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The Search for Normality in Capote's *In Cold Blood*

by Barbara Anderson

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As Truman Capote was looking through *The New York Times* one morning in November 1959, a headline caught his eye, "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain." For the next five and a half years, until its publication in January 1966, Capote spent time investigating and writing about the events surrounding these murders in his nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood*. Capote, however, does more than merely write a journalistic report of the facts surrounding a gruesome, multiple murder. Through his selective depictions of the individuals and circumstances involved, he strongly raises the question: what is actually "normal"?

The American Heritage dictionary defines *normal* as, "conforming, adhering to, or constituting a usual or typical pattern, level, or type." The dictionary also notes that "normal stresses adherence to an established level or pattern that is associated with well-being, although based on group tendencies rather than an arbitrary ideal." Everyone involved in *In Cold Blood*, it seems, desperately wants to be "normal" in both senses and yet, what is actually "normal" remains vague—indeed diversely understood. Nevertheless, the haunting and disturbing pursuit of "normality" runs throughout the work.

The novel begins with a description of the "normal" Midwestern town of Holcomb, Kansas. Capote writes:

The inhabitants of the village, numbering two hundred and seventy, were . . . quite content to exist inside ordinary life—to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H Club.¹

Holcomb, Kansas is the epitome of stereotypical "normal" American life, and at the center of Holcomb is the American dream family, the Clutters.

Herbert William Clutter, the father, was "always certain of what he wanted from the world," and "had in large measure attained it" (Capote, p. 16). He was a successful, highly-regarded leader in the community, and had married his college sweetheart, Bonnie Fox. The Clutters had four children, two of whom were still at home. There was fifteen-year-old Kenyon and the town darling, sixteen-year-old Nancy. Not only did the wholesome Nancy win blue ribbons for her cherry pie-making, she played the lead in the school play as Tom Sawyer's Becky Thatcher.

Yet even in this all-American family abnormalities existed. Mrs. Clutter had long suffered from "little spells," and "had been an on-and-off psychiatric patient the last half-dozen years" (Capote, p. 17). Capote continues to describe peculiar details which challenge the image of the ideal
American family. The loner son, Kenyon, lives “in a world of his own” (Capote, p. 52). Nancy bites her fingernails and observes the distinct odor of cigarette smoke in a presumably non-smoking household. She remarks, “Why do I keep smelling smoke? Honestly, I think I am losing my mind” (Capote, p. 33). Capote leaves the reader with a feeling of uneasiness, that perhaps all is not quite as “normal” as it appears to be in the Clutter home.

Capote continues this “normality motif” in his description of Perry Smith, one of the convicted murderers of the Clutter family. Perry pain­fully desires to be considered “normal,” yet Capote notes that to society, Perry is “an uneducated homicidal half-breed” (Capote, p. 324). Perry, it seems, has been doomed to be an outcast from birth. An abused child, Perry was surrounded by defeated, “abnormal” societal outcasts. His mother suffocated in her own vomit during an alcoholic binge; his sister jumped from a hotel window, and his brother killed himself after driving his wife to suicide. Perry worries that something is wrong with him as well.

Perhaps because of these worries, Perry tries desperately to include himself as “a normal” by describing others as “abnormal.” Recalling Forty-second Street in New York City, Perry remarks, “My whole life, I never met so many freaks” (Capote, p. 160). After reading about a murder similar to the one he and Dick committed, Perry ironically states, “Know what I wouldn’t be surprised? If this wasn’t done by a lunatic. Some nut that read about what happened out in Kansas” (Capote, p. 228).

It is as if Perry disassociates himself entirely from his own bizarre behavior, he wants so much to be “a normal.” This is especially evident in Perry’s estimation of Richard (Dick) Hickock, his accomplice in the Clutter murders. By criticizing Dick’s behavioral patterns, Perry somehow hopes to appear “more normal.” Perry is disgusted by Dick’s sexual attraction to children. He comments, “Now that’s something I despise. Anybody that can’t control themselves sexually. Christ, I hate that kind of stuff” (Capote, p. 275).

Perry also put himself above Dick in respect to the thefts which they perpetrate. He says, “Dick loves to steal. It’s an emotional thing with him—a sickness. I’m a thief too, but only if I don’t have the money to pay” (Capote, p. 325). Perry tries to rationalize his actions in order to remain “normal.” Perry also describes Dick’s plan to return to Kansas City as “a crazy man stunt” (Capote, p. 161). The reader cannot help but wonder why, then, Perry follows Dick and if these men are not “crazy” and “abnormal.”

When detailing the events of the murder, Perry again places himself outside of the events which occurred. Perry describes Dick as the “lunatic running around below” (Capote, p. 274). He describes the entire murder itself as a “nutty movie” (Capote, p. 171). By placing himself outside of the event, Perry somehow hopes to displace responsibility, thus regaining “normal” status in society.
There are times, however, when Perry does openly question his own normality. While in the Holcomb jail, Perry wonders if he did not invent the young men outside his cell. Capote notes that Perry develops "a notion that he might be insane" (Capote, p. 299). Perry even goes so far as to suggest that anyone who associates with him or likes him could not be "normal:" When Donald Cullivan, an old Army acquaintance, befriends him, Perry remarks, "You must be some kind of a nut" (Capote, p. 327).

Perry is not the only member of his family to fear being outside the realm of the "normal." Barbara, Perry's sister, quietly fears that the family instability will somehow haunt her. She tries to assure everyone of her normality, whether they ask or not. "I do believe I am normal," she states (Capote, p. 163).

Dick, Perry's plotting accomplice in the Clutter murders, also continuously emphasizes that he is normal. In his confession, Dick writes, "I've always behaved like a one-hundred percent normal" (Capote, p. 259). The question the reader ponders, and that Capote repeatedly raises, is: what is a one-hundred percent normal? Dick tries to rationalize his pedophilia as "normal" by arguing that "most real men had the same desires he had . . . . That, to be sure, was something he was certain he was—a normal" (Capote, p. 229).

Like Perry, Dick tries to place himself above his associates in the realm of "normality." While on death row, Dick writes his mother of the men in prison, "plenty of them are fighting mad and crazy to boot" (Capote, p. 359). In another instance, Dick adamantly refuses to be grouped with the rest of the men on the row. He curtly corrects another convicted murder, Lowell Lee Andrews, "There are four killers up here and one railroaded man. I'm no goddamn killer. I never touched a hair on a human head" (Capote, p. 364). Dick disregards the fact that it was he who plotted the Clutter murders. He does not want to be considered "abnormal."

Capote continues to give insight into the differing obsessions with "normality" through Andrews, the obese eighteen-year-old boy who murdered his own family. To Andrews, a compulsive eater who keeps a scrapbook of edibles, Perry's eating habits define his "normality." Andrews says of Perry's hunger strike, "Maybe he is crazy. Starving himself like that" (Capote, p. 357). Dick, on the other hand, insists that Perry is merely "play-acting. So they'll say he's crazy and put him in the crazy house" (Capote, p. 357). The reader is left to ponder the truth and to consider the strange irony. Both Perry's and Dick's ultimate goal has been to be "normal," and yet the reader wonders what is "normal"? What, furthermore, is "abnormal"?

Capote is careful to point out that society itself also has its own conflicting conceptions of what is considers "normal." Dr. W. Mitchell Jones, a physician specializing in the field of psychiatry, plays the role of society spokesman. He is responsible for judging the degree of psychological "normality" in Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Perry, Jones states, shows definite
signs of severe mental illness. Perry's present personality structure is "very nearly that of a paranoid schizophrenic reaction"—very much out of the realm of being psychologically "normal" (Capote, p. 334). Jones describes Dick as having "what would psychiatrically be called severe character disorder. He cannot tolerate feelings of frustration as a more normal person can" (Capote, p. 331). Perry and Dick, despite their psychological abnormalities, however, fall under the judgment of the M'Naughten Rule which defines legal "normality." The M'Naughten Rule recognizes no form of insanity, provided the defendant has the capacity to discriminate between right and wrong (Capote, p. 335). In the eyes of the court system, Perry and Dick are "sane murderers."

Perhaps the most disturbing question Capote raises in his "normality motif," however, occurs with the execution of Perry and Dick. Many readers, far from feeling elated at the prospect of justice being performed, are left with a weight of sadness and loss. In the execution scene which Capote describes for the reader, there seems little justice; there are no winners. In the closing chapters of the work, Capote pushes the reader beyond merely wondering what is "normal." The reader is also forced to question the humaneness of existing societal "norms." Capote pain­fully sketches the bleak "festivity" of Dick's execution:

"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed is the name of the Lord," the chaplain intoned, as the rain sound accelerated, as the noose was fitted, and as a delicate black mask was tied around the prisoner's eyes. "May the Lord have mercy on your soul." The trap door opened, and Hickock hung for all to see a full twenty minutes before the prison doctor at last said, "I pronounce this man dead." A hearse, its blazing headlights beaded with rain, drove into the warehouse, and the body, placed on a litter and shrouded under a blanket, was carried to the hearse and out into the night. (Capote, p. 380)

As if they had been watching a ballgame, a reporter and guard converse:

The reporter said, "This your first hanging?"
"I seen Lee Andrews."
"This here's my first."
"Yeah. How'd you like it?" (Capote, p. 380)

The reader's uneasiness is further underscored as the conversation continues:

"They don't feel nothing. Drop, snap, and that's it."
"Are you sure? I was standing right close. I could hear him gasping for breath."
"Uh'uh'uh, but he don't feel nothing. Wouldn't be humane if he did."
(Capote, pp. 380-381).

It is here, in the irony of the conversation, that Capote makes his
strongest statement on "normality" in society. Capital punishment, though the norm, hardly seems sane, "normal," or humane. Perhaps most frightening is the vision Capote draws for us of the individual within "normal" society who views the death of human beings as mere spectacle. Capote illustrates the dangerous implications involved by drawing parallels between Perry's and Dick's ability to rationalize their actions of multiple murder, and society's ability to rationalize the same. Is not, Capote asks, society guilty of the same offense for which Perry and Dick are executed—premeditated, inhumane murder? Perhaps, as many critics have previously noted, the volume's title, In Cold Blood, refers not only to the murder of the Clutter family, but to the execution of Dick and Perry as well.

The words of the Athenian philosopher Demosthenes may best summarize the irony that Capote points to:

What should we all most earnestly pray against, and in all the laws what end is the most eagerly sought? That people may not kill one another.²

Ultimately, Capote's In Cold Blood causes the reader to wonder if society's definitions of "normal" are not too narrow, and if capital punishment, although the accepted norm, is any more sane than the inhumane murders of the Clutters.

Notes