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Writing in Suspense:

A Critique on American Culture Through Objective and Subjective Reportage

Brittany Twigg

“You are a man of extreme passion, a hungry man not quite sure where his appetite lies, a deeply frustrated man striving to project his individuality against a backdrop of rigid conformity. You exist in a half-word suspended between two superstructures, one self-expression and the other self-destruction. You are strong, but there is a flaw in your strength, and unless you learn to control it the flaw will prove stronger than your strength and defeat you” (Capote 43).

During Perry Smith’s first three years in prison, he befriends a man named Willie Jay, who later writes a letter describing Smith’s characteristics. The portion of the letter noted above not only describes Smith, a main character in Truman Capote’s novel, *In Cold Blood*, but also personifies the development of a new form of journalism. In the same way that Perry Smith becomes frustrated by trying to create his own identity opposite of social expectations, the genre of narrative journalism grew out of a desperation among writers for individuality. Though narrative form enhanced the way in which journalists told stories, the increase of fictional elements can detract from the author’s credibility if not kept under control. Therefore, as Perry seeks to find himself between

a world of self-expression and a world of self-destruction throughout the novel, he demonstrates the way in which journalists sought a balance between fact and fiction.

During the 1960's, fiction writers became dissatisfied with the novel as means of describing reality, and simultaneously journalists grew frustrated with the confines of the inverted pyramid—a technique that required journalists to include the most newsworthy information in the introduction of the story. As a result, both journalists and novelists rejected the constructed norms of their genres and began to experiment with new ways of self-expression. As the quote suggests, the writers of this era were passionate about the world in which they lived, but they sought new ways to share their real-world experiences. Writers sought to integrate their own perceptions within the objective truth of journalism in order to better express themselves. This transition led to the combination of fact and fiction through which subjective truth became the primary focus. Although this style has increased in popularity since then, many critics still question its validity and factuality due to the increased use of fictional elements to tell factual stories. By defying the foundation of objective truth in conventional journalism, Capote and Thompson create a more profound experience for their audience through the development of their own persona and their use of suspense within their novels.

Defining Narrative Journalism

The genre of narrative journalism is the result of an era when both novelists and journalists became frustrated with their means of expression. While writers began to question the limitations of the novel to express “contemporary reality,” journalists were displeased with the inverted pyramid and “the neutrality of conventional journalism” (Olster 44-45). Therefore, narrative journalism marks the recognition of the limitations presented in objective reportage by giving “significance to the personal view of journalists” and finding new ways to describe “the feeling or atmosphere of an event,” further exposing readers to new aspects of society (Olster 44-45; Lucy 289). By forgoing the confines of the inverted pyramid, narrative

journalism seeks to promote aesthetic appeal and resonance among readers rather than factual accounts. Therefore, objectivity within narrative journalism becomes “a textual effect, the product of a certain aesthetic proficiency, a way with words” (Lucy 294). Writers, such as Capote and Thompson, construct this form of objectivity by inserting themselves as characters in their writing and immersing themselves in the events they cover (48).

The use of oneself as a character in a narrative, other than in an autobiography, contrasts with conventional journalism. Traditional journalists develop knowledge through “an ideal of professional detachment,” which allows them to simply observe and record what happens in the world (Lucy 284). In contrast, narrative journalism allows writers to personally participate in the event by creating a new epistemology for writers. From the 1960’s to the present day, this written form of expression began to incorporate a participatory understanding of the world that could not be accomplished through conventional journalism. However, this new style of writing caused writers to be considered “incompetent outsiders from a professional point of view” because they did not adhere to the traditional expectations of objective reportage (Lucy 289). In 1990, Joan Didion wrote an essay that “warned of the falsehoods that can emerge when historical events are framed as narratives that misconstrue their meaning” (Olster 52). In order to truly understand this type of writing, a paradigm shift must take place in order to understand that the authors are not trying to be strictly factual, but are rather commenting on society in a new way.

Narrative Journalism and Truman Capote

This shift in thinking gives insight into the style and purpose of Capote’s novel *In Cold Blood* as he aims to retell one of the most horrific murders to happen in American history. In November 1959, Truman Capote was sent to Kansas to report on the Clutter murder for the *New Yorker* (Tynan 130). The accounts of the murder that were published in the newspaper adhered to the conventional forms of journalism. However, through spending five years researching the murder of Herb, Bonnie, Nancy, and Kenyon Clutter, Capote developed his most renowned

work—*In Cold Blood*. This novel, unlike any of his journalistic writing, uses a narrative structure to tell the events of the Clutter murder through Capote’s “conscious intention to the novelistic objective throughout” (Wiegand 137). In an article titled “The Kansas Farm Murders,” author Kenneth Tynan explains that “*In Cold Blood* . . . is certainly the most detailed and atmospheric account ever written of a contemporary crime” (130). The use of narrative description that Tynan points out in his article allowed Capote to defy the confines of conventional journalism.

Capote’s narrator persona becomes evident in the structure of the story, even though he is not the main character. *In Cold Blood* begins with detailed description of the characters and the setting. Through this initial description, Capote establishes himself as an omniscient narrator. However, the novel is written in third-person as a means to distance the author from the subject. In a personal interview, Capote explained that the hardest part of writing this novel was keeping himself out of the story (Voss 72). The distancing effect of Capote’s third-person narration, however, did not hinder him from manipulating the events of the murder as an author to adhere to a narrative form. Capote’s influence on the portrayal of the events of the crime defy objectivity, as certain scenes are reconfigured, further diminishing the factuality of the novel.

Capote’s most strategic manipulation is the way that he portrays Perry. While Perry is admittedly a victim of a poor home life, Capote reshapes the events in the novel to reinforce this victimized image and generate sympathy from his audience. Ralph F. Voss, author of *Truman Capote and the Legacy of In Cold Blood*, explains the reasoning behind Capote’s sympathy towards Perry: “Capote had an extraordinary relationship with the Clutter killer Perry Smith. He had parallels to Smith in his own life: both were more or less orphaned in their youth, rejected by their parents, and raised by surrogates” (77). Because of his connection with Perry, Capote emphasizes Perry’s poor home life in several places throughout the novel. One instance of this is towards the end of the story, when a detective interviews Dick and Perry about the Clutter family and notes that “[Perry’s] life had been no bed of roses, but pitiful, an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another” (Capote 246). Because Capote presents Perry in this way, he never attributes guilt to Perry for the crime against the Clutter family. Instead, Capote minimizes Perry’s guilt at the time of the killing and justifies his actions by saying that he had a

“brain explosion” (Voss 87-88). Through the portrayal of such events in the novel, Capote’s bias becomes clear through his intentional portrayal of the crime. This point of view allowed Capote to write outside the limits of regular journalism and construct the setting, characters, and events in a way that adds suspense to the novel.

The structure of the novel adds suspense to the events of the crime further separating Capote’s work from conventional journalism. When analyzing the text, one might draw the same conclusion as Galloway, who explains the “metaphorical patterns” in Capote’s novel (Galloway 145). The first metaphor occurs in the description of the scene of the crime—a suburb of Garden City in Kansas. While the location of the crime is “situated at the geographical center of the United States,” the Clutters and the killers represent two very different classes of people (Galloway 145). Galloway explains that “the Clutters seemed, at first glance, an apple-pie embodiment of the American Dream; the killers were the victims of a success-oriented society” (145). Through Galloway’s identification of such “metaphorical patterns” within the setting and characters, one can understand the larger implications of Capote’s novel (145). The Clutter murders not only disturbed the residents of Garden City, but the crime also invoked a sense of fear in every small town across the United States. Because there was no apparent motive behind the murder, the same crime could have been committed against any American family. Thus, by shaping the setting and characters to be representative of the typical American family living in a small town, Capote generates tension not found in the accounts published in the *New Yorker*.

In Cold Blood is not a chronological order of the Clutter family murders; rather, Capote organizes the four sections of his novel in a way that generates suspense for his audience. In the first section of the novel, readers are introduced to Dick and Perry, the Clutters, and Garden City. In his description of Capote’s style, Voss explains that “it is an extraordinary stylistic achievement that Capote establishes and maintains the building tension of alternating scenes between victims and killers in part one, even though readers know what is going to happen” (74). Through these alternating scenes, Capote provides a thorough background of Dick and Perry, who commit the crime against the Clutter family. By choosing to introduce the suspects and

the victims prior to the description of the murder, Capote allows his readers to connect with the characters on an intimate level.

By structuring the novel this way, Capote humanizes the murderers and the victims before describing the murder in section three. After reading the novel, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh explains that Capote “structured the facts, and generated suspense, by withholding the murder scene until he had sentimentalized the victims and their killers” (qtd. in Lucy 308). In the first section of the novel, Mrs. Ashida, one of Mr. Clutter’s neighbors, says she could not imagine Mr. Clutter scared because he can always talk himself out of anything, yet Mr. Clutter could not talk Dick out of killing him and his family (Capote 36). Later in the novel, Capote reveals that Mr. Clutter arranged “a forty-thousand-dollar policy that in the event of death by accidental means, paid double indemnity” the day before his sudden death (48). The irony present in both of these scenes would not have been possible if Capote had not saved the murder scene until the third section of the novel. Because Capote had the authority to order the events in the best possible way to tell the story, he begins to refer to his book as a nonfiction novel—“Having written a book that was like a novel from the point of view of technique, but unlike a novel in as much as it was supposed to be made up of transcripts of actual conversations and reconstructions of actual events” (Lucy 292).

Though Capote’s novel serves as an excellent example of fiction because of its narrative structure, Capote’s credibility becomes questionable when considering the definition of his work as a nonfiction novel. According to *A Handbook to Literature*, a nonfiction novel is defined as “a classification . . . in which an historical event is described in a way that exploits some of the devices of fiction, including nonlinear time sequence and access to inner states of mind and feeling not commonly present in historical writing” (Harmon 326). This combination of fact and fiction resulted in a mixture of objective facts and subjective description throughout the novel as Capote manipulates the structure of the events to develop a suspenseful narrative account. “Determined to make the book assume the form of a traditional novel, [Capote] apparently placed facts in a consciousness in which he had chosen to locate the point of view of certain scenes” (Lucy 312). In this way, Capote inserts his own bias, however noticeable, by manipulating the setting, plot, and characters to imply a deeper meaning for his audience. Regardless of the factual evidence, Capote “stretched the material in ways

disturbingly close to the approximating illusions associated with realist fiction, while continuing to claim a journalistic contract” (Lucy 312). Nevertheless, Capote’s novel remains a literary achievement because of his willingness to venture beyond the conventional forms of journalism to “portray the decline of the American West, the death of the small town, and the ease with which American dreams can turn into American nightmares” (Olster 46).

Narrative Journalism and Hunter S. Thompson

Capote’s work on the nonfiction novel ultimately paved the way for other writers to defy traditional forms of journalism because of his success with narrative journalism. One such writer, Hunter S. Thompson, wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which he aims to define the American dream through journalistic pursuits. The plot of *Fear and Loathing* mirrors a trip that Thompson took with his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta in 1971 when Thompson was assigned to cover the Mint 400 race in Las Vegas (Doss n.p.). Perhaps the most noticeable similarity between Capote and Thompson is their placing of themselves as characters in their novels. Though Capote does not blatantly introduce himself as a main character, his novel is “suffused from start to finish with its author’s manipulations” (Olster 49). In a similar manner, Thompson manipulates the events that take place in his novel, yet he has more freedom to construct the plot of the story because he is the main character. Thompson’s novel differs from Capote’s in that he tells a specific story about himself uncovering the American dream, rather than telling someone else’s story. Because Thompson eliminates all boundaries between the reporter and the subject, his version of the nonfiction novel—as a separation of reporter and subject and as an extension of authorial voice—can be defined as gonzo journalism.

Gonzo Journalism

The concept of new journalism, which categorizes both Capote and Thompson’s novels, is a participatory manner of reportage. Rather than remaining objective in their news stories, Capote and Thompson allow themselves to participate in the event on which they are reporting. However, Thompson expands this style of reporting through the creation of ‘gonzo journalism.’ Through blurring the lines between the reporter

and the subject, Thompson allows his own feelings and experiences to dominate the story. Tom Wolfe defines gonzo journalism as a “manic, highly adrenal first-person style in which Thompson’s own emotions dominate the story” (qtd. in Reynolds 55). Because of his more personal writing style, Thompson is free to report on stories as he experiences them, rather than merely reporting based on outside interviews. In essence as John J. Pauly explains, Thompson’s writing exhibits his belief that an author cannot fully develop a factual account without “personal involvement and immersion” (qtd. in Reynolds 56). Therefore, the author’s participation becomes the foundation for gonzo journalism. William Stephenson, author of *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson’s America*, describes Thompson’s journalism as “a vehicle for outrageous semi-autobiographical narrative that [does] not cloak itself in any pretense of objectivity” (10). By outlining his own experiences and emphasizing his own personality in his writing, Thompson creates a fictive persona of himself that blurs the lines between fiction and nonfiction genres and further represents a “fragmented reality in fragmented form” (Stephenson 33). This experiential form of writing, which challenges objectivity even more so than Capote, allows Thompson to defy the conventional forms of journalism. Therefore, experience and emotion become the foundation to understanding subjectivity in Thompson’s novel.

Thompson challenges objectivity in his novel through the development of his own persona, almost as if the protagonist is a self-caricature. The beginning of the novel is narrated in first person, though readers are not sure which character is narrating the story; however, Thompson finally introduces the protagonist by his name, Raoul Duke, in chapter three. Not until the tenth chapter do readers realize the connection between Thompson and Duke when a letter is written to “Hunter S. Thompson C/O Raoul Duke” (76). Though his audience may have picked up on the similarities between the author and his persona, Thompson explicitly makes the connection for his readers by inserting this letter. Because Thompson wanted to create a more experiential form of written discourse, he sought to “create from within himself and to involve himself in his world . . . which suggest[s] a need to experience fully what it means to be human” (Stephenson 7). Through these personal experiences, Thompson “realized his own humanity through writing as much as through life;” in

fact, the persona that Thompson creates in his novel gives insight to his authentic self (Stephenson 7).

Thompson's character, Raoul Duke, is unique in that he seems disconnected from the world, yet he knows that he is part of something much larger than himself. Duke is ultimately on a quest to find the American dream: "It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country—but only for those with true grit" (Thompson 18). As Duke and his lawyer travel in a red convertible filled with a mixture of drugs, they are unaware of the immense issues they will soon uncover about America. Duke was sent to Las Vegas on an assignment to cover the Mint 400 motorcycle race—"just a few photos of motorcycles and dune buggies racing around the desert" (Thompson 56). However, by the end of his time in Las Vegas, "he was plunged, without realizing it, into the maw of some world beyond his ken. There was no way he could possibly understand what was happening" (Thompson 56).

Thompson's persona is consistently disoriented both in reality and through drug hallucinations, which makes his commentary on American culture almost void of meaning. However, through this disorientation, Thompson exposes the vulnerability that occurs when journalists directly experience or interact with that which they are reporting. Therefore, Thompson "positions his persona in an extreme situation" on the edge of the desert driving a hundred miles per hour to cover a story in Las Vegas in hopes of finding the American dream (Stephenson 27; Thompson 3). By using this "comic, mock-psychotic persona as narrator-protagonist," Thompson enables himself to write beyond the confines of conventional journalism through the "dramatizing of an individual mind experiencing, ordering, and interpreting national events" (Hellmann 17). The protagonist, Duke, is not struggling with meeting a deadline, even though he claims to be a true journalist. In fact, his character is never seen finishing a news story in the novel. Rather, Thompson's persona is "an antihero on a quest, confronted by powerful enemies whose symbolic representatives are the animals he has summoned up himself" (Stephenson 27).

While Thompson claims that the events in the novel are factual, and that he is the "Doctor of Journalism," his consumption of a variety of drugs and alcohol throughout the novel create doubt in his credibility. From the beginning of the novel, as Duke and his lawyer set off on their

adventure to Las Vegas, Duke has no intention of reporting on anything without drugs: “If a thing like this is worth doing at all, it’s worth doing right. We’ll need some decent equipment and plenty of cash on the line—if only for drugs and a super-sensitive tape recorder, for the sake of a permanent record” (Thompson 9). Though he intends to report factual information about the Mint 400 race, his persistent reliance on drugs makes readers question his credibility, and it even places Duke and his lawyer in several compromising situations.

Throughout the novel, Duke describes the effects the drugs have on him, which contributes to the overall experience that he has while attempting to fulfill his journalist responsibilities. The entire novel switches between ‘real’ life and hallucinations as Duke’s body and mind succumb to the effects of the drugs: “Ah, devil ether—a total body drug. The mind recoils in horror, unable to communicate with the spinal column. The hands flap crazily, unable to get money out of the pocket ... garbled laughter and hissing from the mouth ... always smiling. Ether is the perfect drug for Las Vegas” (Thompson 46). Because of their consumption of drugs and its effects on their bodies, Duke and his lawyer place themselves in situations where they are on the verge of getting caught with the drugs. Perhaps the most unique scene is when Duke hallucinates as he tries to check into his hotel in Las Vegas: “The room service waiter has a vaguely reptilian cast to his features, but I was no longer seeing huge pterodactyls lumbering around the corridors in pools of fresh blood” (Thompson 27). The lawyer drags Duke out of the bar just before the employees call the cops and blow their ‘press’ cover story. Scenes such as this demonstrate how the effects of the drugs drastically alter the perception of the events in the novel by creating a more fictional and suspenseful narrative.

The effects of the drugs further alter the personalities of the main characters as well as their decision-making skills. “The characters’ trains of thought become difficult to unravel as the distortions induced by drugs and by the extremity of their situation take their toll” (Stephenson 36). Because of the effects of the drugs, Duke struggles to distinguish between reality and the hallucinations that he and his lawyer have, which is why they are both consistently paranoid about being caught for stealing, cheating, and consuming drugs. The entire plot proves that “... the Gonzo staple [is] the stoned freak trying to deal with officialdom” (Stephenson

25). As Duke and his lawyer pretend to be well-known, professional journalists, they must hide the drugs and the lies they have told.

As Thompson works to tell the story of Duke, he also composes himself as “both a central character within the narrative and an implied author behind it” (Stephenson 29). The story that Thompson created was a commentary on American culture and the American dream. William Stephenson explains Thompson’s cultural commentary by referencing work by Weingarten: “Vegas has been read as ‘journalism as bricolage: Thompson moved around freely in space and time [. . .] always searching in vain for the American dream.’ The adversary stopping the bricoleur Duke from finding the dream was vulgar, oppressive capitalism of the Nixon era, personified by Las Vegas itself” (29). This development would not have been possible if Thompson had remained within the strict confines of objective journalism. Hellman explains that because Thompson “conceived his journalism as a form of fiction, [he] has been able to shape actual events into meaningful works of literary art” (16). Thompson creates an authentic self and a more accurate, yet suspenseful, picture of American culture by allowing himself to explore the meaning of humanity through drug experimentation. *Fear and Loathing* granted Thompson the opportunity to express himself as a journalist in a way that he had not found in conventional journalism: “He flouted the conventions of journalism and fiction and violated the rules of syntax in order not only to represent drugged consciousness, but also to support the premises of the state” (Stephenson 17).

Conclusion

Both Capote and Thompson wrote works of literature in which the subjective and objective become one. They took creative liberties within the confines of journalism that allowed them to intertwine fact and fiction by establishing personas and generating suspense. However, each author uses different techniques to achieve these defining characteristics of their novels. While Capote establishes a persona through his omniscient narration, Thompson immerses himself as a main character in his novel. Their means of generating suspense also differs, as Capote uses the structure of events, whereas Thompson uses the influence of drugs to alter character choices and motivations. The writing style that Capote

and Thompson exhibit in these novels contrasts from conventional journalism because they allow themselves to play a role within the plot; whereas, journalists must remain strictly objective. This creates a more interactive and experiential style of writing, where the authors can express themselves and their experiences, while the readers discover new ways of looking at society and factual events.

In this way, Capote and Thompson transformed the expectations of journalism by challenging “the very way we think about a journalist’s role as producer of the first draft of history” (Nuttall 113). In doing so, Capote and Thompson’s work reaches beyond the confines of their own lives. Not only did Capote and Thompson create a new style of writing about reality, but they also left behind messages of American culture that may appear to be more relevant today than when their novels were published. The development of narrative journalism gave writers the freedom to incorporate their own experiences within the factuality of the reported event. Thus, the combination of fact and fiction suggests a more intimate level of verisimilitude by presenting the facts through the experience of the writer. No longer are journalists restricted by questions of who, what, when, where, and why; instead, they have more liberties to comment directly on the American culture as they experience it.

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