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English 1C

July 15, 2010

“American Beauty”

Truman Capote’s novel *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences* (1965), describes in detail the slaughter of a preeminent Kansas family, the Clutters, by a pair of emotionally abnormal and socially excluded criminals. Emphasizing the effects of the crime on their community, Capote recounts the enormous distrust that the murder initiated among the usually cordial and friendly citizens of Holcomb and Garden City, rural communities of southwest Kansas. In contrast to this distrust, the ex-convicts, Richard “Dick” Hickock and Perry Smith, move on with their chaotic and lawless lives, without expressing remorse. While Perry constantly contemplates his actions, Dick only ponders on the crime after he was arrested, convicted and sentenced to death by an apparently biased jury. Like the beginning, the novel ends with a cold blooded scene— the hanging of Dick and Perry. As Capote portrays the story, depicting the paradoxes between one’s professed beliefs and actions, he exposes a hypocrisy of the American society.

Despite appearing to be the perfect husband and father, Herb William Clutter, the patriarch of the family, was actually a selfish and lonely man. As one reads Capote’s description, he may think that Herb is the man depicted in the American Dream. Through Mr. Clutter’s details, however, Capote reveals the contradiction between what he seems to be and what he really is. Mr. Clutter, the man who was usually seen as a “joiner” and a “born leader,” wasn’t such a “joiner” if we consider that he and his wife slept in different rooms (Capote 29). Furthermore, Mr. Clutter was usually overwhelmed by his work, leaving no time for his family. In essence, Mr. Clutter, often masquerading his obsession for work, only looks like a “family man.” Accordingly, he, a man who apparently has all the values praised by the American society, is living proof of the hypocrisy that all too often affects this society.

Similar to Mr. Clutter, Herb’s wife, Bonnie Fox, the woman who seemed to have everything, was in fact a lifeless creature. As Capote recounts Bonnie’s life, he explains that she commonly experienced “inexplicable despondency- seizure of grief that sent her wandering from room to room in a hand-wringing daze” (Capote 27), indicating that something was wrong with her. When Capote describes Mrs. Fox’s room, “the room she so seldom left was austere; had the bed been made, a visitor might have thought it permanently unoccupied” (Capote 29), it becomes evident that Bonnie is an unhappy woman despite her material wealth and apparently perfect family. Contradicting the view that the community had of her, Bonnie serves as another example of the hypocrisy that influences American society.

Resembling Mr. Clutter, Nancy Clutter, the “darling” of the town, was in truth odd for her age. According to Capote, Nancy:

managed to ‘practically run that big house’ and be a straight-A student, the president of her class, a leader in the 4-H program and Young Methodists League, a skilled rider, and excellent musician (piano, clarinet), an annual winner at the county fair (pastry, preserves, needlework, flower arrangement) (Capote 18).

In other words, Nancy didn’t have any time for herself even though she still was a child. Moreover, Capote states, “Nancy deeply felt the daytime absence of her friend [Susan Kidwell], the one person with whom she need be neither brave nor reticent” (Capote 21). In brief, Nancy was overwhelmed by the community’s pressure for her to be “the perfect kid,” forcing her to pretend to be somebody who she wasn’t. Accordingly, Nancy, affected by the community’s expectations of her, was forced to be a hypocrite.

In addition to the hypocrisy of the Clutter family, Dick, the mastermind of the crime, contradicts himself many times throughout the novel, uncovering his double standards— a form of hypocrisy. “I believe in hanging. Just so long as I’m not the one being hanged” (Capote 336), Richard Hickock said while awaiting execution for the assassination of four innocent lives. In other words, Dick was in favor of capital punishment provided that his neck wasn’t the one in the rope. His double standard is another instance of hypocrisy.

Beyond his incongruous stances, Dick constantly lies to himself, bringing to light his own internal sanctimoniousness. While conversing with Lowell Lee Andrews, a fellow inmate who was also on death row, Dick states, “there are four killers up here and one railroaded man. I’m no goddam killer. I never touched a hair on a human head” (Capote 325). In short, Mr. Hickock wasn’t able to absorb the fact that he was as guilty as any of the other killers there even though he, before the occurrence of the crime, has said to Perry, “I promise you, honey, we’ll blast hair all over the walls” (Capote 22). Moreover, Dick fails to accept that, instead of being an “American Bad Boy,” he’s a coward. The crystal clear contrast between Dick’s actions and his perception of himself demonstrates that his hypocrisy is fueled by a pressure to achieve his own interpretation of society’s standards.

Suffering from society’s pressure in the same manner as Dick, Perry pretends to be a killer in order to gain Dick’s friendship. While in Jail, “Perry described a murder, telling how, simply for ‘the hell of it,’ he had killed a colored man in Las Vegas— beaten him to death with a bicycle chain” (Capote 54). Though this story was fictitious, Perry gained Dick’s appreciation and respect. This fabrication shows us that in order to socialize, Perry opts to assume a new identity, bringing to light his own hypocrisy.

Not only is the American hypocrisy represented through the actions of the characters, but also the description of the arrest of Perry and Dick. As we learn that both of the defendants were denied their rights to writ of habeas corpus (“order that requires jailers to bring a prisoner before a court or judge and explain why the person is being held” (Schmidt 85)) and to be informed of the charges, the paradox between the law and the reality becomes evident. This contradiction is further emphasized when the K.B.I., Kansas Bureau of Investigation, detectives disregarded the Fifth Amendment by not informing the suspects of their rights. The negation of the vulgarly known “Rights of the Accused” draws a clear contrast between the law and reality, shedding light on the hypocrisy of some law enforcement officers.

Analogous to the detaining process, Perry and Dick’s trial was clearly biased and unfair. According to the Amendment:

In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an **impartial jury** of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defense (United States Constitution).

First, the jury was not impartial as evidenced by N. L. Dunnan, a middle-aged man whose opinion toward capital punishment was that “‘ordinarily I’m against it. But in this case, no’” (Capote 273), was accepted as a juror. Secondly, Perry and Dick didn’t have proper counsel because that they weren’t informed of possible legal maneuvers like the requisition of change of the trial venue to a place where the crime was less publicized. Finally, the decision of Judge Tate to not allow the physicians to report their complete psychological assessment of the criminals seriously hindered the defense. Despite the clear violation of the rights foreseen by the Sixth Amendment, the trial continued and, as expected, Dick and Perry were sentenced to the ultimate penalty— death. This completely unfair trial reveals that even our judicial institutions are often hypocritical.

Depicting reality, Capote’s nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood*, sheds light on an American hypocrisy. Despite appearing to be the perfect family, the Clutters were actually dysfunctional and superficial. Similar to their victims, Dick and Perry pretended to be persons they weren’t in order to satisfy their own views of society’s expectation of themselves. Finally, the arrest procedure and the trial were farces since Dick and Perry had most of their rights negated. As Capote comments in the novel, the Clutters assassination only happened due to the chemistry— Dick’s and Perry’s need to satisfy what they thought society expected from them— between the killers. Just as in the movie “American Beauty,” this chemistry was lethal.

Works Cited

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