows ample room for an authorial point of view. As explained by Chris Anderson in Style as Argument,

Nonfiction reportage is more than informative: it is an effort to persuade us to attitudes, interpretations, opinions, even actions. The rhetoric of reportage is subtle – it must be interpreted, the texts read carefully for nuances and tone – but it is there, powerful and persuasive... only a naïve reader... could regard In Cold Blood as free from the author's shaping attitudes and perceptions. (2)

While In Cold Blood presents only one version of true events out of many possible tellings and allows for only one narrator, Song indulges a variety of tellings and narratorial voices. This is an overwhelmingly chaotic departure from Capote's cohesive, ordered narrative; In Blood, we are able to maintain point of view and the sense that we are receiving the true series of events. In Song, however, the point of view keeps jumping, at times from paragraph to paragraph. It becomes difficult to fully grasp the text's characters, because they are only ever described through the viewpoint of other characters. For instance, while Nicole Baker sees herself as "phony" (Mailer 81), Brenda views Nicole as "a space cadet... who pops out a kid before she's 15 and lives on the government ever after" (64), and Tamera sees her as having "a mystique about her, a sky glow... like an old movie star" (540). Even more overwhelming are the literally hundreds of different viewpoints of Gary Gilmore. All these opinions would not be able to sustain the notion of a single person; the many contradictory viewpoints refuse to allow the reader a sense of who Gary is. There is simply too much information.

A reading of In Cold Blood, then, will be an experience of trust and adherence to a single viewpoint, that of the narrator's. As Capote has already taken pains to suppress the contradictory details that naturally arise out of true events, the narrative is cohesive, ordered, and meaningful. The Executioner's Song, however, provides quite a different reading experience. Instead of a single narrator to trust, or a single narrative to experience, we are bombarded with narrators and their stories. Instead of experiencing the immersive narrative effects of Blood, we can only try to stay afloat in Song's tempests of chaos.

## Chapter One

### The Artistry of the 'True' Account:

#### In Cold Blood and the Nonfiction Novel

Things were rupturing & nothing held. Books were solid, yet time was molten. Books were consistent, yet people were not. Books dealt in cause & effect, yet life was inexplicable disorder. Nothing was as it was in a book...[But] the world no longer existed to become a book. A book now existed with the obscene ambition of becoming the world.

Richard Flanagan, *Gould's Book of Fish*

Stories are problematic. They incorporate bias and a subjective perspective while entertaining with style and formal grace. They tell of events that really happened and of events that are wholly invented. However, according to Jerome Bruner, author of Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life, the division between 'stories' and 'real life' is illusory, for it is not only stories that "construct and maintain a self" (14), but true-life stories "are not innocent: they always have a message" (5). We have all experienced Bruner's former assertion: we tell stories of things that happened during the day as much as we maintain stories that span our lifetimes. These stories are ones of hardships that led to understanding or accomplishment, periods of grief, or triumphs over adversity. The idea that "everything happens for a reason" is a widely held, or at least widely repeated, belief. Our identities maintain a coherent order, and every personally narrated event is

meaningful, connected in some way to who we are. Bruner's second point regards the storyteller. Every narration has a narrator, an actor who molds the storyline as he will, suppressing or releasing details of his choosing, such that no story is a reflection of true events, but rather one individual's view.

Even 'nonfiction' storytelling, then, cannot maintain objectivity, so long as a human storyteller is involved. However, such storytelling is the only method we have of attempting to interpret and approach the knot of reality. As explained by Christopher Insole,

The truth is worked out by telling a story. It is not just that the story attempts to tell the truth that is already there. Rather, in telling the story, we partly create the truth we are attempting to articulate... This process is rather grandiosely called the "hermeneutical circle" by philosophers, but in truth it picks out a perfectly ordinary experience. Few have shown this better than Charles Taylor in his Philosophical Papers, and in his major work, Hegel (1975). This is roughly how it works. I do not know how I feel about x. I attempt to access my feelings about x by talking about it/him/her. In talking about x, I surround it/him/her with a narrative, connecting x to my past and future, and my network of values and presuppositions. The range of possibilities for the narrative I invoke is largely given to me by a range of contexts in which I am situated and saturated. In talking about x, I (as a site for these narratives) actually to an extent create the very feeling I am attempting to articulate. Telling the story is responsive to truth, but it also creates truth. (4)

Stories thus pull from the knot of reality a single narrative thread, a series of events that we are able to absorb, comprehend, and retell.

Insole's above procedure can be seen in Truman Capote's "nonfiction novel," In Cold Blood. Capote's aim is to describe the events set off by the seemingly random death

of a respected Midwestern family. In order to tell such a story, he gathers the knot of reality – with its different version of events, various perspectives and biases – and molds from this raw material a single constructed strand of meaningful events. Capote’s only hurdle to convincingly telling this version of events is the same problem identified by Bruner: that of differing narratorial perspectives. So long as Capote remains a storyteller, airing only ‘his version’ of what happened *alongside* the perspectives of other narrators, his story will remain on the same plane as those he interviewed; at times emotional and entertaining, but still merely one person’s biased perspective, instead of the comprehensive ‘truth.’ Such reception is not Capote’s aim, instead, he desires “to apply my style to the realities of journalism...I exhaust the emotion before I feel clinical enough to analyze and project it” (Cowley 291). Capote does not want his narrative to be forced to compete with other narratives of this event (which includes newspaper reports, detective findings, and the stories of his own characters) – instead, he wishes to hoist himself above this narrative fray, and tell this story from a more “clinical” and analytical point of view, so as to attain an ‘objective’ journalistic status. As seen from his quote above, he wishes not to partake in the type of emotive narrative telling of those affected by the murders, but to rather be the type of storyteller who inspires such emotion in readers.

Such a journalistic endeavor requires a fair amount of authorial cultivation from Capote, who was best known for both his dramatic fiction and dramatic public personality – he hardly fit the bill of a Walter Cronkite type, or the stoic, analytic sources from whom Americans were used to hearing of true events. Capote’s “creation of a self-conscious and elegantly public persona” (Hoffman 307) had the potential to work against

his authority to tell a ‘nonfiction’ story. As Bruner describes above, however, it is one’s stories that create one’s identity. Capote, quite the convincing storyteller, used his relationship with the media, from which he “courted every kind of literary and nonliterary attention” (Beaver 139), to re-shape his character to move from an excessively dramatic, egoistic, and often-satirized fiction writer to a grave and factually-obsessed writer of nonfiction. He considers his style of writing in Blood to be fundamentally changed, breaking with his past works, employing “an artistry predominantly objective, rather than subjective as before” (Nance 217). Capote, as any narrator, can of course never obtain objectivity – but in a society where the myth of the objective is robust, where ‘real stories’ are in the newspaper and ‘fake stories’ are on the fiction bestseller list, he can make a powerful argument that he has indeed obtained objectivity in his writing.

Capote’s cultivation of authority can also be seen in many interviews that were conducted after In Cold Blood was first published, as a series of long articles in the New Yorker in 1965. One of his main arguments for his own authority to tell the ‘truth’ are the confidences he offers as fact – measurable, ‘objective’ instances of his own accuracy as a journalist. In countless interviews, he has claimed a “95% of absolute accuracy” recall (Plimpton 202). However, even these ‘facts’ themselves yield to a more slippery fiction, as noted by Kenneth Tynan: “[Capote] relied on his memory, which he had sedulously trained until it could retain 95 percent (or 92 or 97 percent: his interviews differ) of total recall” (Tynan 21). Indeed, the idea that one could somehow know the exact percentage of one’s mental retention – and that such a rate would remain constant – is an illusory ‘fact’ in itself, especially if Capote wasn’t armed with a team of diligent statisticians. Such an assurance of recorder-like ability masquerades as objectively factual, but ends up

being instead a supporting story to the larger narrative of Capote's new identity: the objective reporter.

Capote offers another sub-story as evidence for his authority in noting that his account of the Clutter murders was well-researched. He claims ten thousand pages of notes and interviews,<sup>1</sup> the fact that he spent 8 months in Holcomb (with 'research assistant' Nelle Harper Lee), and completed innumerable interviews with the murderers themselves in the five years from trial to execution. He has sworn to the 100% accuracy of every detail in the book: "One doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions. People are so suspicious" (Plimpton 207).

Using the media to announce one's authorial reliability is perhaps unconventional. However, the argument is backed up by Capote's creation of narratorial authority in the realm of the text itself. In his effort to create the 'true' story of the course of events, Capote found it necessary to project himself as an almost godlike authority on Perry Smith and Dick Hickock as they existed as actual people. Of Dick, he said, "[he] is a person I never could have dreamed up or written...Small-time chizzler. I understand him perfectly. Much too banal for my taste. But I think I brought him off pretty well" (Nance 211). Here Capote does not place emphasis on the question of his *understanding* of Dick (which is "perfect"), but rather how Dick is *portrayed* in his work. This is a typical Capote reality inversion – the only thing he is able to 'perfectly' control (and understand) is Dick the character, not Dick the human being. This creates a tremendous sense of authority – Capote proposes that this is not merely depicting one version of events, or one

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<sup>1</sup> Or, in Capote's exact words, "if I just used 20 percent of the material I put together over those years of interviewing, I'd still have a book two thousand pages long" (Plimpton 200).

biased interpretation of these characters, but the true and accurate essence of the beings themselves.

Capote also implies a godlike knowledge (and thus ownership) of Perry the human being. “My portrait of him is absolutely one hundred per cent the way he was...Perry almost never used to have to finish a sentence with me,” said Capote in a 1966 interview, “because I always knew exactly what he was talking about. He’d start to tell me something about his life and I’d be miles ahead of him” (Nance 215). The line between Capote’s authority in his fiction and his authority regarding Perry in reality is blurred further: “Something about Perry turned the whole thing, because Perry was a character that was also in my imagination... [he] could absolutely step right out of one of my stories” (Nance 211). His professed complete understanding of Perry, as with Dick, is necessarily fictitious. Even his analogy of a “portrait” conveys the idea of the creative imitation of the knot of the real; Capote can paint only what he sees, from a given perspective in relation to his subject.

The narrative itself echoes the emphasis on facts Capote expressed in his interviews. The preface of the book loudly announces its factual importance, under the guise of “Acknowledgements”:

All the material in this book not derived from my own observation is either taken from official records or is the result of interviews with the persons directly concerned, more often than not numerous interviews conducted over a considerable period of time. Because these ‘collaborators’ are identified within the text, it would be redundant to name them here; nevertheless, I want to express a formal gratitude...” (Capote i)

Here, the interviews are not identified with any bias; they are not “my numerous interviews,” but the more neutral “numerous interviews.”

Another marker of the text’s insistence on its own factuality is Capote’s frequent use of quotations used during description, which appear on almost every page of the text. This references his actual interviews with the true-life version of these characters, and acts as a perpetual reminder of the (supposedly) immaculate accuracy of these portrayals: “When [Perry] told Dick that story, it was because he’d wanted Dick’s friendship, wanted Dick to ‘respect’ him, think him ‘hard,’ as much ‘the masculine type’ as he had considered Dick to be” (Capote 111).

An additional, perhaps more powerful, reminder of Capote’s authority is his use of actual written artifacts as text that supports his version of events. He includes newspaper articles (Capote 89), police memos (164), excerpts from Perry’s journal (146), and letters from Perry’s family members (138 and 125-130). His inclusion of these written things act as jarring reminders of the actual events, and are well-spaced throughout the work so as to ensure we are never lulled into reading In Cold Blood as purely fictional. One of the most potent of the written artifacts is Nancy Clutter’s diary entry, in which the tragedy of the event is automatically doubled as we first absorb the tragedy of the narrated event, then realize this diary in fact tangibly exists:

Before saying her prayers, she always recorded in a diary a few occurrences (‘Summer here. Forever, I hope. Sue over and we rode Babe down to the river. Sue played her flute. Fireflies’) and an occasional outburst (‘I love him, I do’)...A different-tinted ink identified each year: 1956 was green and 1957 a ribbon of red, replaced the following year by bright lavender, and now, in 1959, she had decided upon a dignified blue. But as in every manifestation, she continued to tinker with her

handwriting, slanting it to the right or to the left, shaping it roundly or steeply, loosely or stingily – as though she were asking, ‘Is this Nancy? Or that? Or that? Which is me?’ (Capote 57)

Of course, the choice of narrative style also commands its own authority. The omniscient narrative voice invites complete trust and immersion, leaving no seams open for doubt or questioning – the voice itself is the final word. All-seeing, “this stance is also godlike in its assumption of unlimited knowledge, power, and benevolence” (Nance 226). As a matter of course, such a voice is a trustworthy observer. Seeming proof of this narrator’s accuracy arrives when, for instance, Capote’s explanation of Perry’s matches up with Dr. Jones’s psychiatric evaluation of Perry. “So it would appear,” Capote states after Perry’s thorough psychiatric analysis, allowing a rare self-reference, “that by independent paths, both the professional and the amateur analyst reached conclusions not dissimilar” (Capote 302).

The painstaking development of ‘fact’ in the text is no arbitrary thing; through it, Capote implicitly promotes a theory about art and its relationship to life. Art has often drawn from life, but there is traditionally a marked difference between the two – narrative often allows a stability, understanding, and reason that actual events simply lack. As Jerome Bruner, in his work Making Stories, puts it, “literary fiction does not [exactly] refer to anything in the world but only provides the sense of things” (6-7). Life is chaotic; narrative is cohesive. Indeed, as Capote once stated in an interview, “I could have added a lot of other opinions. But that would have confused the issue, and indeed the book” (Plimpton 203).

Capote, masterful with narrative conventions, wrings them to the fullest in this text: “The real strength of the Capote book is achieved by the way he exploits a whole

battery of novelistic techniques which enforce the structure and hence the meaning of the Clutter case” (Wiegand 245). In this text, Capote forces a dilemma upon the reader: this is real life (as we are by now fully convinced), yet it looks like art – it has none of life’s chaos or ‘madness’, but rather cause-and-effect, sense, and meaning. He attempts to convince us that life is not merely *represented* by art, but that life *is* art. There is no doubt that Capote had such a grand theory in mind:

Capote wanted to go a step further: while remaining literally true to the record, he was not content to make a work of record. He wanted, wholly and exclusively, to make work of art...He wanted, ultimately, not the specificity of fiction, which must be content to be itself alone, but to make an emblematic human situation for our time that would relieve it of mere factuality’...[to] break down the barrier...ultimately between art and life. (Galloway 146)

The effect of this life-as-art argument, which has been made convincing through Capote’s various authoritative mechanisms, is to endow *life itself* with meaning as an author would typically only attempt to endow a novel with meaning. There is a deep comfort at the center of this ostensibly brutal text: human life is inherently meaningful.

Capote’s omniscient narration is also significant in his theory of life-as-art. His emphasis on his own authority transcends ‘authorship’ and settles in a more ‘godlike’ sphere – he is not telling things ‘how he sees them,’ but rather ‘how they are.’ Likewise, his omniscient narrator removes the immediate perception of a storyteller altogether, and moves the story from the realm of ‘being told by Capote’ to simply ‘being.’ The work thus achieves an effect of an unfolding of events, rather than a synthetic narrative; art appears as life, life art.

His critics, however, are less than convinced. The majority of criticism penned on In Cold Blood contains a sense of suspicion that results from the merger of the heretofore very separate worlds of fiction and nonfiction. In order to be comfortable with terms like 'real' and 'imaginary,' 'fiction' and 'nonfiction,' division between the two must be maintained. Capote's text raises questions about what it is that makes a story 'real' or 'not real.' As Bruner notes, "We sense that too good a story is not to be trusted. It implies something fake" (5). It is a delicate balance, then, of what is to be considered 'nonfiction' before it crosses the threshold to 'fiction.' Many critics, to solve the problem of how to categorize this text, simply identified it as fiction, and continued their analysis from there: for instance, as claims Diana Trilling, it is after all "only a novel" (252).

Bruner notes that our insistence on a fiction/nonfiction binary does not accurately reflect our actions regarding stories:

Common sense stoutly holds that the story form is a transparent window on reality, not a cookie cutter imposing a shape on it. Never mind that we all know, for example, that the worlds of good stories are peopled with free-willed protagonists of idealized courage or terror or malevolence who have to cope with obstacles to their desires that are preternatural, or preternaturally ordinary. Never mind that we know, again implicitly, that the real world is not "really" like this, that there are narrative conventions governing stories worlds. For we also cling to narrative models of reality and use them to shape our everyday experiences. We say of people we know in real life that they are Micawbers or characters right out of a Tom Wolfe novel. (6-7)

According to Bruner, we are vastly confused by our relationship to stories, on one hand dismissing them as fake, on the other embracing them as tools of identifications (and self-identification). Although a clean division between the two is illusory, what so frustrates

Capote's critics is that he refuses to maintain this misapprehension, instead rejecting what the literary theorist Zavarzadeh calls "the illusion of the binary": "Capote manages throughout the book to dwell on the factual details most akin to those found in fictional works: coincidences, 'prophetic' statements..." (Johnson 326). Such narrative conventions, despite all of Capote's attempts at establishing a factual authority, signal to many of his critics that this is indeed fiction.

Capote's smudging of genre isn't just caused by a confusing combination of facts and foreshadowing, however. What further distorts the issue is the way this story is told. It is essentially a therapeutic narrative, where every reader anxiety, which itself is carefully aroused, is soothed or diverted; every problem or confusion is explained by the end of this text. It is truly an extraordinary feat to begin with an event that excites such "existential dread" (Anderson 60) as random murder, and end with a comforting, ordered universe. Capote follows a pattern of confronting the reader with a threatening chaos and then resolving it through explanation and meaning. However, this pattern of posing a problem then promptly delivering a solution, which creates the entire structure of the text's action, doesn't seem to fit Flannery O'Connor's definition of imitation of the real:

The serious [writer] will think that any story that can be entirely explained by the adequate motivation of the characters or by a believable imitation of way of life or by a proper theology, will not be a large enough story for him to occupy himself with...when he finishes there always has to be life over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula." (Keuhn 127)

Capote does not indulge or celebrate mystery, but tries to either explain it away or divert our attentions from it, snubbing O'Connor's advice and instead completely embracing the

guidance of critic Wayne Booth: “the concept of writing well must include the successful ordering of your reader’s view of a fictional world” (388).

Capote thus begins with the raw material of chaos, and the goal of imposing order. The initial problem is one of humanity’s fundamental questions: why do bad things happen to good people?

If God exists and is just, how could the Clutters be murdered? If God can be silent when people are suffering, can he be just? Can he exist? The murders in Holcomb raise the possibility that the world is not governed by a benevolent deity. Because they are apparently random and senseless – because no reason for them is discernable – they threaten to undermine the faith and values of the community. (Anderson 60)

Collaborating with this threat to a religious system of beliefs is a threat to an equally important faith: that of The American Dream. The Clutters, as described by Capote, are the epitome of the nuclear American family: they are protestant Midwestern farmers, fiscally practical, and exceedingly kind. On the last day of Nancy’s life, she teaches a younger family friend to bake a cherry pie (as she is the town’s “champion cherry-pie maker” [Capote 18]): “Nancy would willingly have taught Jolene to prepare an entire turkey dinner; she felt it was her duty to be available when younger girls came to her wanting help with their cooking, their sewing, or their music lessons –or, as often happened, to confide” (Capote 18). Likewise, Mr. Clutter is a self-made American man:

Erhart had seen his friend evolve from a poorly paid Country Agricultural Agent into one of the region’s most widely known and respected farm ranchers: “Everything Herb had, he earned – with the help of God. He was a modest man but a proud man, as he had a right to be. He raised a fine family. He made something of his life. (Capote 79)

Their deaths, Capote demonstrates, disturb the town's sense of order and the rules of American prosperity at least as much as they disturb a religious faith. As Andy Erhart's thoughts conclude, they focus on this sense of injustice against this type of American Dream: "How was it possible that such effort, such plain virtue, could overnight be reduced to this – smoke, thinning as it rose and was received by the big, annihilating sky?" (Capote 79) As echoed by another townsman,

Feeling wouldn't run half so high if this had happened to anyone *except* the Clutters. Anyone *less* admired. Prosperous. Secure. But that family represented everything people hereabouts really value and respect, and that such a thing could happen to them... it makes life seem pointless. I don't think people are frightened as they are deeply depressed. (Capote 88)

Capote thus generates narrative energy with the enormous question of how something so terrible could happen to people so good. For in this case, the anticipated failed to occur – the expectation of the self-made congenial American man to live out a peaceful and prosperous life with his family was thwarted. It doesn't 'make sense' why such a thing should happen; it is disorder. Capote, in response to Bruner's question of "Are stories part of our armamentarium for coping with surprise?" (Bruner 29), indicates an enthusiastic agreement with every step he makes to realign order in a world that begins as very chaotic indeed. As Bruner elaborates,

Narrative is a recounting of human plans gone off track, expectations gone awry. It is a way to domesticate human error and surprise. It conventionalizes the common forms of human mishap into genres – comedy, tragedy, romance, irony, or whatever format may lessen the sting of our fortuity. Stories reassert a kind of conventional

wisdom about what can be expected, even (or especially) what can be done to restore or cope with the situation. (31)

But how does Capote solve the threatening chaos of the Clutter murders? The first step he makes is to distance the reader from the Clutters, rearranging sympathy so that it falls to one of the murderers, Perry. This, however, creates a new problem to solve: the reader now sympathizes with a murderer (a problem that will be covered in-depth later). It is this “problem-solving” via “problem-creating” (Faller xvi) element that Capote employs time and again in this text. As discussed above, although many books attempt insight into real-world issues, Capote professes to work in the realm of ‘truth’ and not simple fiction; when he ‘solves’ problems in this text, the solutions attempt a real-world resonance. Indeed,

Literary texts...are able to escape or smooth over strongly felt contradictions in belief or practice that other kinds of texts have difficulty dealing with. This can make them powerful instruments for ‘solving’ social and political problems. (Faller xv)

Thus when Capote diverts our attention from the Clutters to focus on Perry, it is not a solution that would work without his careful textual constructions, but it remains a satisfying one; Anderson’s “existential terror” of the original chaos is quelled, our anxieties subdued.

To create this sense of reader distance, a number of subtle narrative assaults are made on Mr. Clutter especially, so that his character seems sterile and cold. Suspicion is frequently cast upon how much he really cares for his family:

“Yes, yes,” said Mr. Clutter, as though conversing with himself. “I’ve plenty to be grateful for – wonderful things in my life.” Framed documents commemorating milestones in his career gleamed against the walnut walls of his office: a college

diploma, a map of River Valley Farm, agricultural awards, an ornate certificate bearing the signatures of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Forster Dulles, which cited his services to the Federal Farm Credit Board. “The kids. We’ve been lucky there...I’m real proud of them. (Capote 47)

Mr. Clutter’s statement simply moves from being thankful for the “wonderful things” in his life to speaking of his pride in his children. It is Capote who inserts the catalog of personal awards, injecting a more prideful suggestion of what Mr. Clutter is “grateful for,” while also alerting readers to the fact that there are no pictures of his wife or children in his office (of course, Capote may also have simply chosen to suppress this information in his account). Elsewhere, Capote is more explicit in his portraiture: “Just nothing scares you,” [Mrs. Ashida] said, commenting upon a generally recognized quality of Mr. Clutter’s: a fearless self-assurance that set him apart, and while it created respect, also limited the affections of others a little” (36). Likewise, the description of the Clutters’ household repels, rather than invites, association:

As for the interior, there were spongy displays of liver-colored carpet intermittently abolishing the glare of varnished, resounding floors; an immense modernistic living-room couch covered in nubby fabric interwoven with glittery strands of silver metal; a breakfast alcove featuring a banquette upholstered in blue-and-white plastic.

(Capote 9)

The decision to describe the family’s home in such a way is a move to distance the Clutters from the reader. The surfaces are all uncomfortable, scratchy or sticky; the floor being likened to spongy internal tissue is rather nauseating. The Clutters’ status as an all-American family is retained, but Capote has complicated it by introducing these distancing factors. Their home is unwelcoming, and their patriarch cold and prideful.

As Capote works to build a barrier between the reader and the soon-to-be murdered family, he also brings the reader closer to Perry, inviting intrigue and identification with this more interesting character. While Perry is first identified as a mysterious ‘other,’ he eventually wins the reader’s sympathy. Initially in Blood, Capote plays with society’s prejudices regarding what a criminal should ‘look’ like, emphasizing the physical difference of ‘the deviant.’ When he introduces Perry, he seems to be describing a creature quite unlike a typical man:

But some sections of him were not in proportion to others. His tiny feet...would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady’s dancing slippers; when he stood up, he was no taller than a twelve-year-old child, and suddenly looked, strutting on stunted legs that seemed grotesquely inadequate to the grown-up bulk they supported...overblown and muscle-bound. (Capote 15)

Perry’s face is likewise depicted as something just outside of human: “Each angle of it induced a different expression. It was a changeling’s face...now ominous, now impish, now soulful” (Capote 16).

The physical depiction given to Dick Hickock, Perry’s partner, also repulses any association with the ‘typical’ human body. Dick’s bodily description, however, seems much more threatening, almost monstrous:

The tattooed face of a cat, blue and grinning, covered his right hand...his face seemed composed of mismatching parts. It was as though his head had been halved like an apple, then put together a fraction off center. [This was] the outcome of an accident that left his long-jawed and narrow face tilted...with the results that the lips were slightly aslant, the nose askew, and his eyes not only situated at uneven levels but of uneven size, the left eye being truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue

squint that although it was involuntarily acquired, seemed nevertheless to warn of a bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature. (Capote 30-31)

Capote is capitalizing on the culturally ingrained notion that the criminal will be somehow recognizable; that their 'true nature' cannot be hidden. Indeed, he prods us into this assumption by making a direct link between Dick's 'serpentine' look and his nature itself.

While Dick's characterization develops no further – he remains monstrous and 'othered,' Perry is significantly humanized, made open and sympathetic. Unlike a grotesque, cold-hearted killer, Perry possesses those distinct markers of humanity, creativity and the ability to dream:

Singing...was a mesmerizing way of whittling hours. He always used the same mental scenery...It was an elegant room filled with celebrities excitedly focused on the sensational new star rendering his famous, backed-by-violins version of 'I'll be seeing you' and encoring with his latest self-composed ballad...(Capote 17)

Unlike the physical descriptions of Perry, this one portrays him as remarkably, and indeed, almost quintessentially human: he sings, hopes, and indulges in dreamy aspirations. He is also portrayed as a romantic dreamer, conjuring enticing dreams from the moment of his introduction in the text:

Since childhood, for more than half his thirty-one years, he had been sending off for literature...that stoked a longing to realize an adventure his imagination swiftly and over and over enabled him to experience: the dream of drifting downward through strange waters, of plunging toward a green sea-dusk, sliding past the scaly, savage-eyed protectors of a ship's hulk that loomed ahead, a Spanish galleon – a drowned cargo of diamonds and pearls, heaping caskets of gold. (Capote 17)

The reader is invited into Perry's mind, an opportunity that rises time and again as Capote often describes his thoughts using free indirect discourse. His fantasies, far from being frightening or perverse, are largely accessible: the adventuresome treasure-hunter, the famous lounge-singer, or the talented poet.

Perry's past is also emphasized in the text, and it reveals the trauma and pain of his childhood. Included in the chapter that focuses on Perry, titled "Persons Unknown," Capote includes a manuscript by Perry's father, titled "A History of My Boy's Life." The document, which was written "in an effort to help his son obtain a parole from Kansas State Penitentiary" (Capote 125), recounts his difficult childhood, allowing the reader to speculate on the ensuing emotional and psychological trauma. His father writes,

I was able to care for him properly until my wife turned out to be a disgraceful drunkard when my children were school age...It all started when my wife wanted to go to the City and live a wild life – and ran away to do so. I let her go and said goodby as she took the car and left me behind (this was during depression). My children all cried at the top of their voices. She only cussed them saying they would run away to come to me later. (Capote 126)

The technique Capote employs in encouraging the reader to sympathize with Perry while remaining distanced from Dick can be understood with ideas put forth by Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish. According to Foucault, it is the visibility of the criminal that is dangerous to society, for it is visibility that invites sympathy and identification. Visibility breaks down the socially constructed difference of the criminal as inhuman or monstrous, and reveals him as merely another human being. Tracking the history of punishment, Foucault begins at "torture as a public spectacle," which was

socially dangerous – the visibility of the deviant, and the deviant’s suffering, created the danger of potential sympathy:

It was as if the punishment was thought to equal, if not to exceed, in savagery the crime itself...to make the executioner resemble a criminal, judges murderers, to reverse roles at the last moment, to make the tortured criminal an object of pity or admiration...Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. (Foucault 9)

Even though Dick and Perry’s execution is relatively ‘hidden,’ observed only by a select handful (including Capote), this danger of criminal inversion can be realized, and there lingers a confusion over which party is criminal. Capote demonstrates such criminal sympathies in a conversation between two men close to the case:

“What’s unfair?”

“The whole trial. Those guys don’t stand a chance.”

“Fat chance they gave Nancy Clutter.”

“Perry Smith. My God. He’s had such a rotten life –”

Parr said, “Many a man can match sob stories with that little bastard. Me included. Maybe I drink too much, but I sure as hell never killed four people in cold blood.”

“Yeah, and how about hanging the bastard? That’s pretty goddam cold-blooded too.” (306)

According to Foucault, society has adopted the veiled execution in an attempt to dull the notion that another human being is being killed, and to further encourage notions of the criminal as ‘other’: “the last addition to penal death was a mourning veil. The condemned man was no longer to be seen...The more monstrous a criminal was, the more he must be deprived of light: he must not see, or be seen” (Foucault 14). This obfuscation repulses public sympathy, for society is not able to identify the criminal as

human or worthy of sympathy, and thus strengthens the border between the criminal and non-criminal. The more Perry is ‘seen’, however, as the narrative follows him before and after his murders, the more the reader gains insight into his life, past, and humanity. Here, we do not have a criminal whose judgment is “a strange secret between the law and [who] it condemns” (Foucault 15), but an account that insists on visibility. The narrative saves Perry from an obscure, secret death, where he is the explicit other – instead Perry is unveiled, explained, made tragically sympathetic. Indeed, as noted by Booth, “inside views can build sympathy for even the most vicious character” (378).

The movement of sympathy from the Clutters to Perry is thus realized. By the time Perry delivers his confession, it has been almost 200 pages since the Clutters were killed; Capote has allowed us to forget about the Clutters and focus on Perry. When Perry confesses, the reader has already become acquainted with him as a human being, and cannot reassociate him with the type of ‘monster’ Holcomb assumed committed these crimes. This displacement of events occurs to allow a space for reader interaction with Perry on human terms – if Capote described Perry killing the Clutters on page 57, before the reader became familiar with his personality, history, and aspirations – it would have been much harder for Capote to cast him as a sympathetic character. Instead, Perry delivers the long-awaited details of what happened the night of the murder in his own words after he is ‘made visible.’ Here, the narrative shifts from past tense to present, and the events of the night are told step-by-step through Perry’s perspective:

Perry frowns, rubs his knees with his manacled hands. “Let me think a minute.

Because along in here things begin to get a little complicated. I remember. Yes. Yes,

I took a chair out of the hall and stuck it in the bathroom. So Mrs. Clutter could sit

down. Seeing she was said to be an invalid. When we locked them up, Mrs. Clutter

was crying and telling us, 'Please don't hurt anybody. Please don't hurt my children.'

And her husband had his arms around her, saying, like, 'Sweetheart, these fellows don't mean to hurt anybody. All they want is some money.' (Capote 239)

Perry manages to retain his sympathetic status even through his description of the killings. The line between observation and vicarious experience is uncomfortably blurred as the reader 'moves' with the murderers through the Clutter household. Eerily, Perry's descriptions of his mindset precisely mirror the reader experience:

And I thought, Why don't I walk off? Walk to the highway, hitch a ride... And yet –  
How can I explain this? It was like I wasn't part of it. More as though I was reading a story. And I had to know what was going to happen. The end. So I went back upstairs. And now, let's see – uh-huh, that's when we tied them up. (Capote 240)

Describing the act of murder as akin to 'reading a story' or 'just like watching a movie'<sup>2</sup> – both acts that the reader is essentially already performing, in reading a highly cinematic text – delivers the ultimate social threat: murder is not, in fact, accomplished only by a monstrous 'other,' but is something that humans are capable of.

Capote has 'solved' the first problem of the text effectively by distracting us from it: the shock of bad things happening to good Americans subsides with textual distance, and the narrative readily re-engages our distraught attentions from the Clutters to a fascinating new character. This solution, however, poses its own puzzle: How can sensitive, creative Perry be capable of murderer? Just as Capote used his narrative earlier to perhaps "make sense of things when they don't" (Bruner 28), he seeks to solve this moral mystery. Perry has an uncannily 'normal' morality, as expressed in a conversation

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<sup>2</sup> Hickock expanded on this notion in a 1961 interview: "As I began to recognize these objects I experienced the strangest feeling I've ever had. It seemed that everything that was happening was taking place regardless of whether I put forth any effort. It seemed to me I was viewing a movie in which I appeared" (Hickock, 20-21).

with Dick, when he admits, “Deep down... way, way rock-bottom, I never thought I could do it. A thing like that” (Capote 109). Perry again displays this morality when he stops Dick from raping Nancy Clutter: “Now, that’s something I despise. Anybody that can’t control themselves sexually. Christ, I hate that kind of stuff.... I told him straight, ‘Leave her alone. Else you’ve got a buzzsaw to fight’” (Capote 243).

After creating a sense of closeness to Perry, Capote begins to construct a disidentification. He begins to suggest that within Perry there is an intangible, mysterious *something* that separates him from a normal person. Dick first hints at the cause of this unnamed element, in identifying Perry as possessing “unusual and valuable qualities...[he] was that rarity, a ‘natural killer’” (Capote 55). Perry later supports the theory that he is somehow inherently different from other people:

When Perry said, “I think there must be something wrong with us,” he was making an admission he “hated to make.” After all, it was “painful” to imagine that one might be “not just right” – particularly if whatever was wrong was not your own fault but maybe “a thing you were born with.” (Capote 110)

The mystery and indefiniteness surrounding this condition is not to be tolerated in this text – Capote is not in the business of indulging or celebrating mystery, but instead works to solve it. As before, he must restore order to the chaotic question of why Perry is capable of murder. To resolve the mystery of Perry’s condition, Capote’s narrative naturalizes this intangible space into a something the reader can comprehend: a psychological condition. The mysterious space is thus re-formed in a more solid, measurable form, as a psychological disorder. Instead of an unknowable, mysterious affliction, Perry is explained by the familiar. Indeed, psychology comes with its own set vocabulary, field of experts, and assessable degrees of severity. Introducing psychology

as a solution to Perry's deviance is reassuring; it no longer repulses discussion but can instead be talked about in meaningful terms. What was ambiguous and threatening has now been named and naturalized, and furthermore, is a closed question – there will be no need for any further explanation.

Capote expands on the description of Perry's childhood, adding to his father's letter,

And, indeed, over the course of the next three years Perry had on several occasions run off, set out to find his lost father, for he had lost his mother as well, learned to 'despise' her; liquor had blurred the face, swollen the figure of the once sinewy, limber Cherokee girl, had 'soured her soul,' honed her tongue to the wickedest point, so dissolved her self-respect that generally she did not bother to ask the names of the stevedores and trolley-car conductors and such persons who accepted what she offered without charge (except that she insisted they drink with her first, and dance to the tunes of a wind-up Victrola). (Capote 132)

Lingering on these childhood moments (as well as emphasizing them through evocative language and description) Capote strongly implies his solution, or rather, explanation, to the 'problem' of Perry being a criminal – it is his disturbing childhood that caused his psychological problems, and thus his deviance. At the time this novel was published in 1965, the theory of a psychological connection between one's childhood and one's psyche had become popularized to the point of being mainstream: "Perry Smith, to be sure, has a life story so casebook as to be a cliché of the environmental explanation of mental disease and crime" (Trilling 125).

The focus on Perry's childhood lays the foundation for Perry being 'solved' more explicitly later on in the text by Dr. Jones, a "physician specializing in the field of psychiatry" (Capote 293). In the opinion of Dr. Jones,

Perry Smith shows definite signs of severe mental illness. His childhood, related to me and verified by portions of the prison records, was marked by brutality and lack of concern on the part of both parents. He seems to have grown up without direction, without love... (Capote 297)

This psychiatric evaluation goes on for another seven pages, and includes approval of Dr. Jones's assessments by another psychiatrist: "It is significant that a widely respected veteran in the field of forensic psychiatry, Dr. Joseph Satten of the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, consulted with Dr. Jones and endorses his evaluations of Hickock and Smith" (Capote 298). Capote, as meticulously as any good rhetoricist, thus supports his narrative conclusion with evidence.<sup>3</sup> At the end of this lengthy psychiatric explanation, Capote supplies a resolution to the question implied by the title that has perplexed both the reader, Alvin Dewey, and the whole of Holcomb: Why did Perry kill the Clutter family? The solution delivered is at once psychological and highly literary: "[The Clutters] never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it" (Capote 302).

In the narrative of Perry's life, the Clutters were not actual people, but symbols: It is Dr. Satten's contention that only the first murder matters psychologically, and that when Smith attacked Mr. Clutter he was under a mental eclipse, deep inside a schizophrenic darkness, for it was not entirely a flesh-and-blood man he "suddenly

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, as William Wiegand notes, "By the time the reader reaches this report in the book, the medical diagnosis does not seem to mean very much. Its conclusions are intelligible in terms of the evidence Capote had previously presented" (138).

discovered” himself destroying, but “a key figure in some past traumatic configuration”: his father? the orphanage nuns who had derided and beaten him? the hated Army sergeant? the parole officer who had ordered him to “stay out of Kansas”? One of them, or all of them. (302)

As Capote later indicated in an interview, “The Clutters were the perfect set of symbols” (Plimpton 38). Capote has thus narrated a satisfying solution, a “successful ordering” of the confusion that surrounded Perry. He remains human and sympathetic, and although a killer, only a killer of a set of symbols (from his perspective). Capote has once again maintained “his allegiance to the controlling and conserving power of language over and against chaos and violence and meaninglessness” (Anderson 77).

However, there remains a tension in the novel between Perry, the empathy-inducing, psychologically damaged criminal, and Dick, the unrelatable deviant who ends up shouldering all of the blame for the killings. Such a transfer of blame is necessary – in order to make Perry appear more human, Dick must appear more monstrous – but it introduces a paradoxical pressure into the text. If we are to accept Capote’s ‘enlightened’ view of the human criminal, whose deviance is comprehensible via childhood trauma, how then are we to interpret an inhuman murderer with a trauma-free childhood? Capote is only able to accomplish ‘solving’ this social issue through manipulating our attention, which is never allowed to linger on Dick: “Though portrayed at some length and even permitted to speak on occasion, Dick emerges as an unsympathetic character – shrewd, mean, able to take care of himself. It is Perry who haunts the memory, overshadowing not only Dick but everyone else” (Nance 207). Dick has filled the position of the more malevolent “bad guy,” who acts as the receptacle for all of the blame displaced by Perry.

Perry is thus only 'solved' as Dick is left unsolved, unsympathetic, and fully to blame. Whereas Perry's psychology is explained in the novel by his traumatic childhood, Capote relates no similar experiences in Dick's past. From the brief encounters we have with Dick's family, they appear to be the typical 'decent' Americans: his parents are still married, his family loves and (inexplicably) trusts him, his mother worries about who he associates with. In fact, the sense of perversity Capote creates after Dick helps kill the Clutters in part *relies* on the normalcy of the Hickock family, described here directly after the murder of the Clutters:

A few miles north, in the pleasant kitchen of a modest farmhouse, Dick was consuming a Sunday dinner. The others at the table – his mother, his father, his youngest brother – were not conscious of anything uncommon in his manner. He had arrived home at noon, kissed his mother...seeming quite his ordinary self. When the meal was over, the three male members of the family settled in the parlor to watch a televised basketball game. The broadcast had only begun when the father was startled to hear Dick snoring; as he remarked to the younger boy, he never thought he'd live to see the day when Dick would rather sleep than watch basketball. (Capote 73-74)

There is a clever reader repulsion at work here – Dick in fact seems more terrible *because* of the advantage of his background. This detail is also added to create more sympathy for Perry, who had none of the benefits of a good, decent family.

Forcing our attention to linger on Dick's situation illuminates the fact that he aids in our construction of sympathy for Perry. Within this narrative, Perry is partially so sympathetic because Capote offers us someone who is 'really to blame': Dick, who has proven himself to be sadistically brutal (such as when he veers his car off track to hit a dog) and domineering (for he persuaded Perry to join him in robbing the Clutter's home).

Capote's solution to Perry, however, hinges on reader sympathy. He never answers the question 'How can we understand why Dick murders?' because he is far too busy keeping our attention focused on the question he has enabled himself to answer: 'How can we understand why Perry murders?' In Foucauldian terms, Dick is never 'unveiled'; his vulnerabilities and traumas are never made open to us. Indeed, if Capote does apply free indirect discourse, allowing the reader inside Dick's mind, it is always used to describe Perry:

Dick realized that Perry was staring at him. A week ago, in Kansas City, Perry had bought a pair of dark glasses – fancy ones with silver-lacquered rims and mirrored lenses. Dick disliked them; he'd told Perry he was ashamed to be seen with 'anyone who'd wear that kind of stuff.' Actually, what irked him was the mirrored lenses; it was unpleasant having Perry's eyes hidden behind the privacy of those tinted, reflecting surfaces. (Capote 109)

Dick is not the only murderer who receives such distancing treatment. In a similar effort to make Perry appear vulnerable, human, and sympathetic, Capote juxtaposes him with the other 'characters' on Death Row: Earl Wilson, Bobby Joe Spenser, and Lowell Lee Andrews. In these cases, as with Dick, Capote relies on a repulsion of identification, a necessary sense of 'otherness' that emanates from these characters in order to propel us closer to Perry. This is especially true in the case of Andrews, who, as the text describes, "shot his mother three times, and his father twice. The mother, eyes gaping, arms outstretched, staggered toward him; she tried to speak, her mouth opened, closed, but Lowell Lee said: 'Shut up.' To be certain she obeyed him, he shot her three times more" (Capote 313). In these cases as well, the focus shifts quickly, so that we don't linger on the questions and inconsistencies that arise when considering these murderers. Here, then,

is another “problem-solving” via “problem-creating” element that creates the frame for Capote’s version of events. Although Perry’s deviance is satisfactorily explained, its explanation requires that Dick and the other murderers on death row cannot be satisfactorily explained.

The final ‘problem’ of the novel is Perry’s sentencing. For the fifth time within In Cold Blood, the reader must face the death of a likable character. Before therapeutically resolving this problem, however, Capote first indulges the grief of the moment. The day after Perry is sentenced, he is described by the prison warden’s wife:

I heard him crying. I turned on the radio. Not to hear him. But I could. Crying like a child. He’d never broke down before, shown any sign of it. Well, I went to him. The door of his cell. He reached out his hand. He wanted me to hold his hand, and I did, I held his hand, and all he said was, “I’m embraced by shame.” (Capote 308)

However, the text does not close on these notes of anguish or despair, but proceeds to solve this final problem, with a combination of distance and distraction – both tactics previously used by Capote to ‘solve’ anxieties and disorder. Distance is realized by the passing of time – Perry’s condition moves from the despair shown above to the tedium of living in prison for five years on Death Row. During this time, other distracting mini-narratives are placed in the text: the brief stories of Earl Wilson and Bobby Joe Spencer, and the longer tale of Lowell Lee Andrews. For the next five years, Dick and Perry interact only with these characters and the letters they receive, and any action comes from the day-to-day activity of the prison: Dick gets sick, Perry fasts, the two squabble with each other and Lee Andrews, or a new prisoner is put in an adjacent cell. By placing such distance between Perry’s sentencing and his execution, Capote allows the grief and anxiety the reader experiences after Perry receives the death sentence to wane. If Capote

had instead eclipsed the Death Row years and jumped directly from Perry's sentencing to hanging, the hanging itself would have been immensely emotional and tragic: the reader's trauma would have been hard to recover from, and Capote would have had a much more difficult time ending his text with an optimistic closure.

Instead, when the day of the hanging finally arrives, we are allowed not only the closure of Perry's apology – "It would be meaningless to apologize for what I did...But I do. I apologize" (Capote 340) – but we are not forced to view the act itself. The narrative describes the execution through Dewey's eyes, who misses the painful moment of death:

But Smith, though he was the true murderer, aroused another response, for Perry possessed a quality, the aura of an exiled animal, a creature walking wounded, that the detective could not disregard. He remembered his first meeting with Perry in the interrogation room at Police Headquarters in Las Vegas – the dwarfish boy-man seated in the metal chair, his small booted feet not quite brushing the floor. And when Dewey now opened his eyes, that is what he saw: the same childish feet, tilted, dangling. (Capote 340)

The next move Capote makes is the key to his conclusive, comforting ending, the final step of achieving universal order from what began as universal chaos. Capote ends his text with Dewey, who, still at the site of the execution, recalls an "incident of almost a year ago" (Capote 341); that is, post-sentencing and pre-execution. In the memory, Dewey is in Garden City's Valley View Cemetery, tending to his father's grave. His ruminations there revolve around the comfort of human birth and growth, but also express the comfort of the acceptance and necessity of human death:

Dewey had spent several hours at Valley View weeding his father's grave...[he] was proud of both [his sons], who were deep-voiced now and as tall as their father. The older boy was headed for college in the autumn.

When he finished weeding, Dewey strolled along the quiet paths. He stopped at a tombstone marked with a recently carved name: Tate. Judge Tate had died of pneumonia the past November; wreaths, brown roses, and rain-faded ribbons still lay upon the raw earth. Close by, fresher petals spilled across a newer mound – the grave of Bonnie Jean Ashida, the Ashidas' elder daughter, who while visiting Garden City had been killed in a car collision. Deaths, births, marriages – why, just the other day he'd heard that Nancy Clutter's boy friend, young Bobby Rupp, had gone and got married. (Capote 341-2)

Such calm, peaceful acceptance of death soothes the pain of Perry's death, and even reaches back to alleviate any lingering trauma over the Clutters' deaths. It is the book's final interaction, however, that clinches such faith in the order of the universe. Dewey finds Susan Kidwell, Nancy's childhood friend, at Nancy's graveside. Susan is now a "willow girl with white-gloved hands, a smooth cap of dark-honey hair, and long, elegant legs" (Capote 342). The reader's residual grief over the text's many deaths is distracted to instead focus on this lively, happy young woman. When Dewey asks her what she is studying in school, Susan replies: "Everything. Art, mostly. I love it. I'm really happy... Nancy and I planned to go to college together. We were going to be roommates. I think about it sometimes. Suddenly, when I'm very happy, I think of all the plans we made" (Capote 342). As Susan leaves, Capote delivers the final moment of the text:

"And nice to have seen you, Sue. Good luck," he called after her as she disappeared down the path, a pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining – just such a

young woman as Nancy might have been Then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat. (Capote 343)

In the above passages, Nancy's identity has been redirected into the vitality of Susan's identity; the residual pain felt at the loss of Nancy is refocused into Susan's joyful young life. Capote's 'hopeful future' conclusion arrives right after the acceptance of his 'death is inevitable' argument. After putting forth this grand 'circle of life' universal order, he decides to end on a note of optimism – an ending with peaceful closure that manages to solve all the trauma and mystery of the previously described events.

Such an ending keeps Capote firmly in the position of a godlike narrator, one who restores a sense of order and meaning to the world. This is a position he has maintained throughout the entire text – even within the first pages, it is clear that he knows what will happen, as when he drops in bits of information like “[Mr. Clutter] headed home for the day's work, unaware that it would be his last” (Capote 13). Indeed, Capote knows the answers to all the mysteries: it is the reader who must wait to find out the answers. Furthermore, it is Dewey, the mere human, who searches for a sense of order in vain; it is Capote who is able to deliver such order. Even when Dewey apprehends the two murderers, it “failed to satisfy his sense of meaningful design” (Capote 245). But godlike Capote ensures that we are privy to the larger picture, which explains Perry and creates a sense of this ‘meaningful design.’

The fact that he is unable to tell such a story without problem-solving, problem-creating elements is not a failure of his narration, but a symptom of every storyteller – no one can tell a story with complete objectivity, for the facts will never all collaborate with one another. If they did, if every chaotic inconsistency and area of disorder would be able

to be smoothed and explained, our world would be one of fundamental order instead of fundamental chaos; there would be one truth. It would no longer be a myth that, as Robert Siegle puts it, “the truth is there; it [just] needs illumination” (441).

Instead, the only route we have to approaching reality are imperfect stories, which provide cohesion and sense at the sake of exactitude. ‘Real-life’ stories will necessarily select among details, suppress, and exaggerate. They will even invent, as Capote did when he rearranged Valley View cemetery’s landscape – Susan would not have been able to run down a hill, her “hair swinging, shining” because the cemetery isn’t “situated above the town on a plateau of modest altitude” (Capote 341) as claimed; instead, it is encompassed by flat prairie land, no hills in sight. This filtering and creating process that we call ‘real stories’ or retellings is not only necessary for a narrative, but is also unavoidable, for “In actual practice, ‘facts’ are inevitably textual episodes from the moment they form in one’s consciousness” (Siegle 439). Thus, what we call the ‘fiction’ (set in the real world) and ‘nonfiction’ “turn out to have been the same. Different methods all turn out to be varying conventions for framing, proportioning, and selecting from the same basic cultural myth of reality” (Seigle 439). Capote cannot attain a status of objective narrator, illuminating only the truth, but he can tell a convincing story, using his authorial powers to distract and distance from problems, so that we are persuaded to trust in such fictional order.

## Chapter Two

Narrative as Experience, Experience as Narrative:

### The Stories of The Executioner's Song

*Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in the story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semi-conscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue. We live immersed in narrative.*

P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*

Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song is simultaneously an heir to and confutation of In Cold Blood. The text arrives in a clunky, postmodern package: all 1050 pages are filled with seemingly inchoate blocks of interview-style indirect dialogue. Mailer, however, challenges Capote's cohesive, tragic portrayal of small-town violence by incorporating many threads of narrative into his text. Where Capote presented us with a therapeutic way to process violence by endowing the event with justice, moral meaning, and ultimate closure, Mailer is at once not so ambitious and overambitious. The function of this work is not to directly attempt to explain a violent event to the reader, but to present how those involved manage to explain it to themselves. If Capote is telling us a story, then Mailer is telling us a story about why people make stories.

Throughout the second part of Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song, titled 'Eastern Voices,' we are given a front-row seat at the process of story creation. The

journalists in this text scoop up the raw material and fashion it into accessible stories for their readership – throughout, excerpts of actual news items appear alongside the character-voiced paragraphs. The brief bits of articles include only the source of the story (for example: “Deseret News”, “Los Angeles Times”) and the title or subtitle, without mentioning the author. The news articles are coherent, marked progress, dropped into the disordered narrative of the text:

On the 3rd of November, Esplin got a letter from Gary. It read: “Mike, butt out. Quit fucking around with my life. You’re fired.”

#### Provo Herald

Nov. 4 –Despite being dismissed, the two defense attorneys later Wednesday filed a notice of appeal – in their names – with Fourth District Court Judge J. Robert Bullock. They said it was ‘in the best interest’ of the defendant.

Earl had the feeling ‘standing’ was soon going to be a big legal word in the office...

*Hi Baby,*

*Today when I was going to talk to Fagan about extra visits, this dude who was dressed sorta like a girl called to me from one of the other sections as I passed by... Tonite at chow he sent over this little note I’m enclosing for you to read – that you might get a kick outa it.*

*Hi Gil,*

*I have been reading about you in the paper and I must say that you are an exception to all rules. People just don’t know what to think of you, hell they just don’t know us Texans, do they... (Mailer 517)*

Newspaper articles, like the one above, offer explicit storyline progression, and a

concrete sequence of events that allows for a sense of narrative movement amidst the chaos of all the other details. They operate in Song by condensing the series of reality's messy events into a simplified storyline, one where progress of the story can be tracked and monitored.<sup>4</sup> The media is also shown as distilling the complexities of people and events into easily comprehensible archetypes. For instance, here Gary's lawyer is describing a situation that conflicts with the press' 'storyline':

He was always surprised at how little they quoted him...Nor would they print what he said next, but he would tell them. "Gary lives," he said, "in a cell so narrow he can touch both walls. The light is on 24 hours a day. Guards beat on the bars. The noise confounds a man's last thoughts. Gary puts a towel on the bars to keep the light out. 'Take it down,' they tell him, 'or we'll come in and remove your mattress.' (Mailer 553)

The media at this point has already taken pains to cast Gary as the brave, brash 'bad guy' – any information that alters or complicates this narrative, including the above excerpt that makes him appear a victim, must be ignored for the sake of their cohesive story.

Above all, Mailer juxtaposes the relative parataxis of the interview-style voices and the filtered, deliberate storylines of the journalists as a thought exercise. The news excerpts, though they contain 'facts,' are always presented as further from the reality of the course of events than the court manuscripts, interview-paragraphs, and letters. Mailer celebrates the chaos of confusion and contradiction of these latter documents, and jars his reader into realizing that the national source most trusted for its reportage of reality in

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<sup>4</sup> Another example, too lengthy to be reprinted here, begins on page 532: the transcript of one of Gary's court visits appears verbatim. The chaos and confusion of this moment drastically contrasts with its corresponding four-line blurb in the Deseret News on page 535. Alternate paper blurbs, all similarly brief and smoothed, appear on pages 536-7.

fact contains its own brand of fiction.

Mailer also invites us into the mind of one of these journalists via the free indirect discourse of his interview-paragraphs, revealing the mechanisms behind the story making process. When we are introduced to the first of these character-journalists, Dennis Boaz, he is busy creating a coherent structure out of his own life:

Dennis was into alliteration these days, so he was going to call [his course]: Society / Symbolism / Synchronicity. Just as he said the last word to himself, a trailer truck slammed to a stop just ahead and he had to take his car around on the right...just before it happened, he had been thinking of the date, November 2nd. In his mind, he was writing it as 11/2. That, of course, added up to thirteen. In the major arcana of the tarot, thirteen was the card for death...That had to be as much synchronicity as anybody's synapses could take. (Mailer 512)

Thus, from the very first moment Boaz enters the text, he is portrayed as one who is aggressively finding patterns, assembling euphonious language, and actively manufacturing meaning from the random events around him. When he recounts his life story, we get 'writerly' language for the first time in this book, which has thus far been full of the flat, methodical voices of the west. Dennis' interview-voice offers colorful phrasing and metaphor:

In one party... [the young Prosecutors] drifted up to the attic for a toke, while down below their bosses were imbibing alcohol in the living room. The true juxtaposition between booze and grass. The bosses – you could say – the boozers – were down in hell, and Dennis and his associates upstairs in heaven. (Mailer 529)

Here, then, is a man experienced in the art of story creation – his personal history, which he has neatly fit into the span of a few pages, is saturated with various literary devices

and a sense of meaningful progress. Everyone he meets is not a person, full of human inconsistencies and contradictions, but a character: “He did not look bad in Dennis’ eyes. Kind of friendly and curt...sort of Republican cabinet material – a Clark Kent character” (Mailer 531). This method of personality identification of ‘type’ is a convenient narrative shorthand instead of a true excavation of person; it is a mental shortcut to label one a “Clark Kent character” on a first impression, as opposed to actually exploring that person’s character. However, for an author such as Dennis, this strategy aids in the efficient creation of traditional stories. Such an attitude prepares us for his first meeting with Gilmore, in which he likewise conjures an archetypal persona:

Dennis’s first impression was that an intelligence had just come into the room.

Gilmore showed a quiet indrawn face...[he] had smoky gray-blue eyes with a lot of light in them. Startling. A direct clear gaze. Since he was wearing the loose white coveralls of Maximum Security, and had come into the room barefoot, Dennis could see him as a holy man in New Delhi. (Mailer 525)

Dennis mentally adjusts this projected personality soon after their first conversation, endowing Gary with the bolder, more masculine persona that will soon become his established character in all media outlets. During this characterization, one can sense Boaz shaping who Gary Gilmore will become in the world of the press: “Boaz began to ponder the tougher side of Gary. Macho to a certain extent. Of course, he had had to use a gun to prove his power. Lived in ultimates. Must have been a very sensitive child” (Mailer 527). The short sentence fragments of this excerpt represent Dennis’s internal dialogue, his decision-making with himself regarding how to interpret Gilmore. His mental jumps, often unsubstantiated (see the final sentence), facilitate this highly superficial, ultimately fabricated portrait.

In an interesting bit of internal synchronicity, the journalist who does the reportage for Nicole, Gary's girlfriend, has almost identical storytelling impulses. Tamera Smith, of Deseret News, characterizes Nicole (and in this passage, Gary as well) in a similarly archetypal way:

Tamera felt humiliated for him in leg manacles, walking in short jerky steps like he was a spavined monster or something, but it was the girl who drew her, in fact, absolutely fascinated her by those looks. She had a kind of mystique about her, a sky glow, Tamera thought, like an old movie star. The drama of it came right over Tamera. (Mailer 540)

The everyday work of these two journalists, indeed, is to pick out details to create stories, cast real people into roles, and position events to most effectively heighten drama and intrigue. Mailer's most interesting assertion, however, is that story creation can become so internalized that the authors don't even consciously realize they are not merely observing, but instead arranging, assembling, and composing.

The conspicuous story-making of these "Eastern Voices" then works to retroactively inform one's prior (and ongoing) reading of the "Western Voices," which are based on the interviews of those who were both intimately and casually connected to Gary during his time in Provo. A reflection on the uncanny ability of the journalists to create meaning out of the disparate, often random events of life triggers the realization that those close to Gary – most notably his mother, cousin, and girlfriend – are undertaking the exact same endeavor. In response to the trauma of Gary's murders and sentencing, each of these voices generates an easily identifiable narrative genre to process and explain the violent events. Such a response is uncannily human – we all tend to shape our lives, our histories into a convenient story line, and it is these stories that we often use

to identify ‘who we really are.’ In the event of a traumatic experience, such an explanation becomes even more necessary – surely such pain had a meaning and purpose, and thus the imposition of a storyline is often essential for processing human pain itself. This is the idea behind narrative therapy, a mode of psychological counseling that employs this human use of narrative and storytelling to better understand their responses to trauma.

In the text that introduced the idea of narrative therapy, The Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends by Michael White and David Epston, the authors begin with the assumption that reality is experienced through “interpretive frameworks”: “It is now widely accepted that any statement that postulates meaning is interpretive – that these statements are the outcome of an inquiry that is determined by our analogies...that we ‘pull out’ from the world” (5). One of the main points of the texts is that narrative does not stay within the safe, bordered domain of words on a page. Rather,

We believe that persons generally ascribe meaning to their lives by plotting their experience into stories, and that these stories shape their lives and relationships. We also contend that most conversations, including those conversations with the ‘self,’ are shaped by at least the rudimentary requirements of a story – they have a beginning, a turn of events and an ending. Thus, narrative is not constrained to literary texts. (Epston, White 80)

It is precisely this human urge to mold the chaos of life into streamlined narrative that Mailer meticulously portrays. His thousands of interviews have produced individual readings and retellings of the same course of events, and he works to uncover the narrative impulses of the memory itself – after all, as posited by Harold Bloom, “Memory is always an art, even when it works involuntarily” (Bloom 17).

Such a format, far from being trapped within the narrow confines of a single event, in fact makes a very powerful claim about the way humans experience and remember. This storytelling as a mode of comprehension can be found in three of the many narratives that weave their way through this tome. Nicole's perspective is perhaps the most accessible (and is indeed a favorite version of the media), being that of a 'forbidden-love' fairy-tale romance, which cast Nicole and Gary as star-crossed lovers. When Nicole and Gary first meet, they are struck with the coincidence that they both own Ford Mustangs, of same year and model: "Didn't it have to be fantastic, [Gary] told her. He and Nicole had both bought exactly the identical model and year. It was a sign" (Mailer 67). Likewise, physical descriptions that originate in Nicole often have fantastic connotations: her new house in Spanish Fork "looked as funky as a drawing in a fairy tale" (Mailer 71). The almost cinematic romantic quality of their first meeting is unmistakably literary:

When their eyes met, he looked at her and said, 'I know you.' Nicole didn't say anything in reply. For a split second, something flashed in her mind but then she thought, No, I've never met him before, I know that. Maybe I know him from another time...That started everything off. She hadn't been thinking in such a way for quite a while. Now that feeling was around her again. She knew what he meant. (Mailer 73)

The hundreds of pages of love letters Gary and Nicole send back and forth to each other while Gary is incarcerated are also saturated with romantic longing:

Love

Last nite I flew in my dream

Like a white bird through the window

Came through the night and the cool wind with a few

Bright stars in the darkness. (Mailer 786)

This romance storyline is at its most intense – and most tragic – when Gary is in the car that will take him to his execution:

When the driver of the van turned the key for the motor, the radio, having been on before, now went on again. The tension in the van was sufficient that everyone jumped. Then the words of a song were heard. The driver immediately reached down to turn the radio off, but Gary looked up and said, “Please leave it on.” So they began to drive and there was music coming from the radio. The words of the song told of the flight of a white bird. “Una Paloma Blanca,” went the refrain, “I’m just a bird in the sky. Una paloma blanca, over the mountains I fly.” (Mailer 975)

The random coincidence of this certain song playing on the radio at such a crucial moment takes on immense literary meaning as it immediately is re-cast as evidence for the truth and destiny of the Nicole-Gary romance.

However, just as with any constructed story there are contradictions which must be suppressed in order for Nicole’s narrative to satisfy the genre’s expectations (or, in this case, Nicole’s desire to create meaning). The conventions of this story genre are the easiest to identify within the text; likewise, the evidence that doesn’t fit into the romance formula is equally obvious. For instance, Gary is an unequivocally abusive boyfriend. For all of his romantic letters and effusive praise of “his elf,” Gary has a nasty mean streak:

“Baby,” he said, “I really love you all the way forever.” She looked back. “Yeah,” she said, “and so do seven other motherfuckers.”

Gary hit her. It was the first time, and he hit her hard. She didn’t feel the pain so much as the shock and then the disappointment. It always ended the same way. They hit you when they felt like it. (Mailer 151)

Gary's pedophilic tendencies also must be ignored in order to support this 'true-love' plot. In addition to his frequent comparisons of Nicole to a much younger girl (including his concern that the 19-year-old was "too old for [him]," 65), he is obsessed with her more childlike characteristics. After requesting that Nicole shave off her pubic hair,

[It] certainly made a hellion out of Gary...he had been adoring her twice as much. It was like he was truly mad about her now...She began to think of Annette. Nicole didn't have any doubt that Gary might have been having a few thoughts when he gave Annette that peck on the cheek. He did love young girls. But Nicole was also sure he would never have done anything, physically speaking. (Mailer 134-5)

Further undermining this grand love story is Nicole's frequent infidelity. Interestingly enough, Nicole manages to explain such encounters within the context of her own manufactured romance. For instance, after she has sex with Cliff (one of the many men she sees while Gary is incarcerated), the two discuss the many letters Gary has sent from prison. One can mark the point where Nicole departs from a more accurate representation of events and jumps to a constructed, tragic-romantic version:

Did she read all of them, Cliff wanted to know.

Well, nearly all. He wrote so much. Maybe she didn't read every word religiously if you got down to it. There were a few she just scrounged through.

Then she shook her head. No, she said, she really read all of them. (Mailer 327)

Nicole's romance narrative is only one of many that are offered to us in the knot of stories available within The Executioner's Song. A strikingly different story stems from Bessie, Gary Gilmore's mother, in her attempts to explain and process the notion that her son has murdered two men. Bessie's narrative similarly closely cleaves to an identifiable genre – one of the supernatural. According to Bessie's mindset, the only explanation for

Gary's violent behavior is the ghostly spirits that infiltrated their family's home, which then haunted Gary and indelibly changed his sweet temperament to a more frightening personality.

The family history according to Bessie retains an ethereal, mystical aura. Bessie herself, who is described as having "an artistic temperament" coupled with "very white skin" (Mailer 6), characterizes her mother-in-law, and Gary's grandmother, as follows:

Fay had a scintillating smile. She was petite, her hair was white, and her eyes were so blue you couldn't believe it. Her skin was flawless. Her teeth were to perfection. She had no wrinkles...Now she was a medium and rarely left her bed...She would command [others] like she was waving a wand...Maybe once a week, Fay would give a séance...For that matter, you could be talking to Fay, and there would be a knock on the wall, or a thump on the ceiling. At night, Bessie could feel presences walking over her bed. (Mailer 321-322)

Apart from the evident fictive overtone of a name such as "Fay la Foe," there is a clear narrative tradition being exercised as Bessie sets up the context for her individual story. Bessie's perspective is one that recognizes a ghostly influence, and accepts supernatural elements as contributing to the architecture of her life story. Upon this foundation, then, Bessie begins to tell the story of Gary's history. It is a story that develops in degrees, and is revised to various versions according to the level of explanation Bessie requires at various times throughout the story; before Bessie receives news of the murders, she only needs to create a meaningful sequence to explain Gary's misbehavior and jail sentence for a non-violent crime. Before the murders, she exhibits a general sense of mistrust at the supernatural happenings in their house:

Still, it was in the house on Crystal Springs Boulevard that Gary developed his fear

of being beheaded...[In his bedroom at night] Gary would holler, "Mom, I see that thing again." She would try to explain that it was paint and all right but they finally had to do the walls over. Then his dreams of being executed had begun. They had caused such fear. (Mailer 312)

The material of this narrative, rooted in the unearthly, intensifies when Bessie needs it to further explain why her son has become so recklessly violent, and indeed, murderous.

After learning of Gary's killings, Bessie revamps Gary's life story:

The boys went to Our Lady of Sorrows parochial school, and Gary thought he'd be a priest...that was the time, she told Grace, when an apparition attached itself to Gary. She blamed it on the house in which they lived. Even Frank agreed it was haunted, and he was not a man partial to such ideas...On the day they left, Mrs. Cohen and she cried as they said goodbye, and Mrs. Cohen said, "You're lucky not to stay in that house. It's an evil house." (Mailer 466)

An outside evil has thus implanted itself into Bessie's son, who "had a natural sweetness to him" (Mailer 455) – such was the storyline that Bessie uses as a mechanism to understand the series of events that made her son into a murderer.

However, as with Nicole's constructed storyline, there is evidence that undermines this interpretation of reality, and must be actively suppressed in order to internalize the narrative. For instance, Grace, a family friend and former teacher, notes an extreme change in Gary as a result of both his incarceration and Prolixin treatments, which was the drug given to Gary in prison in order to suppress any violent outbursts.

"I never saw that kind of cruelty in Gary," Bessie would say, and Grace would again agree, and know she was not telling the truth. Gary had never done anything cruel to her, certainly not, but she had seen something awful come into him after his Prolixin treatments, a personality change so drastic that Grace could honestly say she didn't

know the man named Gary Gilmore who existed after taking it. It was as if something obscene had come into his mind. She was not very surprised he had killed two people. (Mailer 455-456)

This information complicates the supernatural storyline of the haunted childhood, asserting that Gary became more violent as a result of his prison environment and medication (a perspective also adopted by Gary's lawyers). In fact, Bessie herself notes that the violence in Gary's personality emerged by degrees, instead of occurring in a single instance that changed Gary from a potential pastor to a murderer. Indeed, although she on one hand admits that the defiance she sees in him at two "chills her" (Mailer 403), she ignores such evidence of moral complication on the other, and suppresses such memories in favor of her therapeutic supernatural narrative, where all was out of her direct control.

Unlike Bessie's personal narrative, the story used by Brenda, Gary's cousin, as a method of interpretation casts the series of events not as a result of chance happenings, but as fated. Gary becomes Brenda's tragic hero, one who cannot halt the chain of events that will ultimately lead to both his two murders and his execution. The text's very first lines are given to Brenda, and indeed resemble the Genesis story of The Fall of Man:

Brenda was six when she fell out of the apple tree. She climbed to the top and the limb with the good apples broke off. Gary caught her as the branch came scraping down. They were scared. The apple trees were their grandmother's best crop and it was forbidden to climb in the orchard. She helped him drag away the tree limb and they hoped no one would notice. That was Brenda's earliest recollection of Gary.

(Mailer 5)

The title capping this excerpt is "The First Day," which primarily refers to the major

event of Chapter One, Gary's first day back from jail, but also works to underline Brenda's associations with the Genesis story. Her first memory of Gary takes on a mythic luster as he is portrayed as her accomplice in Adamic sin, hurrying to hide the evidence of the transgression from authority. Throughout Brenda's story, he continues to represent The Fall – having already once been expelled from society (during his initial jail sentence), he continues to disobey laws and social codes, and has a marked disregard for other people. Brenda's notion of impending doom and "strong sense of woe" (Mailer 15) drives this first depiction of Gary: Brenda took a good look into his eyes and felt full of sadness again. His eyes had the expression of rabbits she had flushed...they were calm and tender and kind of curious. They did not know what would happen next" (Mailer 16); which is to say, they did not know they would be killed, but Brenda did. Such an analogy positions Brenda in an authorial role, one who senses what shape her future 'story' will take.

Of course, it is worthy of mention that all of Mailer's interviews took place after Gary's murders, trials, and execution. To the (unknown) level that Mailer's characterizations of these people are based in fact and not artistry, they certainly had an advantage in relating their stories to an interviewer after the fact. This post-execution point of view sometimes comes out in the language of the text, as when Brenda recalls, "The worst story Gary ever told came back to her now" (Mailer 67). Brenda is positioned at some point in the future from this narrative instant, and it is made obvious that she is recalling the series of events. For instance, Brenda would have been forced to revise her tragedy narrative if Gary had been found not guilty. When the tragic hero fails to die, the genre itself is imperiled. Brenda's words are only allowed a portentous weight because

she has the benefit of time; she is constructing her history, not her present.

Thus, her narrative takes on the language of one which hints at its outcome. For example, when driving through a snowstorm as bad as “driving through a barrel of snakes,” Brenda decides to call the weather report (a ‘Smokey report’) on her car’s CB radio.

Gary, however, was upset about Brenda hitting the CB. He had heard of them, but he didn’t really know what they did. He got paranoid. Thought Brenda was talking to the cops. “What are you doing?” He asked.

“Getting a Smokey report.”

“What,” asked Gary, “is a Smokey report?”

“That,” said Brenda, “is the name for the police.”

“Hey,” asked Gary, “are you going to turn me in?”

Brenda said, “For what? Being an asshole? You can’t turn somebody in for being an asshole.” (Mailer 50)

Brenda’s voice not only heavily alludes to the story’s climax – that it is indeed she who turns Gary in, by postponing his departure until the cops arrive – but also that this dynamic is operating in the background before Gary even commits a crime. Therefore, the potential for the sequence of events has always existed, from Brenda’s perspective, and when Gary murders two men, she is not shocked, as Bessie is. After her mother tells her that Gary shot her neighbor, Brenda’s narrative responds “ ‘Oh, Mom.’ Brenda had been walking around all evening with a sense of disaster” (Mailer 258). To round out the poignancy of Gary’s tragic narrative, the instrument she uses to betray him is the very same one that made him so nervous earlier – “They agreed that Brenda would communicate with the police through her CB and so be able to keep her telephone line

open for Gary” (Mailer 262).

Brenda’s story weaves through The Executioner’s Song more subtly than the other two chosen here. This is most likely because a tragic structure is often applied to crime stories, both in novels and when people speak of and interpret actual events. However, her narrative is as constructed as Nicole’s and Bessie’s, and indeed, the other hundreds of narratives weaving throughout this text. The notion that there is a “truth” at the bottom of this complex knot – if one just digs deep enough – is one that Mailer plays around with formally as well, splitting chapters into sub-chapters at random, numbered intervals, and assigning sometimes relevant, sometimes random titles to the chapters, as if challenging us to synthesize and absorb to find the essence of his meaning, his interpretation. Or perhaps these haphazard titles and divisions are to work as self-reflexive exercises – once it is revealed to the reader how much narrative creation is a of a second nature to these characters, Mailer prods us to realize that we partake in it as much as anyone else while trying to ‘uncover’ meaning.

Whether it was his intention or not, evidence of this user-generated story mechanism abounds in both popular and scholarly reviews of the work. Readers of the book, just like the journalists and characters of the book, have created their own meanings from bits and pieces of this text, their very own narrative. They have absorbed this mess of a text in which, according to Chris Anderson, “the prose seems undigested.” (121): “Upon a first reading them no one pattern or metaphor stands out” (122). The rest of the analysis, however, manages to find a storyline full of devices of a traditional narrative. In his view, what binds the whole text together is an existential drabness, and a weariness with violence and pain:

We *discover the key* in The Executioner’s Song at precisely those moments where the

language becomes denser, more metaphorical, more rhythmically controlled: ‘It was time to recognize, Brenda decided gloomily, that when Gary was around, there were questions for which you would not get answers. The snow kept coming down. Out on the roads, the universe would be just one big white field’ (48)...the focus on the snow and the whiteness of the fields is novelistic, metaphorical: the universe is like a white field...[it is] a metaphor of vastness and meaninglessness, and it is aligned here with what Brenda suspects is the impossibility of understanding Gilmore’s inner self.’’ (Anderson 123, emphasis mine)

Anderson insists that he is ‘reading’ Mailer’s meaning, or “key”, when he is actually creating his own cohesive storyline from the material available to him. Despite the text’s insistence on randomness, Anderson has found a novelistic pattern:

Toward the end of the book there is still another landscape of blankness. In describing the thoughts of one of Schiller’s secretaries on the eve of the execution, Mailer writes: ‘She had always though ‘existential’ was an odd word, but it now was so bleak and cold outside, just a little bit of eternal snow on the ground, and she felt as if no one had ever gone out of this motel with these Xerox machines, and the typewriters’ (879-80). The fact of pattern suggests significance. Repetition signals meaning, and by this point the importance of snow, of bleakness, of emptiness is unmistakable...What [Mailer] wants us to see is the pointlessness, the dreariness of the Gilmore story. He wants us to key on the repetition...Xeroxing is here an image of flatness, drabness, pointlessness. Words blur on the page. Snow obliterates all distinctions of building and rock. (Anderson 124)

As before, Anderson resists the notion that he is the one guiding a connecting thread through the hundreds of points of view that make up this text, and instead insists that his reading is the one Mailer intended – “What he wants us to see,” “wants us to key on.” He

takes bits and pieces of different characters' stories and fits them together to create meaning. It is Anderson who performs this authorial work, not Mailer.

Another extra-textual storyline is created by the book's first reviewer, Joan Didion. The storyline she creates from this text is one of fate and inevitability, but claims that this is largely a story about Western women, and their strength and tragedies.

The Executioner's Song, then, was to be a novel of the West, and the strongest voices in it, as in the place itself, would be those of women. Men tend to shoot, get shot, push off, move on...The 'Western' book is a fatalistic drift, a tension, an overwhelming and passive rush toward the inevitable events that will end in Gary Gilmore's death...a kind of desolate wind seems to blow through the lives of these women." (Didion 2)

Didion, like Anderson, also pulls from this text a pattern: hers is that of an uncontrollable falling:

The sensation of falling is constant...Nicole has 'a rush of memories then like falling down in a dream.' Gary's mother Bessie, sitting alone in her trailer in Oregon, gets a call about the murders from her sister Ida and she feels 'vertigo at the fall through space of all those years since Ida was born.' A sister-in-law of Nicole's thinks of sinking 'right into the swamp of misery.' A friend of the family is trying to sleep one night, when she hears Gary, whose visit she has declined, shatter her car window with a tire iron. 'She let it go. It was just one more unhappiness at the bottom of things.' (Didion 3)

Didion's pattern of falling, in the same manner as Anderson's pattern of repetition and bleakness, is woven together from disparate narratives of many voices to create her own storyline. Didion's interpretation and emphasis on the sensation of falling creates a different story than the one fashioned by Anderson, but the larger point is that each of

these critics created a story in which they could find cohesion and meaning.

A third critical narrative drawn from this text is one revolving around paranoia. Claims the critic, Patrick O'Donnell, "Mailer forges a myth" (185). The resonance of such a claim is unmistakable – myths are a structured, meaningful narrative species, not a chaotic assortment of storytelling voices. To bridge the gap, O'Donnell exerts authorial effort of his own, tracking the pattern of paranoia in the text: "Paranoia is contagious in The Executioner's Song, and almost every one of its dozens of characters is afflicted with it as some point or another" (O'Donnell 186). He then offers his own laundry list of pattern and cohesion:

It turns out, for example, that Gary Gilmore and his girlfriend, Nicole Baker, both own Ford Mustangs of exactly the same model and year; Gary has his painted blue to match Nicole's after they meet. Jim Barrett, one of Nicole's former husbands, leaves Provo for "Cody, Wyoming, with a friend of his also named Barrett"...Nicole's mother, Kathyrine, is the spitting image of her half-sister, Kathy. Ida Damico has a twin sister, Ada, who is deceased. Max Jensen, the gas station attendant Gilmore kills, has a sister and a wife who share the same name – Colleen...And so on: The doublings and repetitions of the novel begin to add up to something – a "synchronicity," as Mailer titles one of the chapters. (O'Donnell 186)

This is a third of the innumerable meanings or patterns one could draw from this text; it, like the two preceding it, contains pattern, cohesion, and meaning of a more traditional narrative.

Mailer has said of The Executioner's Song that

I thought it might be very nice for once just to write a book which doesn't have answers, but poses delicate questions with a great deal of evidence and a great

deal of material and let people argue over it. I feel there are any number of areas in this book where there are people who have better answers to give than I have.

(Hellman 60)

What is most striking about such a statement is not its announcement, or probable authorial pose (as Mailer is understood not to be a modest sort of man), but rather its uncanny similarity to a response Truman Capote once gave to an interviewer regarding the 'nonfiction novel': "There is no absolute truth in these matters, only opinion, and as I attempted to formulate my own, tried to tell what I was going to tell Shapiro..."

(Anderson 65)

Capote, unlike Mailer, does not allow any alternative views to seep into his text, but chooses one storyline and ignores all others. This does not mean, however, that divergent threads of narrative didn't exist – as explored earlier, there were several other story modes operating simultaneously in the press. Unlike the series of events of In Cold Blood, and the stories of the interviewees of The Executioner's Song, the accounts in daily newspapers didn't have the advantage of eking meaning out of past events; their articles aren't allowed a single line of cohesive narrative, which suppress contradictions and build cause-and-effect relationships. Instead, the series of articles is more reminiscent of daily life itself: ongoing personal stories suddenly jump genres (say, from romance to tragedy, or the rarer, Nicole-like opposite), or characters switch from malevolent to benevolent and back again. Unlike Capote's characterizations of Dick and Perry, the "Garden City Telegram" journalists couldn't make up their minds about which of the two was worse, so we see versions of each. Unlike Capote's endowment of a tragic inevitability to the Clutter murders, the "Telegram" headline proclaimed, "Background of Two Men Didn't Predict Killing" (Greer A1, "Background"). Hickock, in a telling

departure from his animalistic, malevolent description in Blood, is repeatedly emphasized as “the younger of the two men” (Greer A1, “Attorneys”). During the first day of trial, he is described as “lighting up when he sees his family enter the courtroom” and giving his dad a hug (Greer A2, “Trial”). Likewise, his father Eugene Hickock is given ample space in the article to discuss his own personal narrative, the belief that Dick was “doing fine” before Perry came into town (Greer A2, “Trial”). Meanwhile, in the same article, Perry is described as “the calmer of the two” during the trial, chewing gum and smiling.

These characterizations suddenly switch during the testimony of Perry Smith himself, who is described in the “Telegram” as revealing that he “threatened to use force” if Dick followed through on his plan to rape Nancy Clutter. The one thing Perry Smith can’t stand, as described here in the same words as in Blood, “is the inability to control oneself sexually” (Greer A1, “Details”) Suddenly, Dick is comparatively demonized, acting more cavalier during the trial and “joking and laughing” after the pair receive their death sentence (Greer A1, “Death”).

As Mailer asserts within The Executioner’s Song, the different characterizations and story creation of the media is merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to narrating a series of events; it is the personal narrative that allows meaning to multiply and expand infinitely. So, amongst these overwhelmingly varied views on what happened and what it meant, Capote convincingly delivers his own and suppresses all others so deftly it is as if they didn’t exist at all. After all, “The non-fiction novel is [one in which] the only one valid universe is the one perceived by the narrator” (Kenny 181). Unlike Mailer’s character-driven narratives of Nicole, Bessie, and Brenda, the personality (and thus obvious bias) is removed from Capote’s account, completing the illusion of The One

## True Narrative:

Truman Capote detaches himself from language, resulting in a style marked by authorial silences and an insistent reliance on showing, not telling. This creates what Wolfgang Iser described as 'indeterminacy' or 'gaps,' drawing readers into the text and making them complicit in constructing its argument. (Anderson 244)

Capote's text, then, is an exercise in his ability to persuasively tell a story about true life to tempt us to adopt the same view; Mailer's text is an effort to prod us into creating our own narrative as an explanatory device, and then realize the constructedness of what we've done.

And indeed, Mailer's text defies a Capotesque reader immersion. It is his characters that are compelling, not a drive to know what will happen next; it is safe to say that most readers would have already known the end to the Gary Gilmore story. The format of the novel itself repels a traditional absorptive reading – the size of the text (1,000-plus pages) is as bulky and awkward as the paragraph format, which allocates large amounts of white space on the page around each interview-paragraph. This device is used for more than an indication to the reader that a character-narrator has switched; the white lines allow us a breath of surfacing from the narratives, and announce and remind us that we are reading words on a page, not experiencing the text's dramatic events alongside its characters. This space is also reminiscent of human processes such as blinking or breathing. One is always acutely aware of the divide between book and the self, two entities usually bridged by the engaging act of reading. Song, however, is not a book to lose oneself in; we are constantly prodded and reminded of the synthetic quality of stories, and this story is no exception.

Mailer doesn't refrain from illustrating how characters lives are fully absorbed

into their individual stories, however. He portrays judges, journalists, and lawyers as becoming so immersed in the course of events that they forget to eat, shower, or change clothes. For instance, Pastor Deamer “worked all through the night...was dead tired and felt awful grubby. He had a considerable growth of stubble and smelly socks. Not only tired but near used up” (Mailer 970). Likewise, prosecuting attorney Earl Dorius happens to see that “by his reflection in the window, he noticed he had a growth of whiskers, and his eyes were bloodshot. He needed a bath, but he felt good” (Mailer 967). The defense attorney, Judith Wolbach, has a similar immersive experience: “The thing most disturbing to Judith at this moment was that she felt so dirty. She hadn’t even had a chance to go home that night or change her shirt. Just felt sweaty and tired and really disgusted” (Mailer 978). These characters had been fully engrossed in the Gary Gilmore story (or stories), all unable to pay attention to anything else until the verdict came back from the jury. Not only does this immersion resemble the act of reading, but also true experience – it is easy to become absorbed in a single, exciting storyline. Indeed, how can one not be immersed in one’s reality? In the same vein, O’Donnell notes that

it seems that everyone – from the soft-brained Dennis Boaz, who first attempts to break the Gilmore story and who specializes in esoterica and believes in obscure theories of numerology, to the most hard-nosed reporter in the field – has some sense that things are happening according to some kind of plan or pattern. (O’Donnell 186)

This, however, should come as no surprise. As demonstrated by the field of narrative therapy, and claimed by Bloom and Insole, everyone’s memories are self-authored stories, each of us have our own accounts of how the world operates, and narrative is the only means we have to interpret events. We are all deeply immersed in our own storylines, because it is the only existence we know.

Because we are so exposed to each character's story, sympathy seems to flow easily to these characters, whose fears, hopes, and vulnerabilities are revealed to us, seemingly in their own voices. Many have noted this quality of Song: "The Executioner's Song is also a remarkably compassionate work. Mailer got to know a lot of the people and families he writes about, and they appear here as full people...[he] is also fair to Gilmore and Nicole" (Garvey 140). Characters who would seem to lend themselves to convenient stereotypes are instead endowed with authorial respect; Mailer is by no means condescending. Even Bessie, who at the end of her life lives alone in a filthy trailer, commands a powerful, and pathetic, narrative:

From the day Brenda told her that Gary committed the murders, one of Bessie's legs turned in at the ankle. Then, from the day Gary was killed, that leg would no longer allow her to walk. Up till then, she had been able to make it over to the office for mail...If a car came at night, came into the trailer port, drove around and slowed up, if it stopped, she knew somebody out in that car was thinking that she was alone by the window. Then she would say to herself, "If they want to shoot me, I have the same kind of guts Gary has. Let them come." (Mailer 1049)

A reader's sense of compassion, often inspired throughout the text by monologues such as the one above, can be analyzed in Foucauldian terms. Like In Cold Blood, The Executioner's Song is a carefully constructed work that allows some characters to induce sympathy and others to thwart it. In utilizing the characters' own voices in telling their stories, each character who relates her tale of Gilmore creates her own visibility, removing herself from the realm of obscuring stereotype and into one of reader connection. The way one chooses to tell her story also speaks to how she chose to assemble her personal history, the narrative that is the essence of one's identity. This

composition of anxieties, fears, humor, and love exposes a voice as human, instead of leaving them in a realm of monstrous ‘other.’ Indeed, Gary Gilmore is the only character who fails to generate a lasting sympathy,<sup>5</sup> while also being the only one who is not endowed with a storyline that figures in the text. Where Capote, however, creates a single strand of narrative that explains Perry while failing to do the same for Dick, effectively obscuring him, Mailer obscures Gilmore through opposite means. Dick suffers from a lack of narrative explanation; Gary suffers from an overabundance of it. He is essentially a prism of narrative; allow the light to hit him a certain way, and out tumbles a forbidden love romance, which then becomes a supernatural tale from another angle. Instead of being the author of his own story, he is obscured by being the subject of many narratives, which all cast him in different roles:

Farrell... had been discovering an awful lot about Gilmore that was not so good.

Rereading the interviews and letters, Farrell began to mark the transcripts with different-colored inks to underline each separate motif in Gilmore’s replies, and before he was done, he got twenty-seven poses. Barry had begun to spot racist Gary and Country-and-Western Gary, poetic Gary, artist manqué Gary, macho Gary, self-destructive Gary, Karma County Gary, Texas Gary, and Gary the killer Irishman.

(Mailer 830)

This journalist’s obsession with ‘tracking’ Gary’s personas in different contexts will ultimately prove futile. The above personas are not poses that stem from Gary so much as characterizations that stem from those who are ‘reading’ Gary. Gary is created not by any action of his own, but by hundreds of other narratives that create him as a different

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<sup>5</sup> It is perhaps worthy of note that while Mailer was able to interview most of the people who became characters in this novel, he began the research process after Gary’s execution, so he was never exposed to his voice to the same degree.

character in each story throughout this text. Further complicating this journalist's quest for the one true Gary is the fact that each of us act differently around different people; one's personality can shift and adjust to different roles in different settings. Each human surely has at least twenty-seven poses in different contexts, and many perhaps hold within their repertoire a 'killer Irishman' persona. As claimed by Epston and White,

The narrative mode locates a person as a protagonist or participant in his/her world.

This is a world of interpretative acts, a world in which every retelling of a story is a new telling, a world in which persons participate with others...in the shaping of their lives and relationships. (82)

One not only creates one's character in a given situation, but is free to revise and 'retell' this protagonist in different ways in different situations. Gary's cellmate, Gibbs, understands this aspect of assuming various characters for life's separate contexts: "Gilmore had a quality Gibbs could recognize. He accommodated. Gibbs believed he, himself, could always get near somebody – just use the side that was like them. Gilmore was the same" (Mailer 358).

The 'true Gary' that this journalist, Farrell, is searching for will of course never be delivered, for there are simply too many true Garys. According to Insole,

There is no single narrative whereby truth is discerned and created, but diverse narratives... truth moves from being transcendent to being a construct, then a story, and finally a diverse cacophony of stories. If truth is a story, and the stories begin to fragment, then truth itself fragments, until disagreement and diversity are read as the very fragilization and fragmentation of truth itself. (4)

Thus, Gary's 'true self' is fragmented into hundreds of 'true selves.' Indeed, if Mailer's narrative is to be characterized as anything, the label "a diverse cacophony of stories"

seems utterly appropriate.

An interesting case of the revision or retelling mentioned by Epston and White can be found in Nicole's personal narrative. Although she is deeply invested in her romance story for most of the text, she abandons it and alters her type of protagonist after Gary's execution:

Nicole was sitting in her kitchen one morning in the small apartment she now rented in a small town in Oregon which was where she had wandered after L.A., and she was having coffee with the guy who had been with her the night before...She was not sure there was any such thing anymore as Gary. She didn't know if that was where her belief rested. He was a lot out of her mind. He might really be dead. (Mailer 1049)

Of course, there is a realm of sense and experience beyond the reach of a story, and even beyond the ability of words. The chaos of our reality is such that "experience is too various, complex, and fine to be represented completely in words" (Anderson 66). Consequently, the 'one true narrative,' and its close relative, the 'one true self' are fallacies – any given narrative is not only crowded with a subjective author, but relies on tools that cannot do full justice to the disorder of experience.

Capote's literary exercise is a more detailed version of something humans do every day, in employing the "narrative mode of thought," which "is characterized by good stories that gain credence through their lifelikeness [and] establish a connectedness of events across time (Epston, White 78). His exuberance lies in the fact that he has managed to make reality into a story; Mailer's sharp counter is that our only reality is that of stories.

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