

Literally Reality: Defining the Nonfiction Novel Through Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*

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Abstract

Literally Reality: Defining the Nonfiction Novel Through Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*.

By Jesse Brady

This study examines the literary and journalistic shifts occurring in the 1960s to which both the nonfiction novel and New Journalism arose in response. This thesis examines the two defining texts of this genre: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. I argue that the nonfiction novel was a natural extension of both Capote and Mailer's investments in and experiences with journalism and also provide literary analysis of their texts in light of these investments. The thesis establishes the context and scope of the nonfiction novel, not so much as a sub-category of New Journalism, but as a literary form unto itself with its own parameters, goals, and ambitions.

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Finally I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late grandfather, James McGauley. It is a small gift that I give in comparison to what he has given me over the years.

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Chapter 1: Contexts and Histories of the Nonfiction Novel

The impact and influence that the cultural revolutions of the Sixties had upon art and literature is still something that needs to be studied and evaluated. In literature, in particular, there was so much experimentation with form and content that many of the most interesting developments have been given less attention than they deserve. Not only was there a shift away from the traditional realist fiction of the high modernists but there were also radical experiments in style and narrative form. One of these neglected areas is the nonfiction novel.

The rise of the American nonfiction novel in the 1960s was largely due to a schism that arose within literary realism as well as print journalism. As the stable era of the Fifties came crumbling down under such diverse forces as the civil rights movement and the increasing dominance of television, writers in both literature and journalism found themselves at loggerheads about how to represent the new social reality. As journalists clung desperately to old flawed conventions, some novelists decided to abandon reality all together. These novels, which critics labeled as fables, myths, and black comedies, attempted to create their own self-contained universe and challenged the very notion of an objective world. As a result literary fiction began to divert into two separate groups: the traditionalist realists such as Saul Bellow and Tom Wolfe who still believed in the old modernist notions; and the fabulists such as William S. Burroughs and Thomas Pynchon who shared the subjective notions of the emerging postmodern. In essence, however, both types of novelists were attempting the same task, to represent the world as they saw it; it was just that they saw the world in radically different ways.

The nonfiction novel can be seen as an attempt to mediate this gap between reality and art. It uses journalism as a connection to the real world and the techniques of fiction to transform news stories into literature. Usually seen as a part of the New Journalism trend occurring at the same time, the nonfiction novel—as it was shaped by many of the same factors that went into the development of New Journalism—differed in that it was still a literary medium and not a journalistic one. Interestingly, the nonfiction novel shares much of the same outlook on reality as the fabulist novel does. Yet, instead of abandoning reality, the nonfiction novel explores the very nature of how reality is constructed in the first place. As a result the nonfiction novel of the Sixties was in the perfect position not simply to document the decade but to also to interpret real events to try to come to some sort of understanding of what was happening. The nonfiction novel, it could be said, relies not on the objective truth of journalism and history, but the subjective truth found in art and literature. It is through this critical lens that we can then look at the two founding novels of the genre, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*.

Both Mailer and Capote worked for most of their literary careers writing both literature and journalism and found the new cultural landscape of the Sixties to be the ideal condition to explore the melding of reportage and the novel. Yet at the time these books, because of their news-like topics, were seen more as journalism than literature. And although their literary merits were noted, these novels were not seen to be true works of literature. Perhaps it is because they were topical or perhaps the nonfiction novel was seen as more of a fad rather than a serious literary form. On the other hand, as journalists they were attacked for being too loose with the way that they represented facts. Some of the major critical analyses of *In Cold Blood*, for example, try to find out what Capote had

manipulated or changed for the purposes of the narrative. The nonfiction novel was lumped along with New Journalism, Gonzo journalism and other parajournalistic works as a dangerous new direction in news reporting.¹ However, it was not only critics that worked to associate the nonfiction novel and New Journalism. The first definitive collection of New Journalism, E. W. Johnson and Tom Wolfe's aptly named *The New Journalism* featured excerpts from both *In Cold Blood* and *Armies of the Night* and in doing so married the two genres together. This suited Wolfe's argument nicely, for Capote and Mailer were examples in his argument that journalism was going to surpass the novel as the dominant literary form of the next century. Wolfe's canonization of the nonfiction novel as a part of the New Journalism has rarely been contested over the past thirty years. In fact most of the subsequent studies of the use of fact and fiction have made little to no attempt to differentiate between the two and rarely do the literary merits of nonfiction novel distinguish it from its journalistic cousin.

Nevertheless, these nonfiction novelists did not see their work as simply the representation of fact; they saw their novels as literary texts with artistic merits. Capote claimed that his work was the start of a new literary genre, the nonfiction novel, and Mailer defended that *Armies of the Night*, saying it was not simply a magazine article but a further expression in his artistic development. While New Journalism is a type of journalism—still very much concerned with reporting what happened albeit in a different way—the nonfiction novel is attempting to turn the news stories into literature. This study proposes that by mapping the development of the nonfiction novel as it arose out of

¹ Not only did critics such as Dwight MacDonald misunderstand the nonfiction novel, they even failed to realize that New Journalism did not represent a threat to traditional reporting except for the fact that by its very nature it pointed to a systematic failure within objective journalism itself.

the radical shifts in both literature and journalism, we can understand what makes these two genres of writing, that seem so similar on the surface, two different modes of writing. However, the separation of New Journalism and the nonfiction novel is only the first step in analyzing how the nonfiction novel works and what it is. In order to accomplish this we will take a look at the genre's two founding texts, *In Cold Blood* and *Armies of the Night* and see how their authors arrived at writing them and will give a detailed literary analysis of them to understand what these writers were doing with the genre. In doing so I hope to reveal some of the complexities and elements that are unique to the nonfiction novel and to show how it responded to its time, especially when traditional modes of journalism and fiction writing began to fail.

Shifting Realities

In the late fifties and early sixties the novel suddenly found itself in a period of uncertainty. For close to a hundred and fifty years the novel was the place of reflection and commentary for an American society that was busily transforming itself from an agrarian to an industrialized economy. During this period rates of education and literacy rapidly began to increase thereby creating a whole new audience for the novel. Early on writers such as Horatio Alger, Frank Norris and William Dean Howells not only reflected on the new industrialized world, but also reinforced the values and paradigms of that age. As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh argues:

Given the rudimentary nature of mass literacy during the early stages of industrialization, these totalizing views are usually worked out in such accepted and entertaining forms as the novel, which, because of its mimetic conventions and structural flexibility, is responsive to the epistemological demands of the period while also being highly accessible

to a large readership. [...] The total answers that the conventional novel gives to the new questions raised by the industrial civilization function—to a considerable extent—as the secular substitute for religious absolutes, which were the basis of social connection and cohesion in small-scale agrarian communities but failed to provide practical guidelines for living in the new industrial metropolis. The totalizing of experience in the narrative literature is also encouraged by the dominance of rational and conceptual modes of thinking which are necessary for planning and managing an efficient factory or society. (Zavarzadeh 5)

The novel then served as a form of induction, as Zavarzadeh sees it, into the new economic model that Americans were developing during this time of rapid industrialization in post-war America. The novel also served to reinforce this socio-economic organization by relating narratives that are recognizable and entertaining to those within it. As David Lodge puts it: “The novel supremely among literary forms has satisfied our hunger for the meaningful ordering of experience *without* denying our empirical observation of its randomness and particularity” (*Crossroads* 4). The traditional (or realist) novel served to order the world in a coherent narrative that reflected (and at times challenged) the dominant totalizing views, or grand narratives, of that society. But in order for these realist novels to find an audience these grand narratives need a stable industrial society. However, these narratives can become disrupted when a significant numbers of people no longer see themselves reflected or represented by that narrative, and break off to form their narratives. Once this begins to

happen, a society's stability is threatened by series of narratives forming within it, which can eventually lead to the very questioning of a common reality altogether².

By the end of the 1950's America was well on its way from transforming itself from an industrial to a post-industrial economy. Not only did the United States go through a massive period of war time industrialization, but it also found itself in a buoyant post-war economy. University enrollment swelled at an unprecedented rate with returning soldiers going back to school under G.I. Bills. The work force had to become more specialized and more highly trained. The economy had become more rooted in knowledge than in labour. The nation's birth rate shot up rapidly. By the mid 1960's the oldest of this baby boom were finishing high school and entering university, swelling the ranks once again. With these demographic and economic changes the very fabric of American society began to shift. The old pre-war narratives were beginning to show signs of strain as social and political movements began to emerge to claim their own stories.

By the late Fifties and early Sixties the novel too began to feel the strains of these phenomena. With the popularization of such technology as cinema and television, the novelists' monopoly on realism was beginning to fade as these forms could claim a far more mimetic relationship to reality. Up to this point the novel was spared as these new forms had yet not matched the artistic level and depth of the novel (some notable

² It should be noted that the crisis that occurred in the 1960s was not the first to strike the novel. The Aesthetic movement of the late 1800's and the early modernist writings after the first world war (such as Dadaism and Cubism) are both examples of moments when the traditional novel and reality itself were threatened by new ideologies. While these movements shaped and changed the literary landscape, they did not threaten the novel's cultural status, only altering it slightly. As we will see the crisis in 1960's was in part due to the abandonment of realism but it was more in the very concept that novel still had the cultural capital—especially in the face of the rising forces of television and film—to be the chief cultural commentator of the arts.

exceptions not to the contrary). In an attempt for some credibility television started off broadcasting stage plays, operas, and the ballet. It would even court novelists to fill time as television extended its broadcasts hours late into the night. Writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1965, Gore Vidal suggests that “Producers discovered that one way of inexpensively enlivening the air is to invite people to talk to one another while the camera records” and that in their search for talkers “only the writers were entirely suitable and perfectly available” (*Writers and the World* 44). Not only were novelists quite knowledgeable but they were also quite opinionated which lead to some explosive exchanges and literary feuds; which made for great television. Many viewers would soon know names of some of the country’s most prominent writers, from their countless appearances on TV not having read a single word they wrote. However, while the relationship between writer and television was quite strong the relationship between the novel and television was far less amicable. Compared to the novel, television and film are far more effective at relating a realist aesthetic to the audience than realist fiction. As Robert Scholes points out:

The cinema gives the *coup de grace* to a dying realism in written fiction. Realism purports—has always purported—to subordinate the words themselves to their referents, to the things words point to. Realism exalts life and diminishes art, exalts things and diminishes words. But when it comes to representing *things*, one picture is worth a thousand words, and one motion picture is worth a million. In face of competition from cinema, fiction must abandon its attempt to ‘represent reality’ and rely more on the power of words to stimulate the imagination (*The Fabulators* 56).

At the same time, film was also progressing into a much more experimental and artistic phase of its development. European filmmakers such as Godard, Fellini, and Bergman, were pushing film away from the populist form that it had been for years, and began to reach out for more artistic ways of expression. These artistic developments married with the advancements in technology (such as kinescope and video tape) threatened to dethrone the novel as the primary realist artistic form.

There was another pressure that the novel found itself under during this time, which was many novelists did not know if reality was something that even could be depicted anymore. Events in the news seemed more out of an adventure novel, political thriller, or science fiction novel than anything close to what a traditional novelist would even attempt. Politics alone in the U.S. took on the appearance of grand story with its tragic heroes (John F. Kennedy), recurring villains (Richard Nixon), martyrs (Martin Luther King jr.) and even a sequel (Robert Kennedy). All this set against a backdrop of a perpetual war, civil protests, riots, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. How could a writer keep up? As far back as 1959 Norman Mailer began to see that things might be bleak for his craft. As he puts it in his story about a novelist, "The Man Who Studied Yoga": "Marvin asks Sam if he has given up on his novel, and Sam says, 'Temporarily.' He cannot find a form, he explains. He does not want to write a realistic novel, because reality is no longer realistic" (*Advertisements* 179). With the very notion of reality itself being called into question, how could a realist novel even attempt to depict the real world?

The grand narratives that were so supportive and integral in the period of industrialization suddenly no longer held sway over the American post-industrial period starting after 1945. The question was no longer what is the American reality but whether or not there is only one American reality and even more damaging whether or not there is

even such a thing as a reality in the first place. The encompassing objectivity that the grand narrative supplied allowed for reality to exist, however with the breakdown of such narratives reality, as a unified collective began to fragment. This fragmentation led many American novelists to abandon the idea of a collective reality and to turn more to fabulism. As Bradbury suggests, “The period saw a notable revival of surrealism and fantasy, often insisting, à la Nabokov, on the utter functionality of *all* attempts at naming, structuring, and ordering experience, and on exploring the novel’s own inward mechanisms; the result was an era of ‘self-reflexiveness in the novel’” (Bradbury 159). At its core fabulism was anti-realism; it suggested that reality was something too subjective to depict with any sort of certainty and therefore “could manifest only the creative invention and artifice of its own existence, speculate about the performance of the fictional act, function as a game or exercise in provisional assertion” (161). As Nabokov himself puts it, novels, and art in general, are creations of the imagination and have no connection to our day to day reality—or even our psychological reality. “Can we expect to glean information about places and times from a novel?” Nabokov asks in his opening essay in *Lectures on Literature*:

Can we rely on Jane Austen’s picture of landowning England with baronets and landscaped grounds when all she knew was a clergyman’s parlor? And *Bleak House*, that fantastic romance with a fantastic London, can we call it a study of London a hundred years ago? Certainly not...The truth is that great novels are great fairy tales. (Nabokov 1-2).

Nabokov is extreme in his view that sees no political or social role for the novel. A piece of art should be enjoyed and savored for its aesthetics rather than its politics. Art is a distraction from the everyday for him, as he describes it: “In a sense we are all crashing

down to our death from the top story [sic] of our birth to the flat stones of the churchyard and wondering with the immortal Alice in Wonderland at the patterns at the passing wall” (375). However this dismissal of the socio-political dimension of art and literature would also mean that the views contained within his work are not reflections of the actual world and therefore his brand of fabulism is not a comment on the world at large, but rather an attempt to make interesting patterns passing on the wall.

Other fabulist writers are not as extreme in cutting their ties to the real world as Nabokov; instead they fall back upon allegory and metaphor to make their comments on the newly emerging post-industrial culture. As Lodge points out, writers such as Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Joseph Heller, and Terry Southern, “abandon history altogether and construct pure fictions which reflect in an emotional or metaphorical way the discords of contemporary experience” (Lodge 33). Bradbury goes a bit further with this analysis suggesting:

In many of these books, history is seen not as a haunting progress, but as a landscape of lunacy and pain; the doubting of a rational and intelligent history leads to a mocking of the world’s substance, a sense of inner psychic disorder, a cartooning of character, a fantasizing of so-called ‘facts’ or actualities, and a comic denominatization. History is itself shown as fictional, not in order to dismiss it but to subvert it; new imaginative structures were generated which both encountered and questioned the world’s ugly presentness. American Fiction in the Sixties found itself deserting the humanistic and realistic centre of much previous novel writing (Bradbury 158).

The fabulists then sought not only to move away from the realist tradition in literature but to subvert it.

Moreover, as these novels moved away from even attempting to depict the world around them, they began to relinquish the novel's traditional role, that is, to help understand and interpret the world around us. As R. A. York describes it, "In reading a successful novel, one may feel that this is the *sort* of thing that happens; it may appear that the novel reveals a *system* that fits our experience and perhaps illuminates it." York goes on to explain that:

These structures allow, of course, many ideologies. [...] What they have in common is the sense of the world as a whole—or some large part of it—can be judged, and that reader and author together can participate in a process of judging. [...] One learns from reading fiction. One learns to be attentive, one extends and enriches one's sense of how one can think about ways people live, of the experience that merit interest and judgment (York 23-4).

In this way, the realist novel connects readers with the world, as they enter a dialogue with what is depicted. The realist novel then serves a greater purpose: to create and maintain a social and political discourse among its readership. But as the link between the novel and the real world is severed, the social and political connections become more abstract and universal. However, as fabulist fiction attempts to subvert the paradigm realism created, fabulism in itself lacks a coherent paradigm of its own. The very elements that it uses to assault realism are the same that make it impossible for fabulism to replace realism with anything cohesive or unified. As Bradbury writes:

Much of the Sixties fiction becomes fantastic through its assault on the historical and the real; it arises, that is, from defined historical landscapes and processes. The strain of black humour which dominated the early part of the decade explored the manifest absurdity of contemporary society and of any rational response to it [...] But as the decade went on, the sense of experiment intensified, and the direct historical reference often weakened; fiction, unable to form coherent meaning, celebrated its own loss of signification, rejected pre-formed views of reality, and sought to create its own provisional, liberated worlds of creative consciousness (Bradbury 159).

Fabulism in its attempt to subvert realism had also subverted the very binds that allowed for a larger progressive movement. Things like a shared collective vision, common goals, and a sense of progress all failed to manifest in fabulist tradition. Instead of having a positive vision or goal, the fabulist could only be destructive or apocalyptic in view. Like an acid eating its way through the literary fabric, the fabulist point of view led slowly to an isolated subjectivity that was barely unified in itself.

As a result, either by happenstance or design, the audiences for these fabulist novels become much narrower, attracting the attention mainly of academics and critics. Many of these authors, such as Barths and Pynchon enter into a dialogue not with the general reader, but with the philosophical and theoretical minded. The discourse community becomes a closed and elite circle of readers/writers, concerned with ideas and concepts that barely reflect the day-to-day events occurring around them. This disconnect between the novel and its public began to make critics and literary observers question the role of the novel in the new culture that was beginning to emerge in the sixties. As Tom

Wolfe puts it: “as a result, by the Sixties [...] talented novelists had abandoned the richest terrain of the novel: namely society, the social tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of ‘the way we live now’” (NJ 43). For Wolfe:

All the changes that were labeled, however clumsily, with such tags as ‘the generation gap,’ ‘the counter culture,’ ‘black consciousness,’ [...] This whole side of American life that gushed forth when postwar American affluence finally blew the lid off—all of this novelists simply turned away from, gave up by default. That left a huge gap in American letters, a gap big enough to drive an ungainly Reo rig (44).

If this abandonment of the traditional realm of the novel left it without the ability to deal with major events, such as the Vietnam war, student unrest, and the civil rights movement, then perhaps the novel was past its prime; perhaps in the new social reality the novel, whether realist or fabulist, would no longer be a place of serious reflection and commentary.

Revolutions in News

As the literary community was reassessing the role of the realist novel, print journalism was facing its own crisis in how to depict the world. Journalism’s ultimate goal has always been to accurately recount news and events to its readers; giving the reader the unbiased facts in order for them to make of it what they will. To this end journalism strives for objectivity: to relay information without contamination by a personal or institutional point of view. It has defined conventions and codes in order to get at the truth of the stories and events that it covers. As Gaye Tuchman points out “Newspapermen must be able to invoke some concept of objectivity in order to process

facts about social reality” (Tuchman 660-1). Objectivity is then not an external reality but a social one, made up of the shared perceptions of the society in which it exists. This position places the journalist’s notion of reality in a precarious situation. Any attacks against objectivity attacks the very notion of the ability of the journalist to report reality in a truthful way. Journalism was safe as long as the notion of objectivity was intact. However this all changed in the Sixties. Just as the phenomenological reality of the realist novel was being brought into question, so was that of print journalism. Both the realist novel and journalism codified themselves in the nineteenth century, but, whereas the novel had the latitude to shift and change with the epistemological currents of the twentieth century, journalism remained virtually unchanged in its use of, as John Hellmann puts it, “a set of literary conventions and techniques...to enable the writer to describe the *typical* experience of member of large classes in society” (Hellmann 9, my italics). But by the 1960s, as former *Esquire* editor Harold Hayes reflects, “No longer was there an *archetypical* American; standing in his place, self-absorbed and passionate to the point of militancy, was a cluster of groups” (Hayes xx, my italics).

This was not the first time, however, that journalism found itself at a point of crisis. Journalism exists in a dynamic relationship with those in power whether it be government, corporate, or religious. It is at times when those in power are able, through force or manipulation, to control the media that journalism finds itself at point of crisis. When the traditional means to reporting have been co-opted or blocked, journalism has usually found a way to circumvent or renew itself in a manner that allows journalists to report the truth in another manner. The work of the Muckraking journalists of the early 1900s helped bring laissez-faire capitalism under control and exposed political corruption. They accomplished this through using more investigative techniques and a

documentary style to their writing as well as great sense of moral outrage. Moreover, they were not published in the large corporate newspapers of the time but rather in the more independent magazines, such as *McClure's*. In the end what “muckraking” did, besides its social accomplishments, was to introduce new tools to journalists that would allow them different ways to report news stories. However, as these journalists learn new ways of reporting, those in power became more savvy to them and soon learned new ways to circumvent or manipulate them.

It is one of these times of journalistic crisis that we can see developing in the mid-fifties. However, the crisis that journalism faced was that of conformity and conservatism. As Hayes puts it, “The passivity of the Fifties was shared by garage mechanics and college presidents” (xviii). The conservatism and passivity of the Fifties had been able to stifle any serious challenge to the conventional press as it came to represent the social reality that journalism took to be objective. Objectivity was “related to the newsman’s interorganizational relationships, for his experiences with those organizations lead him to take for granted certain things about them” (Tuchman 661). The days of muckraking journalism that had dominated the early part of the century were now gone. Print journalism had become complacent and conventional. Its stories no longer aimed at exposing truth, but rather to reinforce the status quo. As White House correspondent James Deakin has put it: “Objectivity in the mid-fifties, meant that major governmental news consisted largely of what the government said it was” (*Newsweek* 83B). As a result news also became easy to manipulate by those in power or who wanted power. It would take the rise of a new news medium, television news, to reinvigorate journalism and revive the debate. Probably the best example of this situation can be seen

in Sen. Joseph McCarthy's rise to power: while he understood how to manipulate the print media he lost it all because he failed to understand the power of television.

By 1953 McCarthy's red scare tactics had whipped the nation into a frenzy of fear and it made him one of the most powerful politicians of his time.³ Even President Eisenhower, who privately disliked McCarthy and his methods, would not publicly speak out against him. McCarthy's success stemmed not only from taking advantage of a national concern over the rise of Communism around the world, but also out of his firm understanding of how the news industry operated: not only in its methodologies, values and conventions, but also as a business in a highly competitive market. In doing so he was able to get his message out while at the same time making sure that it would not be questioned or verified by the various news organizations. The way that this was achieved was through his thorough control of the news wire services coming out of Washington. At this time only a few of the nation's larger newspapers could afford to have correspondents in D.C., which left the majority of America's newspapers reliant on the wire services for their national and international news. The wires also served magazines as well as radio and television stations. This meant that whatever the Associated Press, United Press, and International News Service wrote had a substantial influence on the way that Americans understood what was happening in the world. All McCarthy had to do was to make sure that they wrote what he wanted them to and as Rodger Streitmatter point out, McCarthy had a number of dubious ways of doing so. "One of McCarthy's

³ The information on McCarthy and Murrow is from Michael Curtin's *Redeeming the Wasteland: Television Documentary and Cold War Politics*, Thomas Doherty's *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* and Rodger Streitmatter's *Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History*.

most successful media techniques involved the timing of accusations,” Streitmatter describes.

[McCarthy] calculated the exact hour of the day he could make an accusation and be sure the wire services would not have time to track down a response from the accused person before stories were filed. So the journalists, driven by strident competition, had little option but to distribute the one-sided stories (157).

In this way McCarthy was able to toss out completely false charges that would be rushed into print without any evidence except the word of the prominent senator. By the time that the story had been checked out and found to be false, it was too late, and retractions and clarifications always received a much less prominent place in the newspaper. Such was the fear of being scooped or out-done by their competition that newspaper editors printed stories that under normal circumstances would never have appeared. Not to print headlines about members of the State Department being communist or a university professor being a spy could mean a drop in circulation, and therefore a drop in revenue; this was not a risk newspaper editors were willing to take. Even the reporters themselves knew they were being manipulated, but could do very little about it, as pressure from their editors demanded the stories that the competition was about to run, even if they could not be proven.

Another reason that McCarthy could get away with his tactics of manipulation was because he hid behind the cornerstone of journalism. As Streitmatter describes:

News accounts in the 1950s barred all interpretation, as the journalistic convention of the day was that news stories should provide a bare-bone recitation of the facts—only. So McCarthy knew that journalists would

report, without comment, any charge he made. Reporters were so fearful of allowing subjectivity to slip into their work that they would not, for example, include in a story the fact that a particular accusation was the fifth or tenth or fifteenth unsubstantiated accusation McCarthy had made that week. (158)

Streitmatter goes on to quote an interview he had conducted with William Theis, a Washington correspondent at the time for the International News Service:

“We let Joe [McCarthy] get away with murder, reporting it as he said it, not doing the kind of critical analysis we’d do today. All three wire services were so God damned objective that McCarthy got away with everything, bamboozling the editors and the public.” Theis said editors refused to believe a United States senator would make charges without having the evidence to back them up. “Joe saw what a bonanza he had, and he rode it,” Theis said. “It was the most difficult story we ever covered, especially emotionally. I’d go home literally sick, seeing what that guy was getting away with.” (158)

It is amazing the power that this understanding of the media gave Sen. McCarthy. By playing to their deadlines and desire for sensational news while at the same time hiding behind their own sacrosanct conventions around objectivity he was able to lie right to reporters’ faces—with them knowing it—and still have them print it that afternoon. But the grip that he held over the news stopped at the Washington press corps. Starting in 1953 McCarthy would quickly see that his powers of coercion and manipulation were becoming dated and ineffectual.

In the mid-fifties television news was anything but established as a coherent news source. It was only in 1950 that news had been taken over by the major networks instead of it being farmed out to independent production companies, which had been the case up to that point. Television news constituted only about fifteen minutes at the top of the six o'clock hour. The technology was still relatively new, and formulas and conventions of broadcasting were still being made up, mostly on the fly. It was out of this chaotic and highly charged atmosphere that one show arose to demonstrate for the first time the power that television could have.

See It Now began on CBS in 1951 and quickly became the leader in television news. *See It Now* had a keen journalistic sense and understood how to tell stories in this new visual medium. It had a sense not only of the importance of the stories that it covered, but also of the power that images could have in telling those stories. The show's host, Edward R. Murrow, had built a reputation as a trusted journalist during World War II where his skills as a reporter were matched by his poetic ability to relate the war back to the people in the U.S.. In 1950 he teamed up with producer Fred W. Friendly for the CBS radio show *Hear It Now*, but seeing that electronic journalism was moving into the new realm of television, they decided to make the switch. With Murrow's solid reporting and verbal skills, and Friendly's vision and technical wizardry, *See It Now* became the leader in television news shows. "For Murrow and Friendly created the first television program to grapple with controversial issues," Streitmatter describes, "crafting programs about such provocative subjects as the quality of health care, and the relationship between smoking and lung cancer" (159). By 1953, both Murrow and Friendly, concerned about the increasing paranoia and fear gripping the country, decided to tackle the biggest story

in the U.S. at the time: Joseph McCarthy and House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Their first salvo came in October 1953 in the form of a profile story of a man, Milo Radulovich, a 26 year old meteorologist, who McCarthy had deemed a security risk; he had been kicked out of the Air Force reserves because his father and sister subscribed to a Serbian language newspaper. The paper, it turned out, was not even a communist paper but in fact a paper that supported Marshal Tito, the Yugoslavian dictator who broke away from the Soviet Union and was backed by the United States government. Far from being a simple story about one man being wronged by the system, Murrow and Friendly made the show about the injustice of being punished for something that a family member or friend did or believed, thereby attacking the very core of McCarthy's methods. The segment was not met with a backlash of anti-communist sentiment; rather it was a success both in the media and with the public, and soon after Radulovich was allowed back in the Air Force Reserves. Murrow and Friendly now knew that they had tapped into something, and were now going to press it home by going after McCarthy himself.

In March 1954 "A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy," did for the first time what print could never do: showed McCarthy's actions for what they were. The segment was mainly made up of filmed speeches McCarthy had given. By cutting them together Murrow and Friendly were able to show the contradictions and lies McCarthy used that got him so much power. They also showed him badgering and taunting witnesses many of whom were begging for their professional lives. This was the first time that the majority of Americans were exposed to the type of man McCarthy really was and they did not like what they saw. After the show, CBS received roughly 12,000 calls and telegrams that were five to one positive to negative reactions and in addition they later

got 22,000 letters that were about nine to one supportive (Streitmatter 162) which seems quite startling at the height of communist paranoia. The press too was supportive. Newspapers and magazines nationwide applauded *See It Now* for its courage and journalistic gumption. In a way the story opened the door for other journalists to print what they had always seen, but what without the public's direct experience, would always be out of their scope to publish. It then allowed them to write in an indirect way their own objections to McCarthy and his hearings without being accused of bias or subjectivity. The favorable press that McCarthy had received up to this point suddenly began to erode, as reporters suddenly felt the freedom to actually report what was happening.

In the spring of 1954 Americans would get even a closer look at the Senator as ABC decided to run wall-to-wall coverage of the last of McCarthy's hearings. Even more than in the *See It Now* segment, the hearings really exposed not only the kind of man McCarthy was but also how ridiculous and inflammatory, not to mention self-serving, his charges and accusations really were. As clever as McCarthy was at manipulating the print press, he seemed conversely ignorant of the power of television. In front of the live cameras, McCarthy seemed unable to win over the eighty million viewers who watched the hearing across the country. On camera he was still as snide, as mean, and as unsympathetic as he ever was, only this time he did not have the power to stop it from being shown. The hearings turned out to be disastrous for McCarthy, leaving him to ask his aide Roy Cohen 'what happened?' "What happened," Thomas Doherty explains, "was that television, whose coverage of McCarthy's news conferences, direct addresses, and senate hearings had lent him legitimacy and stature, had become the stage of his downfall" (Doherty 204). The hearings ended in a shambles and leaving

McCarthy isolated and disgraced. Public opinion polls now showed that his popularity had fallen to 29 percent, down from 50 before the hearings and by the end of the year the senate removed his chairmanship of the HUAC and condemned his actions (Doherty 210).

See It Now was not the only show to report on the unscrupulous behavior of McCarthy and his committee; however it was at the vanguard of understanding how to use television as a new news medium. Its pioneering use of actual events, or actuality as it is called in news, led to a more direct connection to what was happening without cluttering the screen with talking heads and commentators. As Michael Curtin points out “The Murrow-Friendly *See It Now* programs about McCarthy were widely hailed for demonstrating the potential of television journalism against the forces of demagoguery” (Curtin 148). It also demonstrated the new power of the medium and spawned countless shows of its kind and is even copied to this day. Shows such as *60 Minutes* and *20/20* still follow the format that Friendly and Morrow developed over fifty years ago.

However, unlike most of the previous shifts, television was not simply a change in style or practices, but in fact was an entirely new medium. This meant that nothing radically new was introduced into print journalism and therefore it was not affected by this energy of renewal and reinterpretation. Print therefore did not reexamine the way that it reported news, and the problems that led the McCarthy crisis would remain in place in print journalism for at least another decade. At the same time, however, television journalism was revolutionary not because it was trying to redefine journalism’s relationship to power—Edward Murrow not withstanding—but because it was so new and therefore unknown. By the end of the Fifties, however, television was just as codified and conventional as print. Because of its network structure, it was vastly more

corporate than print, as well as it was far more regulated than newspapers and magazines, which meant it had to follow rules about content and fairness that print never had to. All of this made television a much more conservative medium as it was always trying to keep sponsors, affiliates, and the government happy. As the Fifties drew to a close, shows such as *See It Now* no longer fit so well in the network line-ups, leading to a number of cancellations. *See It Now*, seen by many critics as one of the most important shows of the decade was canceled in 1958 and was replaced by *The \$64,000 Question*.

The television revolution had another impact. What McCarthy did not understand about television was exactly the power of the audience seeing and hearing what would later be called a news event. Having the facts of the story presented so much more directly makes viewers feel that they experience the story for themselves. By the sixties, as television news became the primary source of news for Americans, the way that they perceived the world also shifted. The hegemony of print, that worldview constructed out of the printed word, began to shift for the first time since Gutenberg. Suddenly people were not just reading about people, place and events from all over the world, they were now seeing them taking place. Though using film for news wasn't completely new—the news reels had been around for decades—television operated on such a massive scale that the images that it broadcast were not isolated or focused only on important events, but they covered everything from wars, to the weather, to sports to local events. No event was too important or too trite for television to cover. Instead of images simply being supplemental to textually based information, television images became primary, with text—on screen as well as newspapers and magazines—falling into the supplementary role. With change in the way that we received information also came a shift in the way people came to see the world.

One impact of this change was that the world no longer felt as large or as familiar as it once did. It is no coincidence that as television established itself by the end of the 1950's, we also heard authors and critics bemoan the 'absurd' reality of the modern world. For it was not only the shift in economic and educational levels that precipitate the erosion of reality, as critics such as Zavarzadeh have proposed, but also the changing way that people got their information had fundamentally altered their perception of the world around them.

What cultural critics who use the "altered nature of reality" to explain the "death of the novel" overlook is the mythicizing objectification of the world by the media through which we get much of our "news." The "reality" the mass media cover—objects of their attention—has become indistinguishable from the way they cover it. (McCord 63)

In essence McCord is repeating McLuhan's infamous "medium is the message" maxim, however he is also pointing out that mass media had utterly transformed the way that American society saw itself. Writers now found themselves out of step with the new paradigm. The fact that they felt threatened by television news should not be that surprising. For while print journalism tried to stay away from traditional narrative techniques in order that they not be confused with fiction, television news did not feel that restriction. In fact television news items continue to be written precisely so that they resemble narratives. In a memorandum issued at the beginning of NBC's nightly half hour newscasts in 1963, executive producer Reuven Frank instructed his staff that:

Every news story should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a

beginning, a middle and an end. These are not only the essentials of drama; they are the essentials of narrative (Frank 3).

Frank's reasons for wanting a narrative structure to television news had more to do with the audience than accurately telling a story. As Edward Jay Epstein points out in his landmark study of television news, *News From Nowhere*, it is "assumed in this logic that news reports are more likely to hold viewer's attention if they are cast in the form of the fictive story, with narrative closures" (263). This is then in direct conflict with the presentation of the world that print journalism constructs. In print the world is reduced to a number of facts that the reader puts together; facts are the basic unit of this paradigm. In television, it is the story, the narrative, which becomes the basic unit of how people see the world. News events become little narratives, and sometimes they are chapters in a much larger story.

Think of the Kennedy saga that gripped the American imagination for three years in the early sixties. It had a heroic rise, idealism (the space race), conflict (Bay of Pigs, Cuban Missile Crisis), and a tragic ending. It may seem glib to say but it even spawned a sequel and imitations⁴. I do not mean to demean the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., but the news coverage of these events, especially television's, took on much of a Kennedy type narrative as the media looked for the next great story to follow. Sadly they were not disappointed, as both led to the same dramatic end. The irony is that while print was constructing a reality of facts, there seemed to be a

⁴ It is not surprising that it was not only the general public that was drawn to this story. Novelists and other artist were also drawn to the powerful Kennedy narrative. In fact one of the first proto-new journalist works that Mailer wrote was "Superman goes to the Market" all about Kennedy before the 1960 election.

rather solid view of what that reality was; whereas television's narratives, packaged self-contained stories, led to a more fragmented view of reality.

The new fragmented reality that emerged in the Sixties presented a problem to print journalism. As a news medium, print had relied on the stable perception of reality that it shared with realist fiction. The assumption that there was a real world out there that was a place that could be known through objective facts was one of the basic tenets in which print operated. As John Hollowell writes, "the straight news article is based upon an 'objectivity' that requires a commitment to telling both sides of the story, and an impersonality on the part of the journalist characterized by the lack of value judgments and emotionally colored adjectives" (22). But as the world shifted away from that view, the very idea of objectivity in print began to come under scrutiny. Objectivity began to be seen as incomplete and ignoring intrinsic values that permeate the news story as a whole. This is what Jack Newfield calls the "rhetoric of objectivity" which he defines as a "belief in welfare capitalism, God, the West, Puritanism, The Law, the family, property, the two-party system, and perhaps most crucially, in a notion that violence is only defensible when employed by the state" (Newfield 184). Media critic Herbert Gans further narrows it down: "it would be fair to say that the news supports the social order of public, business and professional, upper-middle-class, middle aged, white male sectors of society" (61). Gans further extrapolates:

The news reflects a white male social order, although it sides with blacks and women who try to enter it and succeed. Nevertheless, its conception of both racial integration and sexual equality is basically assimilatory; the news prefers women and blacks who move into the existing social order to separatists who want to alter it. (61)

Objectivity is based not only on a conservative worldview but also helps reinforce it. At the same time these 'objective' values also served to isolate a large number groups and individuals who do not subscribe to that world view or, in fact, never did. Most people existed outside of the dominant social order and therefore outside the sphere of practiced objectivity. Compounding the problem even further, traditional journalists were either ignorant or simply ignoring the crisis of journalistic objectivity. As the social reality began to shift tremendously as the Sixties developed, most mainstream and traditional journalists clung to the older notions of news and reporting even though they no longer resonated with their audience. However there were those who felt that it was time to try something different, time to break some of the rules that were artificially constructed and see what lay beyond.

The Rise of the New Journalism

By the beginning of the Sixties television emerged as the part of a new crisis for print journalism as it now found itself in a rapidly shifting market place. By 1960 a television could be found in approximately 90 percent of the homes in America and, as a result, advertising dollars began to flow away from newspapers and magazines. As Sig Mickelson, an early news producer at NBC, writes:

Evening newspapers circulations began to slide as television rounded out its late afternoon, evening, and late night news programs. The four evening newspapers in New York City in 1950 were down to two at the end of the decade and to one a decade later. [...]

In Philadelphia, where the promotional slogan "Nearly everyone reads the *Evening Bulletin*" was not entirely an idle boast, the *Bulletin* started a downward slide that eventually lead to its demise. The same fate befell

the *Washington Star*, which for many years had boasted of selling more advertising lineage than any other American newspaper (Mickelson xvii).

As newspaper revenues began to fall and a number of papers around the country began to fold, the same fate was being shared by magazines. “*Collier’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post* both died and *Look* and the original *Life* suffered damaging blows that were eventually to lead to their following suit” (Mickelson xvii). The impact of television on print was quite dramatic. Publications that never thought they might be in trouble suddenly found themselves in the position of having to change or fail. As Hollowell suggests, “Although television advertising is far more expensive, many advertisers prefer to focus their campaigns upon a potential viewing audience of forty million as compared with fifteen- to twenty-million readers that the largest-circulating magazines can produce” (38). Moreover this change meant that print had to become supplemental to television. Some of the larger papers such as the *New York Times*, or the *Washington Post* shifted attention away from the breaking story and moved to providing more context for the top stories. Magazines too had to find their niche in the new market place. Magazines were situated “between the morning papers and the Cronkite show,” which Harold Hayes sees as allowing for the strength of a magazine to emerge: “there is often little to add but—and this is the redeeming strength of all magazines today—attitude. The magazine engages its reader and holds him because it shares with him a certain point of view” (Hayes xviii). With this new found role in the news world, it is not surprising that magazines now found themselves at the vanguard of the changes in journalism and birthplace of the New Journalism.

In many ways there was nothing remarkably new about the New Journalism of the 1960s. The technique of using tropes of fiction to tell a news story had been around as

long as there has been journalism. Critics and journalists have pointed out that Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1724) was one of the first instances of this technique; others point to more contemporary instances such as Agee's *In Praise of Famous Men* in the 1930s. Although critics such as Robert Augustin Smith and Tom Wolfe are correct that the basic techniques of mixing journalism with fiction were well known, the historic circumstances and intentions of these new journalists were rather unique to this era, as was the proliferation of writers, new and old, who quickly adopted the style for their own reasons.

As Wolfe points out, one of these specific circumstances was the crisis in the realist novel. In his introduction to *The New Journalism* he draws a straight line from the abandonment of realism by authors to the rise of the New Journalism to fill that gap. For Wolfe the novel had been a dream: "it's hard to explain what an American dream the idea of writing a novel was in 1940s, the 1950s, and right into the early 1960s. The Novel was no mere literary form. It was a psychological phenomenon. It was a cortical fever" (NJ 19). The novel then was at the peak of prestige in the literary world and had been for a hundred years. For Wolfe the novel was firmly based in social realism. It arose out of social realism, and it was its social realism that gave it its power. Wolfe does not attempt to acknowledge the reasons for the crisis with the novel; instead he simply sees the abandonment of the traditional realist novel as frivolous and counter-productive. It meant that "a novelist could no longer portray a part of that society and hope to capture the Zeitgeist; all he would be left with was one of the broken pieces" (43). Wolfe goes on to explain that as a result, by the mid-Sixties "talented novelists had abandoned the richest terrain of the novel; namely, society, the social tableau, manners and morals, the whole business of the 'the way we live now'" (43). This could now be open to

journalists, whose heads filled with dreams of the novel begin to fill the realist gap left by novelists.

One thing that Wolfe completely misses in *The New Journalism* is the impact that the crisis occurring within journalism itself had on the New Journalism. For Wolfe New Journalism and those that practiced it were doing so out of literary aspirations. However, many of the New Journalists were themselves trying to overcome the hurdles put in place by the old journalistic conventions. One of the hurdles was that of objectivity. As Hollowell says:

The tradition of objectivity became a fact of life in American journalism about the turn of the century with the development of the major wire services. Until the changes introduced in that last decade [the sixties], it has dominated most of American journalism. With the ever-widening gap between the statements of official spokesmen and the events beneath the surface in the sixties, however, a new approach has emerged.

(Hollowell 22-3)

That new approach, as Hollowell sees it, was then to reject the objective for subjective. It is through this subjective point of view that the writer then is allowed to report those “stories hidden beneath the surface facts” (Hollowell 23). We see this quite clearly in the works of such writers as Hunter S. Thompson, Michael Herr, and George Plimpton. These writers not only write the story from their own point of view, but also become the story by thrusting themselves into it. Thompson, for his book on the Hell’s Angels, bought a “hog” and lived with the misfit biker gang for close to a year. Herr’s dispatches from Vietnam were more about him covering the story and what it was doing to him than the story itself. Plimpton, instead of standing on the sidelines to cover a NFL training

camp, decided to suit up and go through the process himself with the Detroit Lions. In all instances, what came out was a candid and vivid picture of life within these communities that could never have been achieved through standard objective reporting. In fact, one of the chief effects of this subjective journalism was ironically achieving a level of objectivity that traditional objective reporting could never reach. As Hollowell says, “By revealing his personal biases, the new journalist strives for a higher kind of ‘objectivity’” (22). This higher type of objectivity lies in the way that the subject of the stories are treated. Thompson, by living so close to the Hell’s Angels and telling their story and their worldview, normalizes them and makes them accessible for people to understand. His subjective style allows him a far deeper and more meaningful story than could ever be told through the conventions of traditional journalism, for as John Hellmann suggests:

Conventional journalism reinforces and multiplies the problems of this process through disguised perspective and rigid formula. As a result, mass media confront the individual with national news comprised of distorted images and short-circuiting information, while failing to offer the individual a meaningful relation to it.” (Hellmann 5)

It would then seem that by writing new journalistic news stories these writers are able to demystify the shifted reality of their age. By getting inside the story, which these techniques allow the journalist to do, what would seem alien to the general reader suddenly has a familiar tone to it, and, through all the craziness and absurdity, New Journalism allows for the humanity to come through.

As with the troubles writers were having with objectivity, television can be seen as another factor that made New Journalism such a phenomenon of the Sixties. First of all New Journalism can be seen as a way for print to reclaim the narrative of the news

from television. As I discussed previously, television news used narrative to construct its news items. The net effect was allowing them to not have to fragment the news stories into relatable facts, as newspapers did. The New Journalism's use of novelistic techniques such as the portrayal of dramatic scenes, dialogue, recording narrative/descriptive details, and point of view, the journalist could reclaim narrative techniques for writing; i.e. news. Although while narrative was a way of going back to the roots of journalistic writing it was also a direct response to an audience that was used to getting its news from the narrative of the news broadcast. In turn, New Journalism was far more *visual* than other journalistic writing as it aimed not only to recount events to the reader, but to bring them there. "In the New Journalism," Hellmann writes, "the writer attempts to reconstruct the experience as it might have unfolded. The new journalist uses literary techniques to convey information and to provide background not usually possible in most magazine and newspaper reporting" (25). New Journalists attempt various styles to achieve this level of description. Some, like Thompson, write in frantic, energetic prose; others, such as Plimpton, rely on detail and description, while Wolfe relies on an orgiastic out flowing of onomatopoeia and crazed punctuation to capture the speed and immediacy of his subjects.

Secondly, these techniques allowed print journalism to be something that it had not really tried to be for quite some time—entertaining. For one of the benefits of being written like a novel was that these New Journalist works were enjoyable to read. In the near puritan journalistic community this was quite an affront to their mode of working, because they feared that the information would become secondary to the entertaining elements of the story. But for a public becoming bored with the traditional way of news reporting, these texts invited readers to come back to publications that they had started to

drift away from. This was not lost on the editors at the time. While most of the traditional newspapers and magazines refused to allow this new style of journalism to appear within their pages, a number of publications began to look at this new form as a way of increasing circulation in their depressed market as well as finding it a way of making themselves relevant again. As Hollowell says:

One outcome of this struggle for financial survival has been the widespread experimentation in nonfiction [sic]. Younger editors at the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Esquire*, and, later, *New York* magazines encouraged the greater freedom in the form and style than had previously been the case. (38)

Harold Hayes seems to echo this in a 1972 interview:

If there's been any great change to accelerate the possibility of writers dealing more flexibly with the language and form, it's not because of the birth of a New Journalism form, but because there is a commercial disposition among magazines to see that imaginative writing now is more appealing to their readers. (134)

It would seem that the readership of magazines and newspapers were looking for good, at times edgy writing about the events going on around them. New Journalism added a new energy to the pages of magazines such as *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *Rolling Stone* and helped invigorate writing across the board—new journalistic or not. It placed a new emphasis on writing, pushing the boundaries and showing people out there what makes writing such a powerful force in our culture.

The Ins and Outs of the Nonfiction Novel

The nonfiction novel shares a number of similarities with New Journalism. It emerged as a genre about the same time as the New Journalism. It too dealt with the same changes that were occurring with both the novel and journalism. As well, non-fiction novels were also published in the same way and even in the same magazines as New Journalism. In fact in their magazine format the nonfiction novel might have seemed almost indistinguishable from the New Journalism. Critics at the time were unable to really tell the two forms apart: routinely mixed works of both genres together, either decrying or celebrating the new avenues journalism was taking the 1960s.

Again we turn to Wolfe's *The New Journalism*, for as I mentioned earlier it was this text that helped shape how people later looked at and responded to the works collected in it. In the Introduction, what Wolfe is attempting is to establish a literary lineage for the New Journalism. For, like any would-be monarchy, in order for the New Journalism to attain the literary throne it needs to establish the correct lineage. In doing so, Wolfe co-opts the nonfiction novel. In fact he uses the works of Capote and Mailer to boost his claim that the novel is failing the reading public and that even writers were turning to the New Journalism to reconnect to that public. Instead of being seen for the differences of the two genres, New Journalism and the nonfiction novel become intertwined in both the popular and critical consciousness for quite some years to follow.

Perhaps the problem with seeing the differences between the two is that they seem to be so similar in their origins and technique that what ever might separate them is seen to be inconsequential. Although both New Journalism and the nonfiction novel came about around the same time and responded to the same circumstances, to conflate them is a disservice to both forms. While the nonfiction novel too was a reaction to the crisis in

journalism, its method is actually much different than that of New Journalism. At its core the goal of New Journalism is basically the same as that of regular journalism, to impart information about the world, to report 'news' however it is categorized. The nonfiction novel, on the other hand, never saw its duty to inform its audience in such a fashion. Instead, as we see in the works of Capote and Mailer, they attempt to come to terms with the reality that comes out of the culmination of the journalistic facts. What emerges is not a simple narrative or point of view—subjective or otherwise—rather it is a world that is complex and multi-layered, in which the central events of the story become even more obscure. The nonfiction novelist uses the act of journalism as a trope or tool in which to explore the modern world in a way that both realism and fabulism cannot. In fact the nonfiction novel is seen as just as much a reaction against the crisis in traditional realism as fabulism is. As David Lodge states:

The nonfiction novel and fabulation are *radical* forms which take their impetus from an extreme reaction to the world we live in—*The Armies of the Night* and *Giles Goat-boy* are equally products of the apocalyptic imagination. The assumption behind such experiments is that our 'reality' is so extraordinary, horrific, and absurd that the methods of conventional realistic imitation are no longer adequate. There is no point in carefully creating fiction that gives an illusion of life when life itself seems illusory.

(Lodge 33)

Rather than retreating from the world, then, as the fabulism attempted to, the nonfiction novel attempts to delve into reality more and explore the world as if it was art. If reality then is a cultural construction, these authors take a firm hand in both constructing it and understanding it. If history/news is just as subjective as fiction then it is just as created

and formed as fiction. If so, perhaps art and literature can help bring some understanding out of the fragmented ambiguity of journalistic facts. Through literature, these nonfiction texts attempt to break with creating a single narrative history and try to suggest that reality is far more complicated. With this in mind, it is somewhat impossible to represent—in any sort of realist fashion—local truths or facts and so the nonfiction novel strives to uncover the more universal/artistic truths about the world in which we live.

The nonfiction novel then is not the realist genre that Wolfe would like to think it. It too has broken away from the grand narratives and social collectivism that realism needs to assume in order to have a real world to mirror. Also, while the nonfiction novel is not a traditionalist realist novel, it does not mean that these authors were abandoning the novel for a newer genre. The nonfiction novel is still a novel and its authors still believe in the power of the novel. As Lodge says, the nonfiction novel “implies no disillusionment on the author’s part with the novel as a literary form: on the contrary, it reaffirms the primacy of that form as a mode of exploring and interpreting experience” (12). Rather than seeing the novel as a fading genre of literature, these writers see the novel as still having a role in coming to interpret the world around them. In fact, for them, the novel is perhaps more important than ever, for it alone has the generic functions that allow for the breadth and scope to deal with such a complex subject as the modern world.

Chapter 2: I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore: In Cold Blood and Capote's Search for Meaning

The moment *In Cold Blood* hit the newsstands between the covers of *The New Yorker* in 1965, American literature was changed. Originally published serially from September 25 to October 16 as “Annals of Crime—In Cold Blood,” Capote’s ‘report’ on a relatively obscure murder was about to cross the firmly established line that separated fact from fiction. At the moment when print journalism and the novel each struggled to reaffirm their place in the public discourse, editors and readers seemed ready to explore new ways of telling stories. Thus, the nonfiction novel was born.

Praise came quickly in the form of good reviews and excellent sales—in both its magazine and book form. As critic George Garrett recalls, “after the first chunk of it appeared, [people were] waiting eagerly for the next issue of *The New Yorker*. People talked about it with an excitement in the way that people talk about good movies nowadays” (Garrett 469). Capote had planned to exploit those two forms of publishing from the very beginning. In fact only some minor editing was needed to transform the magazine articles into their book form. The whole process took only ten weeks⁵. This was mainly due to the fact that the text had been written with both publication venues in mind, with four chapters of relatively equal length, long enough to serve as complete articles in a magazine, yet with a narrative flow that allowed them to fit together almost perfectly when assembled. *In Cold Blood*’s combination of the novel and journalism can also be observed in the content of the text itself. Weaving interviews, court documents,

⁵The magazine version was collected and published less than three months after it was first printed in *The New Yorker* on January 1, 1966, by Random House. It was also published later that year by New American Library under its Signet imprint. (De Bells 519.)

and factual research, together with a plot, narrative, characters, dialogue, and figurative language, Capote creates a narrative that is both factual and literary. This doubling at the levels of content, style, form and medium of publication allows for the text to transcend its *mere* journalistic function and take on the mantles of literature and art. Capote uses the nonfiction novel to move past the failings in contemporary journalism even while he continues to believe that reality was something worth reporting.

The significance of Capote's accomplishment with *In Cold Blood* becomes clearer when placed in contrast with his previous work. His early stories and articles are testing grounds where many of the themes and techniques found in his later work were developed. In this timeline *In Cold Blood* was the logical next step for Capote both as a journalist and novelist.

Backstory: The Development of Capote as a Writer and Journalist

Capote's was only 17 when he started at *The New Yorker* in the early forties.⁶ Hired initially by the accounting department, he was soon moved to the art department to catalogue cartoons and photos because he had failed to mention that he was quite incompetent with numbers. Capote did not simply want to be employed by the magazine, however; he wanted to write for it. While sorting through the cartoons and pictures, he started suggesting various people and story ideas for the "Talk of the Town" section, and was soon moved up to writing for that section. While cutting his teeth at *The New Yorker*, Capote also wrote freelance, sending out articles to other publications, as well as reading movie scripts and writing anecdotes for a digest publication. Even after writing

⁶ The biographical information for this section was compiled from Helen S. Garson's *Truman Capote & Truman Capote: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Lawrence Grobel's *Conversations with Truman Capote*, and George Plimpton's *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career*.

all day for the magazine, Capote would go home at night and write short stories. He published his first three short stories at 17, and went on to win the O. Henry Prize at nineteen years of age. At this point Capote left *The New Yorker*, thus ending his apprenticeship; he set out to become a young novelist.

Right from the beginning of his career, this two year period shows him developing the parallel journalistic and creative sides of his writing. As he was forming his skills in one area he was also developing the skills and techniques in the other. Much has been made of the impact that early reportage had on Hemingway's technique and style (as well as on those a whole generation after him). There are numerous passages within his Spanish Civil War novels that read like a reporter's description of the events—very much like the reporting he wrote as a correspondent for the *Toronto Star*. This seepage between genres occurred in Capote's writing as well, though not necessarily in the same way. In a sense Capote reverses Hemingway's experiment, adding a more creative slant to the reportage rather than incorporating a crisp journalistic prose into the novel.

After leaving *The New Yorker* in 1945 Capote went on to write several successful short stories and two novels: *Summer Crossing*, written first though he never published it because it felt "thin, clever, unfelt" (Grobel 81), and his breakout novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). Much of the manner and style in Capote's life and work were directly influenced by his childhood in the Deep South. His early style gained a lot from his readings of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers. His early stories and novels were dark and menacing. They featured an atmosphere steeped in a gothic tradition that came to be associated with southern writers at the time. Short stories like "Master Misery," "Miriam," and "The Headless Hawk," reflect a nightmarish world,

in which the boundary between reality and fantasy becomes impossible to locate. As Helen S. Garson points out, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* “belongs to the Southern gothic mode, but it is much more than a baroque fiction. The novelist has combined elements of Gothicism with both Southern setting and Southern characters. The work has mystery and suspense, terror and horror” (Garson 13). We can see this directly in the opening pages of the novel as Capote lays out the tone and setting:

[T]his is a lonesome country; and here in the swamp like hollows where tiger lilies bloom the size of a man’s head, there are luminous green logs that shine under the dark marsh waters like drowned corpses; often the only movement on the landscape is winter smoke winding out the chimney of some sorry-looking farm house, or a wing-stiffened bird, silent and arrow-eyed, circling over the black deserted pinewoods. (*Other Voices* 9-10)

In Capote’s early work realism gives way to symbolism and metaphor. What is real and what is not is moot, for Capote is more interested in the worlds that are constructed by his characters.

The characters themselves, in these early narratives, all reflect Capote’s fascination with marginalized people. They are in one way or another outsiders, misfits, isolated loners, who do not, or are not allowed to, fit in with the rest of society. As George Garrett points out, in most of Capote’s fiction “it is the outsider and the outcasts who reject conventional morality and are examples of another kind of virtue. Those who manage to prosper or get along in the duplicitous world of practical matters are usually exposed as being at heart deceitful and/or self-deceived, hypocrites at best” (Garrett 471).

Capote is interested in those who do not fit in to the rest of society and in how they create their social sphere and morality.

Capote's new focus on fiction, however, did not turn him off of journalistic writing; in fact he was finding success in that field as well. Ironically it was only after he left *The New Yorker* that he was able to get his own work published within its pages. These feature length articles written between 1946 and 1950 show the early stages of Capote's interest in mixing his skills as a journalist and novelist, as he sets out around the world to record, as the title of the collected version suggests, *Local Color*. In these pieces, Capote seems able to condense a sense of place and time through his keen observations and detailed narratives. As Kenneth Reed points out, "*Local Color* was less an embellishment of reality than a greater insight into it, and what the sketches reveal is the author's extraordinary powers of perception" (96). These pieces were more artistic than journalistic exercises for Capote. Through them he honed his descriptive and narrative skills in order to produce something that would be aesthetically enjoyable to read. Capote was not only creating a journalistic style at this time; at least half of these articles were written at the same time that he was hard at work on *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. In both styles, the same sense of place and eye for detail can clearly be seen.

The Fifties saw Capote's experiments with a more creative journalistic style manifested in two major articles.⁷ The first of these was his two-part article in the *New Yorker* chronicling an all-American production of *Porgy and Bess*, with the troubles and trials of mounting a touring theatrical production, making its way to Leningrad during the height of the Cold War. Later reprinted by itself as *The Muses are Heard*, the story is

⁷ It is interesting to point out that these experiments were only in his journalistic work up to this time, and his fiction remained quite clear of any kind of reportage.

almost a collection of profiles with Capote describing many of the highly colourful personalities such as Ira Gershwin, the director Robert Breen, as well as fellow reporter Leonard Lyons, who were on that trip. The article allowed Capote to put his emerging skills as a novelist in the service of a journalistic endeavor. He employed the journalist's eye for details with the novelist's sense of aesthetics and style. The players and their journey come alive in this piece as does the enigmatic Soviet Union in a way that many Americans had never experienced it before. Although Capote could not entirely detach himself from the era's anti-communist bias he nevertheless accepts the fact that these are not the enemies propagandized about back in the U.S.A.. As he states, when he and his companions see their first real Russians, they stared "as though amazed, and rather peeved, to discover Russians had two eyes correctly located" (*Muses* 236). It serves as a powerful signpost for his readers that preconceived notions were not to be trusted.

During the fifties Capote also continued to write fiction, publishing his second novel, *The Glass Harp*, in 1951, and branching off to other creative endeavors such as writing for the stage and films. He wrote two films in this time, John Huston's *Beat the Devil* and an adaptation of Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* called *The Innocents*. Capote's style also began to tone down the early southern Gothic influences as his work began to reflect a more realist aesthetic. The aesthetic theories of Henry James become a dominant influence on Capote's writing at this time. As Melvin J. Friedman points out, Capote's 1958 classic *Breakfast at Tiffany's* "is perhaps [Capote's] most Jamesian work. The narrator, again a participant in the story—although this time more of a detached onlooker—has early counterparts in James's garrulous 'posts of observation'" (Friedman 133). Capote seems highly influenced at this time by James's idea of the observer. As James describes in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*:

The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million—a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. [...] They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a fieldglass, which forms, against and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. (James 46)

For James, it is not so much what is happening in the story, but rather the person observing it, that makes the story. “The spreading field, the human scene, is the ‘choice of subject’; the pierced aperture, either broad or balconied or slit-like and low-browed, is the ‘literary form’; but they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the artist” (46). Capote’s work becomes very influenced by this notion. For instance, in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Holly Golightly’s character is created more through other characters’ impressions of her rather than through the author’s description. Capote makes it very clear that the first-person narrator is a writer and is reflecting back on the Holly he knew. Then there is Mr. Yunioshi’s photo of an African tribal mask that looks exactly like Holly. These are but two examples of ways that Capote attempts to create this aesthetic of observation. The role of the observer is actually dominant in Capote’s work and can even be seen in his journalistic writings throughout the Fifties. *The Muses Are Heard*, for example, is as much about Capote covering the tour (as he even profiles himself in the piece) as it is about a theatrical tour through Soviet Russia.

This theme/aesthetic of the observer can be linked with Capote's fascination and identification with the outsider: those characters who are looking in from the outside. As we will see, it will play an important role in the writing of the nonfiction novel.

It was also at this time that Capote began working out a theoretical framework for an idea he had entertained for years which was to write a literary work based on journalistic fact rather than creative imagination. As Capote explains, this idea "was based on a theory that I've harbored since I first began to write professionally...It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the 'nonfiction novel,' as I thought of it" (Plimpton 197).⁸ The time Capote spent developing his journalistic skills also prepared him for the needs of this as-yet-undeveloped literary form. One of the most important skills he worked on was improving his listening and recall techniques to their maximum extent. As Capote describes it:

I began to train myself for the purposes of this sort of book, to transcribe conversations without using a tape recorder. I did it by having a friend read passages from a book, and then later I'd write them down to see how close I could come to the original. I had a natural facility for it, but after doing it for a year and a half, for a couple of hours a day, I could get 95

⁸ This mix between fact and fiction has also manifested itself in another way for Capote as seen through his desire to make gossip into a literary form. Capote thrived on the ephemeral nature of gossip with its roots in both reality and the imagination. When he was 12 he wrote a story based on things he had heard from his gossipy aunt called "Mrs. Busybody" which caused quite a stir in the small Alabama town they lived in when it was published in the *Social Register*. This love of gossip would also get him in trouble towards the end of this career with the publication of the first installments of *Answered Prayers* in which he retold gossip from the group of socialites and literati whose circles he moved through. *Answered Prayers* was never finished as many of Capote's friends were shocked and hurt that he would write, in the guise of fiction or not, details of their private lives. This led a number of his close friends to distance themselves from him and culminated in a creative and emotional collapse for Capote. It also ended his ambitions of promoting gossip as literature.

percent of absolute accuracy, which is as close as you need. (Plimpton 202)

It was this skill that allowed him to get so close to the people that he interviewed, extracting things that they would never say if there had been a microphone under their nose. This technique allowed him an intimacy with his subjects that made them open up and trust him like few other interviewers of his time.

No piece showed the value of this intimacy more than his infamous profile of Marlon Brando, Capote's second major journalistic accomplishment of the Fifties. The piece allowed Capote to fully understand the power of this memorization technique. "The Duke in his Domain" was one of the most intimate portraits of one of the world's biggest stars that had yet been published. Capote was able to cut through Brando's defenses and express those qualities that made him both a star and a human being. Capote shows it all from the dirty shirts tossed on still-unpacked suit cases in his Kyoto hotel room to how Brando saw his entourage ("I am all they have. A lot of them you see are people who don't fit anywhere; they're not accepted, they've been hurt, crippled one way or another. But I want to help them"). He cut to Brando's core, capturing the celebrity's temperament as well as his view of himself ("The only reason I'm here, is that I don't have the moral courage to turn down the money"). Capote credits the creation of this intimate atmosphere with the absence of a tape recorder or a pad of paper. It was through this mnemonic technique that Capote was able to get the most controversial bit of information for the article: Brando revealed that his mother was an alcoholic. Brando would later feel betrayed by Capote, complaining that it was an "off the record" conversation (a mood even more enhanced by a bottle of Vodka) and something that he really did not want to be revealed. Though Capote's reason for including this unwanted

detail in the article was not sensationalism he also realized that Brando might not be happy with it. “[W]hen I was writing it, I knew that [it] was going to upset him, but I also knew it was the whole key to everything that I had done,” Capote says. “Without that, everything that had gone before didn’t make any sense. But if you understood where the passion and trouble of his youth had begun and how it ended...I just felt that it explained something about him sympathetically” (*Conversations* 102). In a way, Brando became a victim of Capote’s desire to create a fully fleshed out character for his readers, something beyond the simple trappings of celebrity journalism, and show the public who this man really was. For Brando the article exposed too much and he did not give another such interview again for over twenty years.

By the end of the fifties, Capote’s skills and ambition were pushing him towards more literary applications of journalistic style. It is true that “Duke” and *Muses* use elements of fiction but Capote wanted to take it further, making his stories take on the depth and breadth of a novel. All he needed was the right story.

In Cold Blood—Fractured Journalism

In 1959 Truman Capote picked up a copy of *The New York Times* and read a small news report out of Kansas about the murder of a wealthy farmer and his family. The story was scant on details, but something about this tragedy resonated with the novelist. As Capote describes it:

After reading the story it suddenly struck me that a crime, the study of one such [sic], might provide the broad scope I needed to write the kind of book I wanted to write. Moreover, the human heart being what it is, murder was a theme not likely to darken and yellow with time. (Plimpton 199)

After some reflection and some quick calls, three days after first reading about the Clutter murders, Capote found himself in a hotel room in the tiny town of Holcomb, Kansas.

Capote stayed in the town for months, covering the story long after the other reporters had left, interviewing the police and the locals, visiting the crime scene, and generally getting the feel of the place. It took some time for people to get used to this outsider. However, Capote had help from Harper Lee, his cousin and life long friend. She had just finished *To Kill a Mocking Bird* when she joined him. At first she was supposed to be more of a secretary to Capote, but soon she was pressed into interviewing too. Capote's remarkable skill to remember what was said during the conversations and interviews he conducted proved to be quite advantageous at this stage of the research, as it allowed people not to feel as though they were being recorded. Capote and Lee would sit and have tea or dinner with some of the residents or the investigators and chat them up, then later run back to their hotel rooms to write down what they had just learned. As the wife of the lead investigator, Marie Dewey, recalls "Neither of them took any notes when they interviewed people, but then they would go back to their rooms and write down their memories of the day. Check one against the other" (Plimpton 172).

Even after the trial, Capote did not feel that the story was finished. The killers had been sentenced to death, but Capote would wait five years to finish writing the story. In this time he expanded his research, interviewing not only the murderers themselves, but also their families and others involved in the periphery of the story. As KBI agent Nye has pointed out, "[h]e got information nobody else got, not even us. But to be damn truthful about it, I didn't really care about all the travels of Perry Smith and Dick Hickock through Florida and whatnot, which takes up so much of *In Cold Blood*" (197). Capote went even further, interviewing other convicted murderers, consulting experts, and

reading countless books and articles on the subject of murder and murders in order to become an expert on his subject(s).

Capote had most of the novel written long before it was published. The first three parts, which related to the time before and the time just after the murder, and then the trial, were written soon after the events happened. But Capote waited until all the appeals were exhausted to publish the story, and followed it right up to the point where both murderers were hung by their necks until they were dead. Capote wanted to tell the whole story, from beginning to the very end.

When *In Cold Blood* hit the newsstands in the fall of 1965 it was met with both enthusiasm and hostility. Both the articles and the book version were highly successful. The book became an instant bestseller and made quite a stir in both journalistic and literary circles. Critics had a hard time classifying the book: was it journalism? was it fiction? was it in fact still a novel or just a really long magazine article? Mailer thought it was an excellently written novel and admired it greatly—although he felt it was too “stripped down” for his tastes—while Wolfe saw that Capote, by calling *In Cold Blood* a nonfiction novel instead of a novel was using “the ever-clever Fielding dodge” meaning that he “was trying to give his work the cachet of reigning literary genre of his time, so that literary people would take it seriously” (*New Journalism* 52).⁹ Other critics, such as the *Saturday Review of Literature*’s Ned Rorem and *The Observer*’s Kenneth Tynan attacked Capote for not only making millions off the story of these two murderers, but for actually wanting them to die so that he could have a good ending for his book (Plimpton

⁹ The novel was not considered a serious literary form in 18th century, so Fielding famously referred to his book, *Joseph Andrews* as a “comic epic poem in prose” in order to associate it with the more respectable classical canon. Wolfe is attempting to draw the connection here that the New Journalism is at a similar point in its development as the novel was in the 18th century.

215-7). Tynan even consulted with a lawyer in New York to see whether or not Capote could have helped them get a reduction of sentence to life in prison or even a stay of execution. As Rorem put it:

Capote got two million and his heroes got the rope. This conspicuous irony has not, to my knowledge, been shown in any assessment of *In Cold Blood*. That book, for all practical purposes, was completed before the deaths of Smith and Hickock; yet had they not died, there would have been no book. The author realizes this, although within his pages it is stated that \$50,000 might have saved them—that only the poor must hang.

(215)

A cold observation indeed, but one with little proof. Capote's vision of the non-fiction novel did not require such a dramatic ending or final unity. Capote revealed as much in an interview with George Plimpton, saying "I never knew until the events were well along whether a book was going to be possible. There was always the choice, after all, of whether to stop or go on. The book could have ended with the trial, with just a coda at the end explaining what had finally happened" (Plimpton 206). For Zavarzadeh, the ending of any nonfiction novel is problematic: "Any ending in such narratives will be to a certain degree 'false,' since an ending is an arbitrary and artificial but required imposition of a medium on the unintermittible flow of life, whose movements the nonfiction novel follows" (*Mythopoeic* 124). As arbitrary as an ending to such a novel might be, Capote was compelled to follow the story right to the end, whether he did so out of cold journalistic tenacity or affection for the two murderers. While their case was in the courts, appealed and re-appealed, the story continued and Capote needed to follow it to the end.

Other critics felt that Capote got too close to the murders, that we gained too much sympathy and understanding for his ‘heroes.’ Yet this was Capote’s strength journalistically. In his celebrity profiles, such as the one on Brando, Capote showed a remarkable ability to capture the humanity of his subjects. So why was it so terrible in this context? Perhaps it was that Capote was challenging the conventional journalistic cliché that all murderers are horrible, evil people that are barely human. The demonization of criminals dehumanizes them to the extent that their crimes are seen as something outside the normal human context. They exist outside the realm of empathy and understanding and therefore can be executed without guilt. However, by humanizing these two killers, Capote forces his readers to confront some serious questions about the nature of evil and the justifications behind capital punishment.

Some of the strongest critiques called into question *In Cold Blood*’s credibility as a journalistic work. Fiction writing, though it had come a long way since the seventeenth century, still retained the stain of being untrue (a work of the imagination) and of being incompatible with reportage. Some critics felt that Capote took too many liberties with his source material or that his using techniques such as getting into the heads of the characters, was going too far. The most damning was Philip K. Tompkins’s “In Cold Fact” in which he went back to Holcomb, Kansas and did some ‘fact checking’. What he found was that some of the people featured in *In Cold Blood* were misquoted and misrepresented. In the end Tompkins proclaims that with *In Cold Blood*, “[a]rt triumphs over reality, fiction over nonfiction” (57). But the nonfiction novel does not need to simply rest on the strength of its facts. Unlike a piece of journalism or history, where facts are primary, a nonfiction novel used facts as tools for literature. Shifting or manipulating some details for the overall story does not ruin the credibility of the

nonfiction novel. As Friedman says “Despite the convincing claims of unreliability put forth by Philip K. Tompkins [...] we must still believe in the essential authenticity of Capote’s account” (Friedman 129). Tompkins is unable to see *In Cold Blood* as anything other than a piece of journalism. However, Capote is using the facts to provide ‘essential authenticity’ at the same time transforming them into artistic narrative. *In Cold Blood* is in many ways a work of journalism, but how it relates facts and information is determined by its author’s novelistic aims and methods.

Narrative and Multi-Narrative

In Cold Blood is probably one of the most detailed ‘news’ stories of the sixties. It is hard to find another work that details so closely not only the crime and the criminals but also the effect that crime had on a community. Long after all other reporters left to pursue other stories, Capote stayed in Kansas observing the minute details of the case. From this point of view *In Cold Blood* may be the most accurate account of what happened in Holcomb. One of the journalistic strengths of the nonfiction novel is its ability to form a meaningful narrative out of facts, a strength that normal newspaper reporting seriously lacks.

The aim of standard news reporting is to give the reader as many of the facts as possible while economizing space. This resulted in the formation of the so-called inverted pyramid, in which the most important facts are given at the beginning and then the second most, and so on, until all the facts are given. In reality this is more of a time-saving convention than it is a function of editorial style as it allows the editor to simply cut from the bottom to make articles fit into the tight layout of the paper. This mode of organization fragments the facts in two ways. First, the facts are ordered in terms of perceived importance, leaving readers little of the context of the story; they are held at a

dispassionate or emotionless distance. Secondly, just as the story gets fragmented, so does its impact.

Capote, by contrast, sets out to stitch together the facts into something readers can connect to, thus highlighting the context of the story. He wants us to feel the whole range of the tragedy that occurred that November night in Kansas. The narrative elements that Capote borrows from fiction act as glue, not only putting together facts into a narrative, but also providing an emotional attachment to the story. In this way, the facts of the story are not arbitrarily assigned a rank or order according to their perceived value or importance, but rather are fit together in order to provide understanding. And in a time that both journalism and fiction were seen as disconnected from the real world, we can see Capote here trying to make reality matter once again.

In reading *In Cold Blood* it is easy to think that at times one is reading a novel, for the form, language and style all seem to point to an unbroken narrative. As Capote says, he wanted it to be “a book that would read exactly like a novel except that every word of it would be absolutely true” (Grobel 112). This initial plan proved too limiting for Capote as he began to weave other texts through the narrative. Capote’s own narration is rather deceptive as it seems at first glance to be that of a traditional realist novel. Robert Augustin Smart believes so. As he argues “[t]he narrative points of view, typicalizing [sic] of its setting, and omniscient narrator are essential features of the conventional novel” (80). This is for Smart one of the prime reasons why *In Cold Blood* is not a nonfiction novel, but rather a conventional novel much like those of the 19th century. However, the narration in *In Cold Blood* is actually far more complex than that of a conventional omniscient narrator. As Chris Anderson points out, “in nonfiction the author cannot finally claim total omniscience. Capote can’t say with absolute certainty

why Nancy Clutter varies her handwriting, because she is [a] real person, not a fictional creation of his own” (Anderson 350). The level of the omniscience is then limited in the narrative as the writer cannot claim absolute authority over the actions and characters.

As Zavarzadeh suggests:

Though the point of view used in *In Cold Blood* resembles the omniscient point of view employed in *Our Mutual Friend*, *Middlemarch*, and many other fictive novels, the omniscience which informs a nonfiction novel is based on the writer’s thorough research, rather than his or her imaginative authority. In other words, the omniscient point of view of *In Cold Blood* is an “empirical omniscience” (*Mythopoeic* 125).

Unlike Smart’s conventional novel, the narrator of the nonfiction novel is not only bound to the past, but also to what he/she can find out about the past. This empirical omniscience then, is not a totalizing force exerted by an author who makes the subject conform to his/her wishes; rather, the author must follow the story.

Capote goes to great length to embed the empirical nature of the narrative into the text itself, documenting this research throughout the text. And so we see excerpts of interviews, police reports, court documents, diary entries, etc., throughout the novel. These extra-textual devices not only provide a factual element to the narrative but they also break up the single narrative (authorial) voice of the text¹⁰. We then see Capote’s voice fading out as he uses the words of those directly involved. Larry Hendricks’s first man on the scene description of the murder; Perry’s father’s biographical letter entitled

¹⁰ By inter-textual I am referring to texts that are brought into the novel by the author that were not originally written by him/her. More than simply quoting as one would find in a news report or university essay, these extra-textual materials are used to great extent as part of the narrative itself. These inter-textual materials at times even make up entire chapters and therefore constitute a primary, not secondary, element to the novel.

“A History of My Boy’s Life”; the use of Mr. Hickock’s (Dick’s father) court transcripts; psychiatric reports on both killers: all these documents find their way into the narrative practically untouched. The fiction-like narrative is broken up with journalistic bursts, disrupting its novel-like flow. Although it is not rare for a novel to switch point of view and narrative voice, what is special about *In Cold Blood* is that the materials Capote is including are extra-textual elements, brought in from elsewhere and included in the text itself. This extra-textuality lends a film or television documentary feel to the text, wherein the story is told by a narrator and punctuated by interviews and archival material. As Mas’ud Zavarzadeh points out, by means of “the insertion of such verifiable information as names of persons, cities, hotels, or references to publications [...] Capote authenticates his narrative. The documents, which are the self-verifying apparatus of the narrative, form a pole of external reference in the book and point outside the narrative to the actual world” (*Mythopoeic* 122). This has led to the synonymous label of the documentary novel for the non-fiction novel.

Of course the inclusion of extra-textual elements itself does not break away from the subjective nature of the narrative. There is still an author who is choosing which of these extra-textual elements to include, as well as where to place them within the text itself. As in essay writing, these quotes can simply be seen as being used to support the ongoing argument or narrative that the text is attempting to produce. As Capote admits:

I make my own comment by what I choose of the book in that sense. I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it. It is true that an author is more in control of fictional characters because he can do anything he wants with them as long as they stay credible. But in the nonfiction novel one can also manipulate: if I put

something in which I don't agree about, I can always set it in a context of qualification without having to step into the story myself to set the reader straight. (Plimpton 203-4)

So these extra-textual devices, though not in the narrative voice per-se, still conform to the overall narrative as they become part of the narrative instead of standing outside of it. What is interesting about the extra-textual elements that Capote chooses to include in *In Cold Blood* is that they do not always seem to provide clarity or even unity to the narrative. In fact at times they seem to work at cross-purposes with one another.

In researching any story as complex as a murder case, there is bound to be a number of contradictory facts and differing opinions. To construct a singular narrative the author would have to pick and choose those facts that fit in and ignore those that do not. To do so, however, is to simplify complex events into a problematic or flawed narrative. Though not necessarily wrong, a single narrative would be far from being correct. Capote is aware of this pitfall, and works to avoid this. Clear evidence can be seen in the inter-textual material that he chooses; in many ways that material can be seen as not providing a cohesion, but in fact casting doubt on the notion that the truth can ever be known. A good example of this is how the narrative constructs the Clutter family as well as how Capote details their murder.

The re-creation of the Clutter family is an element of *In Cold Blood* that can be seen as quite problematic for the nonfiction novel. Some critics, such as John Hersey, felt that Capote was dishonest when he re-created the dialogue and action that he was not there to witness. As he puts it, "Vivid as *In Cold Blood* was as a novel, it has serious flaws on the nonfiction side, arising from the fact that its action and dialogue had been reconstructed long after the events, yet were presented with all the assurance as being

exactly what had happened” (Hersey 291). How could Capote know what the Clutters were thinking, doing and saying, especially considering that by the time he arrived in Holcomb they were already three days dead. “If they read the book carefully they can see readily enough how it’s done,” Capote explains. “Each time Nancy appears in the narrative, there are witnesses to what she is saying and doing—phone calls, conversations, being overheard. [...] What is reported of her, even in the narrative form, is as accurate as many hours of questioning can make it. All of it is reconstructed from the evidence of witnesses” (Plimpton 208). The Clutters are created very much like the narrative itself—through a collage of interviews and research. It is no coincidence that the title of part one is “The Last to See Them Alive” for it reads like a patchwork of meetings with other people through which Capote stitches together a narrative of their last day.

For example, in Mr. Clutter’s last day, we follow him talking to his farm hand Alfred Stoecklein, to a conversation with a group of four hunters from Oklahoma, to driving Mrs. Ashida home from a 4H meeting, to meeting with a life insurance salesman, Mr. Johnson, and finally to Nancy’s boyfriend Bobby Rupp who was at the Clutter’s late watching television. Capote uses these meetings as a way of interpreting Mr. Clutter through the eyes of those who last saw him. It is their eyes that Capote co-opts to paint the picture we get. “The method of informing the reader,” Zavarzadeh suggests, “is similar to the way the reader as a real person in his or her own life gathers information about other people: external observations and statements made by other people, themselves or their friends” (*Mythopoeic* 122). This technique allows us to feel close to the Clutters while at the same time acknowledging that we will not be able to fully understand their characters. In the end of the first part we are left with a curious portrait

of the Clutters. Although we are allowed to know a great deal about them, there is still a distance that exists between the reader and the characters. The Clutters then become a kind of black hole in the text: we can understand them from the details around them rather than being able to study them directly. Here, Capote is using the text's different points of view and narrative strands to create a somewhat cohesive interpretation of who the Clutters were, while at the same time avoiding an authoritative version of this family. He accepts that we will not ever know really who these people were.

This technique of ambiguous description is also used with Capote's construction of Perry Smith. Even though Capote interviewed Perry and got to know him quite well, he still remains a mystery throughout the text. Even though he has his own interpretation of Perry, which at times pokes through the narrative, Capote still presents us with a complex view of this character. Capote makes it clear right from the beginning that Smith is a complicated character to say the least:

His own face enthralled him. Each angle of it introduced a different impression. It was a changeling's face, and mirror-guided experiments had taught him how to ring the changes, how to look now ominous, now impish, now soulful; a tilt of the head, a twist of the lips, and the corrupt gypsy became the gentle romantic. (*ICB* 15-16)

As the text unfolds, the vision we get is just as fragmented as his mirror image. He is a man who seemed to have compassion one minute, making sure that Mr. Clutter and Kenyon were comfortable while bound, then the next minute, brutally killing them. It is this that confused F.B.I. agent Dewey so much: "What kind of person would do that—tie up two women, the way that Bonnie and the girl were tied, and then draw up the bedcovers, *tuck* them in like sweet dreams and goodnight?" (*ICB* 103). The notion that

the murderer could be cold blooded and compassionate at the same time is one of the central paradoxes of the text. This is further emphasized by Smith's confession. He explains that he defended Nancy from being raped—or “busted”—by Hickock, protecting her, saying: “Leave her alone. Else you’ve got a buzzsaw to fight.” (243) He then sat guard over the girl while Hickock looked for the safe. The fact that Smith later shot her in the head extends the complex depiction of him. This contradiction of character is elaborated on in the letter that his father wrote years before that describes him as a somewhat wounded animal, at home in the woods but “crippled” and “whipped”. This is in contrast with Smith's sister, who, on the other hand, sees him as simply bad to the core. As she tells the detectives “I wanted to help him. I hoped I might change a few of his ideas. Now I know better. The rights of other people mean nothing to Perry. He has no respect for anyone” (181). She believes he was just born that way, broken from the beginning. His sister sees it as part of a family curse: “The eldest, the brother she loved, he had shot himself; Fern had fallen out of a window, or jumped; and Perry was committed to violence, a criminal” (183). During the trial the psychiatric report paints another view of Smith as a psychopath: “Perry Smith shows definite signs of mental illness;” also, his “emotional detachment and blandness in certain areas is other evidence of his mental abnormality. A more extensive evaluation would be necessary to make an exact psychiatric diagnosis, but present personality structure is very nearly that of a paranoid schizophrenic” (284,286). In the end, Perry Smith is created as a complicated and contradictory individual who seemingly defies a simple generic characterization. To reduce Smith to one of the versions presented in the text would be a disservice to the reader. While other *news* sources might simply portray Smith as a cold blooded killer, Capote realizes that falling back on clichéd news stereotypes fails to report the true

complex nature of the crime. Without that understanding people fail to see the true nature of humanity which is at the base of this text.

The narrative of *In Cold Blood* cannot then be seen as a single narrative; instead it becomes a sort of multi-narrative, contradicting itself at times, and proposing different ways of understanding what happened in the duration of the crime and punishment. Capote, throughout, wants to avoid any singular subjective view point and instead opts for a multi-subjective narrative. Perhaps *narratives* would be a better way to look at this text. For these different subjective points of view, under Capote's direction, reveal the complexity of this 'simple' murder case. Instead of presenting a normal journalistic/historical integration of facts to create a complete whole, Capote leaves these facts unresolved. As Phyllis Frus McCord puts it, Capote "has done the research which has made possible the historical narration, but instead of assimilating the evidence and turning it into an assertion of reality, in some cases he has left it as data to be interpreted" (McCord 70). The act of interpretation is then left up to the reader, not the author, as it would be in a journalistic text. Journalism is then exposed to be too limiting when dealing with the truth, while at the same time the notion of a unified truth is shown to be completely simplistic and false. In order for an objective narrative to be considered truthful, all the facts would have to mesh together, but as Capote demonstrates, this is not the case. However while an objective truth might be out of reach, the nonfiction novel reveals that there is another way of interpreting these events: not through the simplistic constructs of print journalism but rather through the complex form of the novel. Literature is then used to try to examine this episode in all its facets and contradictions in order to find a higher meaning in these seemingly meaningless set of murders.

Like a Novel

For Capote the intention of the project of *In Cold Blood* was to explore the serious artistic capabilities of journalism. “[O]n the whole, journalism is the most underestimated, the least explored of literary mediums” Capote once explained (Plimpton 197). While the multi-narrative element of the text was one way to go about accomplishing this goal, by itself it was not enough. For Capote the fragmentation of the narrative points of view only provided the framework for the real power of the nonfiction novel. Because, while journalism seemed unable to accurately articulate truth on the local/specific scale, Capote turned to literature to find some meaning in these murders on the artistic/universal level.

If meaning is absent from the real life facts and actions, Capote aims to infuse meaning into it. One of the ways that he accomplishes this is to turn back to the southern Gothicism that he had used early in his career: most notably his use of foreshadowing, creating an ancient, decaying landscape, and even ghosts. Not only does this allow him to add a level of meaning to the mundane objects and actions, but also to play up the theme of death and mortality. We quickly come to realize that death is everywhere in this novel. Much of the narrative has a brooding sense of disaster and foreboding, even after the murders are committed. In part one of the book, Capote repeatedly foreshadows the Clutters’ imminent deaths: “[t]hen, touching the brim of his cap, he headed for home and the day’s work, unaware that it would be his last” (*ICB* 13) and “she set out the clothes she intended to wear to church the next morning: nylons, black pumps, a red velveteen dress—her prettiest, which she herself made. It was the dress in which she was to be buried” (56). These lines really emphasize the grim, mundane moments of this family’s last day. As a literary device it is effective. Not only does it create suspense

where normally there would not be any—we already know that this family is going to get killed, but it also establishes an atmosphere of death that permeates the rest of the novel. This foreshadowing of death is not isolated to Capote's treatment the Clutters. He uses it twice in describing Mr. Clutter's hired man Paul Helm, the first time when he states "Mr. Helm (the late Mr. Helm; he died of a stroke the following March)" (40), and then later when he says "The weeks had been hard on Mr. Helm. He was 'in poor health' (poorer than he knew; he had less than four months to live)" (120). Death hangs over Smith and Hickock too. The death penalty is a sword of Damocles dangling over the last two parts of the book. At the end, Capote even goes as far to mention that Judge Tate who had tried Smith and Hickock, and the daughter of Mr. Clutter's friend, Mrs. Ashida, have both died during this period of writing.

The gothic imagery is not isolated to the characters but is also inherent in the very landscape of Holcomb itself. Capote begins the book with this description:

The Village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." [...] The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temple are visible long before a traveler reaches them. (3)

The landscape is pictured as ancient and sublime, removed from the normal world.

Capote continues this line of description as he moves to the town itself:

At one end of town stands a stark old stucco structure, the roof of which supports an electric sign—Dance—but the dancing has ceased and the advertisement has been dark for several years. Nearby is another building with an irrelevant sign, this one in flaking gold on a dirty window—

HOLCOMB BANK. The bank closed in 1933, and its former counting rooms have been converted into apartments. (3-4)

Even the people start taking on the characteristics of a ghost town in the making: “Down by the depot, the postmistress, a gaunt woman who wears a rawhide jacket and denims and cowboy boots, presides over a falling-apart post office” (4). This is a world that is still bound up in its frontier and depression era past. It’s a place that is old, isolated and coming apart.

This is also a haunted world. Capote turns memories into ghosts that haunt the living. Mrs. Clutter worries that her family will remember her “as a kind of a ghost” (30). Weeks later, after the murders, Mr. Helm looks up at Mrs. Clutter’s window “as though he expected to see her, a ghost behind the glass” (122). Bonnie even haunts the dreams of those in the town. “I don’t know how to tell you exactly,” Marie Dewey recalls,

but she shut her eyes, she began to shake her head, very slowly, and wring her hands, very slowly, and to whimper or whisper. I couldn’t understand what she was saying [...] I couldn’t comfort her. She shook her head, and wrung she hands, and then I heard what she was saying. She was saying ‘To be murdered. To be murdered. No. No. There’s nothing worse.

Nothing worse than that. Nothing. (153-4)

It’s not just Bonnie Clutter’s ghost that haunts this text. The ghosts of other family members haunt Mrs. Johnson, Perry Smith’s sister, as well. “The front door was locked, but not the door to the garden. The garden was white with sea-fog; it might have been an assembly of spirits: Mama and Jimmy and Fern. When Mrs. Johnson bolted the door, she had in mind the dead as well as the living” (187). True to the text’s gothic imagery, Mrs.

Johnson is worried about the “cursed” lineage of her family with its alcoholism, suicide, criminal behavior, and unexplained death; she wonders what is in store for her.

Capote’s Gothicism even extends into the use of the pathetic fallacy which he uses to infuse the very landscape with meaning. The seasons seem to reflect the development of the story with the murders occurring in the fall—a time of harvest and death, while the trial seems to be stuck in a perpetual winter frozen in place over a number of years with little movement; then finally ending in the execution of the Smith and Hickcock in the spring, which seems to allow people to get on with their lives again. The weather also reflects the mood of the text. It snows on the day that the murderers are brought back to Holcombe, as if it had been waiting for them. The night they are both hung seems to be taken directly out of a nineteenth century gothic novel; the scene is complete with rain and a lone howl of a far off dog. While all these events did happen and can be externally verified, Capote transforms them, giving the weather and seasons emotions of their own. Not only does the use of the pathetic fallacy help to set the tone and mood to the novel, but it also helps imply that these deaths (the Clutters, and Smith and Hickcock) have a deeper meaning, a meaning that lies just beneath the surface of the setting of the novel.

In Cold Blood in many ways reverses Capote’s earlier Jamesian aesthetic. Instead of a number of characters looking out of a building, as James describes in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, Capote situates himself outside of the house looking into it through the various windows and portholes in an attempt to piece together what is happening within:

[S]trangers, ignorant of the local disaster—were startled by what they saw as they crossed the prairies and passed through Holcomb: windows ablaze,

almost every window in almost every house, and, in the brightly lit rooms, fully clothed people, even entire families, who had sat awake the whole night wide awake, watching, listening. Of what were they frightened?
(88)

This figurative ‘looking in’ is very much part of the narrative structure of the book, as it enacts not only the novelist aesthetic but also the journalistic process. Capote uses this technique effectively by his adherence to keeping his descriptions to the surfaces of that he is describing. As Chris Anderson suggests:

“[T]he key similarities between fiction and nonfiction in Capote is his use of authorial silence. Capote’s nonfiction is like his fiction in what it does not say” (Anderson 340). In a more detailed explanation he states,

By silence I mean that throughout Capote’s narrative he remains silent about important details, avoiding explicit interpretation and commentary. He repeatedly puts himself in the position of an outside observer forced to make inferences and read meanings on the basis of external detail. (340)

Capote acknowledges this in an interview with the *Paris Review*:

In reporting one is occupied with the literalness and surfaces, with implications without comment—one can’t achieve immediate depths the way one may in fiction. However, one of the reasons I’ve wanted to do reportage was to prove that I could apply my style to the realities of journalism. But I believe my fictional method is equally detached—emotionality makes me lose writing control. (“Art of Fiction #17” 8)

Capote is able to keep this “literalness and surfaces” while at the same time he can derive a much deeper significance to these details. Capote not only describes but is able to draw

out in that description a deeper level of meaning and symbolism. As David Lodge points out, *In Cold Blood* “is written with a novelist’s eye for aesthetic possibilities of his *donnée*, for the evocative and symbolic properties of circumstantial detail, for shapeliness and ironic contrast in structure” (Lodge 9). The grain elevators, the dance sign, or the post-office, are given more significance and meaning than they would normally have. “These details are all presumably ‘true,’” Anderson suggests, “yet selected from their context they assume a symbolic, evocative value beyond their literal meaning. As in Capote’s fiction, concreteness does not mean what it says; it points beyond itself, evokes via association or metaphor something not stated” (Anderson 348). Capote is then using the facts of the story to move beyond a simple understanding of the events. He sets up a greater, more universal meaning that only becomes possible with a literary handling of the material. What *In Cold Blood* allows then is a deeper analysis of the facts not only as fact but also as symbols and metaphors. And while the interpretation of these symbols might be subjective overall they begin to outline a clear picture of what *In Cold Blood* is about.

What Meanings Mean

Much about the slaying of the Clutter family is not understood. Even Smith cannot explain why he killed Mr. Clutter. At the time he had not even realized what he had done. While we eventually come to an understanding of what happened that night, some of the more important questions are still left unanswered: how can something like this happen? Why did they do it? Were they mentally ill? Agent Dewey is disturbed by this lack of meaning, as Capote writes, “The confessions, though they answered the questions of how and why, failed to satisfy his sense of meaningful design. The crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act; the victims might have well

been killed by lightning” (245). However, while Dewey feels that he is lacking insight into the “meaningful design,” Capote, in his detached role as nonfiction novelist, manages to sketch out a design that strikes at the very heart of contemporary America.

Not long into *In Cold Blood*, we begin to see what Capote is attempting to say with this text. As we meet the Clutter family we see that they are the manifestation of what can best be described as the American Dream, or at least a shining symbol of the successful American. Mr. Clutter is decent, hard working, and religious man. He’s university educated and uses the latest in scientific and technological knowledge to maintain his successful farm. He was appointed by President Eisenhower to the Farm Credit Board. Mrs. Clutter, although ill, was once the model of motherly love and fights hard, even through her limited capacity, to remain so. Their youngest daughter, Nancy, is the town darling who is dating the captain of the football team. In her spare time she teaches younger girls how to bake pies. The son Kenyon is bright and has a natural aptitude for making things and seems destined to be an engineer or a scientist. As a unit they seem to embody what America values: domesticity, religion, progress, hard work, etc., in every way. They might not have been the richest family in their area, but they were the most respected—in many ways they were the heart or soul of Holcomb. In fact the town can barely keep itself together after they are killed, and a number of the residents move away for good.

This metaphor also extends to the flipside of the American dream which find itself embodied in Hickock and Smith. As Zavarzadeh points out “They are in a real sense the incarnation of the darker side of the Middle American psyche, the side inhibited exiled from the consciousness which perceives and reacts to everyday reality” (*Mythopoeic* 120). Both Hickock and Smith are outsiders, who have tried to adjust into

society but find it impossible for one reason or another. Unlike the stable and ordered Clutters, the duo are drifters and chaotic. As York describes “Mr. Clutter is an almost monolithic avatar of Christian Republican virtue; Perry is a shifting mixture of helplessness and viciousness” (York 54). Capote noted that many of his readers “think of the book as a reflection on American life—this collision between the desperate, ruthless, wandering savage part of American life, and the other, which is insular and safe, more or less” (Plimpton 211). This seems to highlight the danger that exists within the very fabric of American society: that there is a class of people—outsiders—who by their very existence pose a threat to everything that is good in America.

This way of looking at the book seems to suggest that *In Cold Blood* is attempting to interpret these killings as the inevitable clash between good and evil elements within American society. As Phyllis Ford McCord argues, *In Cold Blood* “reinforces the dominant ideology of classes: that there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ and when representatives from this underclass of poor drifters, hustlers, and convicts invade the middle-class world symbolized by the Clutters, of all the people in the world ‘the least likely to be murdered’ it must be regarded as an absurdity, a phenomenon to be mastered by incorporating it in an eminently realistic narrative” (McCord 72). For McCord, *In Cold Blood* is attempting to reinforce the “out of date” notion that “assumes a world of cause and effect, of certitude, reason, in short common sense” (72). While I agree that this is a clash between two different segments of American society, I think it would be simplistic to see it as ‘good’ America versus ‘bad’ America. While this argument is valid on a number of levels, there has always been an element to the Clutters-as-American-dream hypothesis that does not quite fit. The characterization of Mrs. Clutter presents a problem for this

extended metaphor, and, through further study, points to something more dark being developed in this text.

As Capote describes her, Mrs. Clutter is not the stereotypical 1950's house wife that cooks and cleans with cheery efficiency; rather she is suffering from mental illness, is depressed and suffers from spells that keep her from participating in the lives of her family. She has even been institutionalized a number of times. While she does not fit in with the narrative that the rest of the family seems to follow, she by no means invalidates the interpretation of the American Dream. Rather, I believe that Mrs. Clutter is the most outward example of the problem that exists with this America narrative. As Zavarzadeh says "The happiness of the Clutters, as it turns out is more a veneer than a deep, richly rooted, inner peace" (118-9). Start scratching beneath the surface and these characters begin to have a darker side. Zavarzadeh suggests that Mr. Clutter, while publicly a family man, is "denied the private sharing of any nourishing emotional intimacy" (119). His affection is directed to his work, as his wife says "my Husband cares more for those trees than he does for his children" (*ICB* 13). There is also speculation that he might have been involved with another woman, though there is never any proof of it. But as Zavarzadeh posits Mr. Clutter's "affection for his family is, one suspects, more a matter of public respect than felt personal attachment" (119). A little harsh perhaps, but this can explain his desire for Nancy to stop seeing her boyfriend Bobby Rupp. Even though he likes the boy and Nancy seems to be in love with him, Bobby Rupp is a Catholic while the Clutters are Methodist. The marriage between the two would be a religious conflict that might threaten Mr. Clutter's high status within his church.

While the American dream may not be all that it is supposed to be, the 'darker' side of it is not as evil as some might want to portray it to be. Hickock and Smith are

actually quite complex characters: violent and unpredictable on the one hand, while on the other, sensitive and intelligent. They are misfits though, outsiders to the American narrative. They have tried to fit in, tried quite hard, but for some reason or another they cannot enter or will not be allowed in. As Capote points out that:

Perry wasn't an evil person. If he'd had any chance in life, things would have been different. But every illusion he'd ever had, well, they evaporated, so that on that night he was so full of self-hatred and self-pity that I think he would have killed *somebody*—perhaps not that night, or the next, or the next. You can't go through life without ever getting anything you wanted, ever. (Plimpton 211)

This sentiment is echoed by Perry himself while in jail: “it wasn't because of anything the Clutters did. They never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it's just the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it” (290). While this quote has been used to justify the two Americas hypothesis, I feel that it hints at something larger, especially with the darker view of the Clutter family.

In the end I feel that Capote is not pointing out the light and dark side of American life and their inevitable collision, but rather pointing out the fundamental flaw within the American narrative itself. The Clutters are trapped by this narrative, forced to live as others see them, in the ways that they can get approval from society at large. This narrative is hurting them, as the figure of Mrs. Clutter demonstrates, for though it allows for success, it does not allow for happiness. Hickock and Smith are just as much caught by this narrative as the Clutters are. “The same cultural values which endow the Clutters with wealth and public security,” Zavarzadeh points out, “prevent the human development of the abilities of Perry and Richard, and deny them any personal

fulfillment” (120). It is then the American narrative that is flawed, as it confines both those within it and those outside it. What is significant is not the fact that this narrative sets up the conflict between the two, but that those within the narrative and those without are both doomed in one way or another: whether it is Mrs. Clutter’s paralyzing anxiety or Perry Smith’s ticking fuse. Just as the singular narrative of journalism is seen as disrupting a true understanding of the facts, the singular narrative path of the American dream is harmful to the very citizens who attempt to follow it.

What this reading suggests is that *In Cold Blood* is far more complex than simple reportage, even far beyond any work of New Journalism in that era. It allows Capote to take the basic elements of the story and not only shatter the basic assumptions of journalism but also to explore the possible meaning of this event on a more universal scale. Through the combination of journalism and the novel Capote introduced fiction techniques into the realm of reporting, then allowed journalism to explore the more universal meanings. In an age that was struggling with reality itself, Capote is capable of recognizing the subjectivity of reality while at the same time striving for a universal (albeit a subjective) understanding.

This artistic power of *In Cold Blood* can be seen in the very fact that it has been constantly in print since its publication in 1965. It has survived the fish wrapping fate of so many journalistic works not by connecting itself to the mundane world, but by striking out beyond the everyday to make events speak to generations of readers that were not even born during that time. The meaning that Capote is able to infuse is a true testament to the birth of the nonfiction novel.

Chapter 3: *The Armies of the Night*: How Mailer Found a Voice in Action and saved the American Novel

Once *In Cold Blood* had exploded on the literary scene, neither the nonfiction novel nor its newsier cousin New Journalism were any longer relegated to small and independent publications. Larger, more traditional publications began to see not only the new energy in these styles of writing but also the popular interest in reading it. But where New Journalism rapidly began to find new voices with the likes of Michael Herr and John Sack to name only two, the non-fiction novel failed to see another of its kind for nearly three years following *In Cold Blood*'s first publication. Although book-length texts like Tom Wolfe's *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1965) and Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels* (1966) were being published and getting wide recognition, they were written with the aim of reporting in the general sense rather with the novelistic aspirations of the non-fiction novel. It would seem that while critics and writers were busy debating the virtues of the non-fiction novel, either disputing Capote's claim to have invented it or inserting it into a larger historical context, no one was attempting to continue the tradition by writing the next non-fiction novel. As a genre, Capote's *In Cold Blood* remained in a class by itself. If left alone, or worse, emulated, Capote's new genre would have failed and it would have become an exception or footnote in literary history.

It was the iconoclastic Norman Mailer who became the next author to recognize the value and power of the nonfiction novel in both its literary dimensions and political relevance. The nonfiction novel allowed Mailer to acknowledge the debate occurring within contemporary literature and journalism without having to abandon either form. Moreover the nonfiction novel let Mailer simultaneously exploit the strengths of these

differing genres while circumventing their defects. Using journalism allowed him to keep his work rooted in the real world while using literature allowed him to transcend the simplistic objective/subjective dichotomy of news reporting. In the end, Mailer would find in the nonfiction novel a way to keep himself connected to the rapid changes of the sixties that also kept literature relevant in this emerging post-modern age.

Armies of the Night (1968) is very different from *In Cold Blood*. Written in only a couple of months rather than the five years it took Capote, *Armies of the Night* lacks both the subtlety and the narrative distance of *In Cold Blood*. Mailer's work is written in an overtly self-conscious manner as he assumes the roles of both the author and the central character. Furthermore, these books are quite different in technique and style: *In Cold Blood* models itself on the traditional realist novel with four chapters that each propel the story forward in a dramatic and chronological fashion; *Armies of the Night*, on the other hand, reads like some of the more experimental fiction being written in the later Sixties, even sharing the fabulists' sentiments about the true nature of reality and its inability to be represented accurately.

For all their differences, however, *Armies of the Night* is the successor to *In Cold Blood* as the next great non-fiction novel, because instead of abandoning reality, Mailer, like Capote before him, decides he is far more interested in extending the literary range that this form of realist/fabulist writing can achieve. In *Armies of the Night*, a much more urgent tone emerges regarding the detachment of writing from the everyday. For Mailer, this detachment is directly correlated with the diminishing relevance of authors and writers in contemporary America. Both *Armies of the Night* and *In Cold Blood* attempt to make reality relevant and meaningful in an increasingly post-modern world.

As mentioned earlier, Capote was both pleased and slightly annoyed with *Armies of the Night*. He felt that it was a strong, well written book and Mailer's best since *Advertisements For Myself* in 1959. However, Capote still felt the sting of Mailer's initial comments regarding the non-fiction novel as a failure of the imagination even though he then went on himself to write a number of successful non-fiction novels. As Capote puts it in his preface to *Music for Chameleons*, Mailer "has made a lot money and has won a lot of prizes writing nonfiction novels... although he has always been careful never to describe them as 'nonfiction novels.' No matter; he is a good writer and a fine fellow and I'm grateful to have been of some small service to him" (xv-xiv). Other critics were also taken aback by what they saw as a new direction in Mailer's career, but in looking at his development as a writer we can see that this combination of journalism and fiction was not in fact new at all. Just as Capote had extended his development as a writer to produce the nonfiction novel so too had Mailer's later work arisen out of his earlier efforts. Although shaped by similar forces that influenced Capote, Mailer was far more attuned to the social and political aspects of writing and therefore was able to create a new sphere of influence for the nonfiction novel in the process.

Burning Bright & Fading Away

Norman Mailer is a writer who defies categorization. Not only is he a novelist, a journalist, a critic, and essayist, but he is also a director, a screenwriter, an actor and a politician. At times he is the grand intellectual, at other times he is the fool. In recent years he has taken on the role of elder statesman of American letters, yet he still retains much of the *enfant terrible* attitude that made him famous. Hemingway-like, he has adopted a tough-guy, literary boxer swagger in his public life, while remaining sensitive enough to be completely aware of the folly of taking himself too seriously.

His writing career began with a bang. In his freshmen novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Mailer drew upon his wartime service in the Pacific in creating a novel that spoke right to the angst of the post-war era. At the age of twenty-five, many critics saw Mailer was, according to many critics, destined to be one of his generation's greatest voices. The book lasted eleven consecutive weeks on the bestseller list and received excellent critical reviews, but success became more bane than boon. In the decade that followed, Mailer moved back to his native New York and wrote two more novels, *Barbary Shore* and *The Deer Park*, and though both were well-written they did not live up to the standard set by *The Naked and the Dead*. Whether it was his disappointment in the reviews or something else, after publishing three novels in eight years, he would not write another one for eleven years.

Although Mailer turned away from the novel, he did not give up writing. He adapted *The Deer Park* for the stage, tried his hand at screenwriting, and wrote poetry and short stories. More than anything, Mailer took to writing for various journals and magazines. He co-founded the *Village Voice* and served on the editorial board of *Dissent*. Through his non-fiction writing, Mailer showed not only his intelligent and critical side, but also the brash, combative bravado that would help form his public persona. This ego, this persona, became as much a product as any of Mailer's works, and, in fact, it soon became impossible to separate his ego from his work. Nonetheless these earlier essays proved to be difficult for Mailer, as he would write later, ". . . whenever I sat down to do an article, I seemed to thicken in the throat as I worked. My sentences and rhetoric felt shaped by the bad political prose of our years" (Merrill 3). These articles were rough in style and, even after three novels, indicated a writer still in search of his voice. This 'thickening in the throat' soon cleared with Mailer's 1957 essay

“The White Negro,” where he investigates the hipster using a scholarly approach. Critic Robert Merrill feels that this essay was a major breakthrough for Mailer:

In one sense an almost scholarly discussion of the Hipster, this piece succeeds where Mailer's other early essays do not because it goes beyond the analysis of a cultural or political situation to create what Mailer has called a sociological "fiction." Mailer's "fiction"—the Hipster as revolutionary elitist—is not, of course, a wholly imaginative creation.

(Merrill 4)

However “The White Negro” is not designed to identify a new cultural trend. Rather, in it, Mailer carves out a philosophic domain for the hipster (and himself) as an “American existentialist.” This existentialism differs from the French form, as Merrill points out, “because it is based on ‘a mysticism of the flesh’ rather than ‘the rationality of French existentialism’” (Merrill 5). Moreover, American existential philosophy does not deny the existence of meaning as does its European counterpart. As Mailer points out in an interview in the *Washington Post*, “I’m an existentialist. Not that I read Sartre and said my God, he’s right. I have enormous admiration for Sartre, but his position is that life is absurdity and we pretend it has meaning. For me life is meaningful but everything in the scheme of things will drive us to seeing things as absurd” (*Conversations With Norman Mailer* 192). “The White Negro” is then an important benchmark in Mailer’s literary career. In it his writing becomes invigorated and re-energized and Mailer finally—after over a decade—finds his voice, as well as the philosophical and aesthetic vision that will shape his writing for the next decade. And while many of his contemporaries, such as Pynchon and Barths, were giving up on representing reality and meaning in their work,

we can see Mailer constantly attempting new ways to depict this absurd world and the meaning that lies just beneath its surface.

At the end of the fifties Mailer published *Advertisements for Myself*, a kind of “best of” collection of his work from the past strung together with his comments on his writing and personal analysis of that work. Far from being a simple anthology, however *Advertisements for Myself* is an insightful and intimate reflection on his writing career, in which he admits the difficulty of following the success of his first book as well as the constraints that have generated the public perception of him. *Advertisements for Myself* can also be seen as Mailer’s attempt to take control of his public persona. As the title indicates, the piece really is an advertisement. As Capote points out, *Advertisements for Myself*, “was more truthful and honest and more what’s best about him” (Goble 115). This honesty comes out of the fact that, as Robert Lucid points out, “Mailer enunciates, more clearly and consciously than had any of the public writers in the tradition before him what the real relationship is between the public writer and his audience” (Lucid 6). Over the next decade, articulating this relationship between writer and reader remained important in his writing.

The early Sixties saw Mailer delving more deeply into politics and political journalism. In many ways, Mailer allowed himself to be swept away by the turbulent political winds in order to pursue his new interest between the area of fact and fiction. These themes are quite apparent in his writings on the rise and tragic end of John F. Kennedy. Becoming caught up in the excitement surround JFK, Mailer sets about to dramatize the mysterious allure of Kennedy's personality by using a variety of novelistic

techniques in his 1960 essay "Superman Comes to the Supermarket."¹¹ Over the three years that Kennedy served, Mailer wrote extensively on him and eventually compiled this writing into the book *The Presidential Papers*. Mailer was so taken by this new spirit in American politics that he even tried his hand at politics, running for mayor of New York (and losing) as an independent candidate. He also wrote quite a bit about Lyndon Johnson, but Mailer did not have the same respect for the Vice-President-turned-President as he had for Kennedy. Mailer saw Kennedy's vision of America tainted by Johnson. With the escalation of the war in Vietnam as well as his domestic policies, Mailer felt that Johnson was beginning to undermine the very fabric of America itself.

However artistically and politically fulfilling these articles were for Mailer, they did not provide the revenue he required. By 1964 Mailer's third marriage was in shambles and he was heavily in debt, so he agreed to write a serialized novel that would appear monthly in *Esquire* magazine. Mailer approached this project with almost a Dickensian glee and the work was later serialized as the novel *An American Dream*. Unlike a lot of his writing up to this point, this was to be a novel of suspense rather than ideas. Mailer declared that "I wanted an intellectual for a hero who was engaged in 32 hours of continuous action and didn't have time to cerebrare" (*Conversations* 109). This action without the time to "cerebrate" is continuous with his hipster philosophy, the physical (i.e. action) is more important to him than thought or perhaps action is a form of thought. However, critics only noticed how similar the main character, Rojack, and Mailer were. Although Mailer has said that "all similarities granted, Rojack is still considerably different from me—he's more elegant, more witty, more heroic, his physical

¹¹ Mailer would later claim that he helped forge the image of Kennedy in the minds of Americans and in his own way, helped to get Kennedy elected.

strength is considerable, and at the same time he's more corrupt than me" (102), the autobiographical elements, such as Mailer's stabbing of his second wife, seeped into the narrative and made it more difficult to delineate the distance between autobiography and fiction that Mailer sees so clearly. However, placing himself in his work was not a new technique for Mailer: in the mid-sixties it became very much part of his writer's toolbox. Rhetorically egotistical, it fit perfectly into his persona, and in some ways separated the 'public Mailer' (the persona that everyone knew) from the 'real Mailer' (the writer). As one journalist once remarked "Norman Mailer is a writer. This fact is too often overlooked" (108). The confusion between the real Mailer and the public Mailer is understandable as he has helped to blur that line in much of previous work. Nevertheless, this confusion becomes a blind spot for many critics as they become unable to separate the man from the character.

Mailer's next novel was also written out of financial need. However, whereas *An American Dream* was meant to be a novel devoid of ideas, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* is a novel very much about ideas. Basically a novel about a bear hunt in Alaska, Mailer mentions Vietnam and the war only once, towards the end of the novel. Mailer's answer to the question poised in the title cannot be found by means of a literal reading of the text, instead he has created a massive allegory in which he explores the nature of violence and its place in the American psyche. Mailer posits that technology causes increasing physical, emotional, and mental dislocation with the world around us. This dislocation has caused the violence inherent in American society to run rampant. As Mailer puts it:

I'm afraid it is saying that America enters the nightmare of its destiny like a demented giant in a half-cracked canoe, bleeding from wounds top to bottom, bellowing in bewilderment, drowning with radio transmitters on

the hip and radar in his ear. He has a fearful disease, this giant. [...] Greed. Vanity. [...] The Faustian necessity to mass all knowledge, to enslave nature. (*Conversations* 107)

It is important to consider *Why We Are in Vietnam?* in terms of the emergence of the nonfiction novel because we see in it, for the first time, Mailer coming to terms with the crisis in the novel and the dislocation of literature from the real world. Fundamentally the text/allegory operates to dislocate the reader from the 'reality' of the story and to make them look for an underlying meaning or message with the text itself. Mailer is not attempting to explain the historical and political reasons behind the war but rather what it is in the national character that requires such violence in the first place. It is ironic that Mailer uses the dislocation of the allegory to bring the reader closer to what he sees as the reality behind the war in Vietnam. However, many readers did not quite understand what a bear hunt had to do with Vietnam and Mailer found himself having to explain the text rather than argue the War. Nevertheless, Mailer was never one for just talk. Talk was cheap in the hyper-political times of the Sixties; action meant relevance and only a couple of months after the publication of *Why Are We in Vietnam?* Mailer got his chance to be relevant once again.

In September of 1967, Mailer received a call to participate in a march on the Pentagon that was to take place later that October. The events of that weekend would later be told in two articles for *Harper's*, which were then compiled into the book *The Armies of the Night*. This book would become a focal point for all of Mailer's talents: his insights as a journalist, his philosophy and intellect, his skills as a novelist, and the power of his ego. *Armies of the Night* seems to have come about at the right time in history and in Mailer's career. The late Sixties saw an end to the idealism that had started with JFK's

election in 1960. That youthful energy had burnt itself out, and any hope died with the firing of two assassin's bullets and one police riot or as Jules Witcover says, by 1968 "both the vision and the dream were truly shattered, and the nation detoured onto a much more demoralizing and ultimately destructive course" (Witcover xii). By 1969, the Movement, made up of anti-war activists, members of the New and Old Left, civil rights activists, and a myriad of fledgling social and political groups, split apart and became many specific movements. It is also at this point that there is a major shift (or more accurately splintering) in the intellectual discourse of the time as the grand narratives that held the Movement together began to erode under political and philosophical pressure. Ironically, these shifts can be seen as a result of the primary motivator of the Movement itself: its anti-authoritarianism. As Fredric Jameson suggests, "the attempt to open up a semi-autonomy of the levels on one hand while holding them together in the ultimate unity of some 'structural totality'... tends under its own momentum, in the centrifugal force of the critique of totality it had elaborated, to self-destruct (Jameson 192). It was logical that this impetus would eventually cause the Movement to turn on itself and implode. However, at the time *Armies of the Night* was written, the fissures that ran so deep throughout the Movement still remained hidden beneath the surface. Observing these fissures, as well as the misleading and inaccurate accounts of the events in the mainstream press, motivated Mailer to provide an accurate account of what happened that weekend. 'Here's what really happened' he starts to say, but then rethinks this proposition as his own words begin to ring with false objectivity. In his attempt to solve this problem, Mailer starts to realize that problems with the journalistic coverage are the same that have doomed both literature and future of the Movement. Mailer's search for truth leads him to combine journalism and literature in order to create a new meta-

subjectivity which opens the way for a more artistic meaning for the nonfiction novel to emerge.

The Myth of Objectivity and Other Problems with Reporters

By 1967, Mailer began to see that reporting was not as neutral as the old guard claimed it was. One of the things Mailer shows in *Armies of the Night* is that traditional reporting rarely gets at the truth of a situation such as the march on the Pentagon. As critic Kathy Smith points out, “Mailer’s strategy [. . .] is to question the authority of the newspaper text and to discover the limits of the reporter’s narrative practices” (Smith 179). For Mailer, these limits exist because reporters do not simply list facts, but retell stories and thereby insert, consciously or not, their own bias and subjective view into their reports. As Mailer explains, “Journalistic information available from both sides is so incoherent, inaccurate, contradictory, malicious, even based on error that no accurate history is conceivable” (*Armies* 255). Journalistic objectivity, then, is simply a myth that Mailer goes to great lengths to undermine.

Armies of the Night opens with Mailer quoting from a *New York Times* article about him before and during the March on the Pentagon. The article, dated October 27th, 1967 begins by saying:

Washington’s scruffy Ambassador Theatre . . . was the scene of an unscheduled scatological solo last week in support of the peace demonstrations. Its anti-star was author Norman Mailer, who proved less prepared to explain *Why Are We In Vietnam?* than his current novel bearing that title. (3)

It then goes on to describe how Mailer was drunk, violent and incoherent. The article ends by saying:

By the time the action shifted to the Pentagon, Mailer was perky enough to get himself arrested by two Marshals. “I transgressed a police line,” he explained with some pride on the way to the lockup, where the toilet facilities are scarce and the coffee mugs low-octane. (4)

Mailer’s argument is not that the reporter got the facts wrong; in fact he goes on to show how everything the reporter said was factually true. Mailer is more concerned with how the article presents its facts. Phrases such as “scruffy Ambassador Theatre”, “anti-star” and “was perky enough” are not neutral or objective. They suggest a particular, predetermined, view of Mailer as well as of the event. This value-laden vocabulary works to dismiss any credibility that Mailer and this event may have had. The reporter’s preconceived attitude stands in the way of any form of balanced coverage.

Furthermore, this article relies on the audience’s knowledge of Mailer’s reputation. Lines like “[m]umbling and spewing obscenities as he staggered about the stage—which he had commandeered by threatening to beat up the previous M.C.” (3) play on the image of Mailer as a foul-mouthed jerk who is always ready for a fight. Now this reputation was not entirely unjustified and Mailer himself had helped create this image of himself over the years, but that should be beside the point. Mailer’s reputation is a fiction, a construct and is not true. As Mailer says a few pages later:

[Mailer] had in fact learned to live in the sarcophagus of his image—at night, in his sleep, he might dart out, and paint improvements on the sarcophagus. During the day, while he was helpless, newspapermen and other assorted bravos of the media and literary world would carve ugly pictures on the living tomb of his legend. (5)

Mailer's image is a part of himself that he worked hard at, but he worked hard to keep it somewhat ephemeral. As Harold Bloom suggests in his 1987 essay, "[Mailer was] the author of 'Norman Mailer,' a lengthy, discontinuous, and perhaps canonical fiction" (2). Mailer's persona, created out of a swirl of half-truths and public performance, is just as much of a fictional creation as any of his novels. By then reporting on his image, and not Mailer himself, the journalist is not giving a truly objective view of Mailer. If it was only a report on Mailer, then the report might have been excusable. However the reporter does not only slander Mailer, but also, by extension, the event that he, as well as thousands of others, have gathered to attend. This type of reporting is worse than anything that New Journalism can be accused of. For, unlike New Journalism, it hides beneath the mantle of journalistic objectivity, while being subjective. New Journalism never claimed to be objective. Mailer goes on for the next few chapters to show the events leading up to the Ambassador Theatre and not only why he did the things he did, but also the importance of the event itself.

Throughout Book One, "History as the Novel: The Steps of the Pentagon," Mailer details several other events that were incorrectly reported by the journalists: there is the misquote when he was getting arrested, and a scene in prison when the protestors, many of whom were badly beaten in the course of being arrested, read in the paper that the police were the helpless victims. In Book Two "Novel as History: The Battle of the Pentagon," Mailer explicitly points out the fundamental flaws in contemporary reporting. Here he switches from his role as Novelist, to that of Historian in order to take a closer, more detached look at the events of that weekend. However, the closer the Historian looks at the coverage, the more he begins to realize that an accurate and objective version of the events would be impossible.

Mailer's *Historian* is an ideal journalist. Whereas the journalist is caught up in the moment of the event, the *Historian* has the opportunity and the time to go through all the reports, the eyewitness accounts and the media coverage, in order to piece together an account as close as possible to the truth. From this vantage point, Mailer is able to see wide bias in the reporting which usually coincides with the politics of journalism. He begins to illustrate this ingrained bias by examining some of the basic units of reportage and their wide discrepancies. One of the most crucial, and therefore most hotly contested, facts of any demonstration is its attendance numbers. The main purpose of any protest is to get as many bodies out in the streets as possible, to show how much support a given cause has. At the beginning of Book Two chapter 2, Mailer recounts a case that shows the politics behind the reported number. In April of 1967 there were two protests outside of the UN building in New York, one against the war in Vietnam, the other in support of that same war. At the time different media outlets claimed different sizes for both rallies: those media that were against the war said that the anti-war protest was bigger and the pro-war outlets claimed theirs was bigger. A similar problem arose with the march on the Pentagon six months later. Mailer points out that both the government and the march organizers had something to gain by playing the numbers game. If several hundred thousand people show up then the organizers can claim that their protest was a success, whereas if the numbers are low, the government could dismiss the march as an act of a vocal minority (Nixon would use similar rhetoric in '68 with his phrase 'the silent majority'). Not being able to trust either side, Mailer comes up with a handy rule of thumb: "the police estimates multiplied by four might be as close to the real number as the Left Wing estimate divided by two and a half. Thus a real crowd of 200,000 people would be described as 50,000 by the police and a half million by the sponsors" (245).

Mailer, if somewhat cynically, demonstrates how untrustworthy both sides of the media are because both sides use facts that are politically tainted. As with the value-laden language used by many reporters, numbers mean much more than simple enumeration and are therefore more subjective than reporters on either side are willing to admit.

Later in Book Two, Mailer again points out some lapses in objective reporting. Mailer brings up one controversial article that had angered many protestors who had been arrested in the march on the Pentagon. The Historian quotes journalist Jimmy Breslin's description of the stoic MPs being beaten by almost feral protestors:

A scraggly bearded guy in a blue denim jacket shirked. He ran up with a flag holder and swatted a soldier in the back.

Whatever it was that this peace march had started out to be, it now became an exercise in clawing at soldiers. And it lasted into the darkness.

(261-62)

However, Mailer is quick to compare Breslin's claim with another report from the *National Guardian*. "It is not known for its lack of bias," Mailer warns of even this article, "and the account here is obviously partisan, but its virtues are to be brief and vivid" (261). The quote from the *Guardian* then details how the MPs beat on the peaceful protestors, directly contradicting the report of MPs' peacefulness of the first article. In juxtaposing these two articles, Mailer allows us to see that even the basic facts of a situation end up the victim of un-objective reporting. Although such subjective/inflammatory reporting is inexcusable, Mailer is quite aware that this problem is unavoidable when a contentious event of this type is reported, and distortion is not necessarily deliberate in the writer. This is made clear back in Book One as Mailer is describing the chaos at the Pentagon:

Abruptly—no warning—the men at the base of the stairs, the very troops who had carried the N.L.F. flag, were running toward the rear in a panic. Mailer had then that superimposition of vision which makes description of combat so contradictory when one compares eyewitness reports—he did not literally see any uniformed soldiers or marshals chasing this civilian army down the embankment, there was nothing but demonstrators flying down towards them now, panic on their faces, but Mailer's imagination so clearly conceived MPs chasing them with bayonets that for an instant he did literally see fixed bayonets and know in some part of himself he didn't, like two transparent images almost superimposed. Then he saw nothing but the look of terror on the faces coming towards him and he turned to run in order not to be run down by them, conceiving for one instant MPs squirting Mace in everybody's eyes. Then panic was on him too. (*Armies* 127-8)

Mailer emphasizes that the misrepresentation of facts here is not deliberate, but in fact a natural result of reporting events such as this. This assertion is a far more of a blow to journalism than simply bad or biased reporting, for Mailer is suggesting that the mind of the eyewitness seeks to impose meaning on something even though meaning might not be implicit at that moment. The eyewitness is then quick to come to an understanding of what is happening. Normally this quick analysis would not be a problem, unless such mental fabrication is recorded as fact. Moreover, if this quick subjective analysis is innate in reporting, then objectivity cannot simply be obtained through new or improved journalistic practices. There is something in the core of the human mind that makes it almost impossible to guarantee the authenticity of reporting of such chaotic (and

political) events. And unlike his attempt to calculate the number of protesters there is no simple way to formulate a math equation to reach an area of consensus. In the end Mailer simply gives up trying, saying, "It may be obvious by now that a history of the March on the Pentagon which is not unfair will never be written, any more than a history which could prove dependable in detail" (262).

Now it may seem that Mailer, with time and intent, has reached an objective equilibrium within his Historian role that the reporters are unable to achieve. The description of the events detailed in this section seems to be clear and balanced, with Mailer taking a close look at both sides of the March. Although Mailer gets quite close to creating an objective, non-partial view of the whole event (from its inception to its end), he realizes that history (and reporting) cannot get at the truth of what happened at Pentagon. In fact what we see here is very much like *In Cold Blood*'s multi-narrative. Here, Mailer, as Capote before him, realizes that what actually happened lies as much in the gaps between of the different versions as it does in the similarities. Instead of ignoring the cracks in the foundations of reality, Mailer decides to examine them in more detail. For Mailer, the breaking apart of objectivity has some major ramifications, not only for the Movement as a whole but also for his relevance as a writer in particular.

The Crooked Tower

After dismissing objectivity as a myth, Mailer finds himself in a quandary over how to recount the events of the weekend of October 21st. He could simply give his version of the events as he saw them, but his portrayal could easily be dismissed as yet another subjective point of view. Moreover, Mailer's ego would not be satisfied by simply presenting another point of view. Instead, he dives right into his subjectivity and pushes it as far as it can go. By being both author and character within the text Mailer

becomes meta-subjective, in that he draws readers' attention to his own subjectivity. Just as the text makes us question how Mailer is presenting himself to the reader, we are also made hyper-aware that Mailer's thoughts and actions are overtly subjective representations of what actually occurred. This self-aware style allows Mailer to supply his readers with the tools to challenge the text and form their own understanding by entering a dialogue with readers in which he encourages them to see his own value-laden language. 'Reader beware!' he states, as he plays with perception in the book.

Mailer's technique of writing about himself in the third person was, by this point, a trademark of his literary style and, for many critics, a manifestation of his legendary ego. Indeed, who else but Mailer would have the guts to do such a thing? In *Armies of the Night*, however, this technique becomes a fusion of form and theme, embodying the meta-subjectivity that Mailer sought. In writing about himself in the third person, Mailer creates two versions of himself: Mailer the character, and Mailer the author (a.k.a. the Novelist and Historian.) In essays such as "In the Red Light" the Mailer character is his stylistic way of providing a different perspective of the Republican convention in 1965. In *Armies of the Night*, however, Mailer creates himself as a full-fledged literary character and gives the fictional 'Mailer' a full breadth of emotions as well as a complexity that makes him more than just a literary tool. Through this character we are given insights into the many moods of Mailer, how he felt while he was drunk, how he felt being hung over, his feelings at seeing the young men turn in their draft cards, or what it was like to be in jail.

The author that narrates this piece is also a literary creation much in line with Michel Foucault's notion of author function. "It would be just as wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the factious speaker; the author function

is carried out and operates in scission itself; in the division and this distance” (Author 112). For in this section the narrator is known simply as the Novelist or Historian, and Mailer never refers to the character as ‘I’. According to the conceit, a nameless Novelist—a version of Mailer—is writing about a character named Norman Mailer and his misadventures during the March on the Pentagon in 1967. This Narrator is not completely neutral either and is allowed his own asides and tirades.

This meta-subjective view takes over as Mailer starts demonstrating what he actually is doing with his subjective point of view. At the beginning of Book Two, Mailer uses the metaphor of building a tower in describing the creation of this book, which purpose is to see “our own horizon,” or, in other words, to understand history. “Of course, the tower is crooked,” Mailer explains, “and the telescopes warped, but the instruments of all science—history so much as physics—are always constructed in small or large error” (219). Mailer cannot escape the fact that he is unable to give an accurate report of what happened at the Pentagon so what he does is equip the reader with the sensitivity to facts. In a text, whether it is a novel or a history, whether it is written in the first or third person, the writer has a way of slipping away from the forefront and seems to disappear. This usually allows the reader to concentrate on the content of the text, rather than who wrote it. However Mailer, in contrast, wants the reader to be engaged in the text, to know at all times who is writing, and to be wary of what is being said and how.

One of the ways that Mailer creates this wariness is through clarification of what seems like a straightforward statement. Throughout the text Mailer states and then clarifies or contradicts information as a device to make the reader aware that words and brief statements of fact are not always to be trusted. On a grand scale the whole novel is

a version of this same technique: as Mailer initially uses the *Times* article as a base point then sets out to show how, while the reporter was not incorrect, the actual truth of what happened that weekend is much more intricate and complex. This device is also used in a number of smaller, localized ways such as the description of the events at the Liberal Party. Before heading to Ambassador Theatre, Mailer and the other Notables go to a party at the home of, as Mailer puts it, “an attractive liberal couple” (13). After talking to some acquaintances Mailer decides to get another drink, which is described thus:

Next, Mailer ran into Paul Goodman at the bar—a short sentence that contains two errors and a misrepresentation. This assumes that Goodman was drinking alcohol but he was not; by report, Goodman never took a drink. The bar, so-called, was a table with a white tablecloth, set up near the archway between the dining room and the living room where most of the party was being enacted [. . .] so did not qualify as a bar, just a poor table with a cloth to support Mailer’s irritated eye. Finally he did not run into Goodman. Goodman and Mailer had no particular love for one another [. . .]. In fact, they hardly knew each other. (22-3)

As you can see here, Mailer gives a brief and seemingly harmless statement and then clarifies it, showing that such a statement is not in fact harmless. It is not a bar but simply a table with alcohol upon it. He did not run into someone he knows, but simply stands next to a minor acquaintance. Mailer sets up the scene in generalities then takes it apart to show how laziness in language can pervert understanding. For, if what Mailer is trying to get here, is some sort of truth (even if it is a subjective or personal truth) then this little statement cannot be let go. For Mailer it is this type of general, unspecific writing that clogs up newspapers and magazines, that instead of revealing the truth hides

it in murky language. Mailer's technique of stating and then clarifying informs the reader to read carefully and not to take such statements as fact.

Mailer draws attention to another statement of fact, the incident right after Mailer decides to get arrested. Without waiting for Lowell or Macdonald, Mailer takes off into the lines of MPs. He is a bit feisty, and eventually the MPs arrest him. While he is being led away, a reporter (conceivably the *Times* reporter quoted at the beginning of the novel) pops up and asks "why are you being arrested Mr. Mailer?" To which Mailer then replies, "I was arrested for transgressing a police line" (137). This statement is not entirely correct (as the reader should see) and Mailer, again, goes to explain:

Of course, he did not know that one of the first two reports to go out would have him saying "I am guilty, I transgressed a police line," so that some of the follow-up stories would have him arrested by accident. But for that matter, he had been inaccurate himself--it was a *Military* Police line he had crossed. (138)

His clarification of what kind of line he crossed—a military police line rather than a police line is a fact that we the reader must know. Mailer tests the reader as if to ask, 'Did you catch the error?' It may be a small fact, yet the fact is inaccurate and therefore wrong. Wrong facts, no matter how small, can skew what really happened, as Mailer shows with his misquote. The 'fact' that he was arrested accidentally, that the early reports suggest, goes against the very reason that Mailer got himself arrested, that he wanted to make a statement about Vietnam. By stating that he was arrested accidentally, the reporter minimizes the whole incident and removes any political significance. This trivialization then threatens the relevance that Mailer is desperately trying to gain.

Such meta-subjectivity becomes a new tool for the reader. Readers faced with the exposure of objectivity as a myth can no longer rely on published reports to give them the facts. Mailer shows that the reader must become aware of the innate subjectivity of any text, and engage and challenge even the most simple of statements. As Foucault states in his essay "Truth and Power," "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects power which it induces and which extend it" (Truth 74). Yet Mailer is not yet ready to give up power. He sees that just because Truth, in all its objective glory, might not be achievable that does not mean that meaning and perhaps a subjective artistic truth cannot be strived for. So, just as *Armies of the Night* sets out to shatter the myth of objectivity, it also sets out in its theme, action and intent to unearth meaning and to re-establish the relevance of literature. Mailer, then, turns to the fictive not only to tell the story of what happened, but also to infuse the text with insight and meaning that will stretch far beyond that October weekend date.

Left and Shattered

Journalism's failings are a concern for Mailer in *Armies of the Night*, but his ambitions are more far reaching. The death of objectivity is a secondary point in Mailer's scheme of things: his main concern is with literature and its apparent abandonment of what he sees as the novel's role to provide understanding in this chaotic and rapidly changing world. Prime in Mailer's philosophy of American existentialism is the belief that meaning can be found in the world and is just hidden by the absurdities of everyday life. Journalism does not have the power or scope to bring meaning to people. It is good at providing information at times, such as sport scores, what a politician said, or what tomorrow's weather might be like, but once it goes on to try and find meaning or provide understanding, it is inherently flawed because of its adherence to its doomed, impossible

mission to provide an objective understanding. The author's job is to arrange things so that the reader can see patterns and shapes in the chaos of life. It is to provide a glimpse at that subjective universal only accessible through art and literature. Through the use of language, symbols, narrative, metaphor, character and all the other literary tools the novelist allows the reader access to meaning and truth. As Mailer puts it "the novel [...] is, when it is good, the personification of a vision which enables one to comprehend other visions better; a microscope—if one is exploring a pond; a telescope upon a tower if you are scrutinizing the forest" (*Armies* 219). This novelistic personification of a vision allows for meaning to be reached even through a subjective form such as art or literature. As John Hellmann sees it "this technique is a natural expression of [Mailer's] epistemology, since it openly displays meaning as an individual consciousness' active projection of its ordering and interpretive abilities upon the world around it" (Hellmann 42). The journalistic facts in *Armies of the Night* are transformed by its novelistic form giving the facts a literary depth and meaning that did not (and could not) have as reportage/history. So while Mailer demonstrates that facts are by no means objective, he also explores their possible meanings without radically changing or manipulating them to fit the greater narrative as Capote does in *In Cold Blood*. In fact, although both Mailer and Capote use the novel to explore the metaphoric nature of reality, they approach this issue from quite different vantage points.

Unlike the symbolic technique which Capote constructs his supposedly "objective" version of the events in *In Cold Blood*, metaphor [in *Armies of the Night*] does not provide the illusion that a particular meaning is inherently present in the world and naturally emanating from it. Metaphor instead presents the act of a mind reaching out to the world in order to

create meaning, a meaning which is both dynamic and tentative, for it is a construction of active interplay between interior conscious and external fact. In *In Cold Blood* Capote sees fact as symbols and then portrays them as such; in *The Armies of the Night* Mailer sees a fact, considers any number of possible symbolic values, and then portrays that seeing and consideration. Capote portrays life as significant; Mailer portrays his search for significance in it. Capote presents actual objects that embody meaning; Mailer presents his attempt to elicit meaning from actual objects, or to project meaning upon them. (Hellmann 42-3)

For Mailer the role of the novel is to search for meaning—as seen in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, a novel that embodies that search. This search is what makes the novel, and literature, such an important part of any culture. As David Lodge suggests “*The Armies of the Night* implies no disillusionment on the author’s part with the novel as a literary form: on the contrary, it affirms the primacy of that form as a mode of exploring and interpreting experience” (Lodge 12). Literature may not provide meaning, but it enacts, nevertheless, a search for meaning and understanding that, in turn, provides readers with the tools to come to terms with the world around them.

Understanding Mailer’s view of the novel is important for understanding this text, for he is, in part, attempting to convey the impotency and failure of contemporary literature. He sees the novel as having abandoned its role and failing society as a whole. As Mailer has more recently said, “the realistic impulse never delivered the novel that would ignite a nation’s consciousness of itself. [...] Literature then has failed. The work was done by the movies, by television. The consciousness of the masses and the culture of the land trudged through endless mud” (*Spooky* 303). *Armies of the Night* is fully

aware that the novel has failed in its task. Not only have novelists and other cultural critics lost touch with people, but they are also rapidly losing relevance (and therefore influence and power) in the culture as a whole. *Armies of the Night* is a novel that shows both the inevitability and the consequences of such a literary downfall.

The same factors that lead to this failure of literature for Mailer are the same factors that had cultural critics, such as Michel Foucault, reexamining our relationship with the providers of Truth. They see the end of the Sixties as the time that the shift between the public (or universal) intellectual and the specific intellectual began.¹² The public intellectual has enjoyed a particular authority up to this point in history, as Foucault explains:

For a long time, the 'Left' intellectual spoke and was acknowledged the right of speaking in the capacity of masters of truth and justice. He was heard, or purported to make himself heard as the spokesman of the universal. To be an intellectual meant something like being the consciousness/conscience of all. (Truth 126)

With the death of objectivity, the intellectual/writer loses the ability to speak for us all. At the same time as the Movement splits up, its pieces begin to seek refuge in the university, and thus it becomes more and more necessary to have the right credentials to be able to speak on a particular topic. The question is no longer, "Why is Mailer talking about Black Power?" but more, "How is Mailer qualified to comment on Black Power? What separates his opinion from everyone else's?" As the intellectual "tends to

¹² Public intellectuals at this point tended to include authors, critics and even some university professors. The one thing that most had in common was they were in some way a writer (of novels, articles, criticism, etc) and were in many ways the last vestiges of the old print paradigm in the increasing techno-visual paradigm.

disappear as a figurehead,” Foucault explains, “the university and the academic emerge, if not as principal elements, at least as ‘exchangers,’ privileged points of intersection” (Truth 127). Universities become the only institutions that could confer academic credentials and therefore status upon those who wish to comment or criticize. The university quickly becomes the home of the new intellectual, the academic intellectual or, as Foucault calls it, the Specific Intellectual. Such a move means that writers were losing the privileged position that they had within society for nearly a hundred years.

The cause of this post-modern shift is tied up in complex social and cultural forces (some of which we have examined already). One such cause that remains pivotal to this study is, of course, the disengagement of the novel from reality. In some ways the decline of the influence of literature and novelists on society is predictable. Not only did a lot of novelists give up on writing realist stories, but they gave up also on any notion of the real existing in the first place. Inevitably then the power that Mailer advocates that the novel has to unearth meaning is as lost as any sort of cohesion that could be possibly derive from it. As the grand-narrative functions of history, journalism and the novel fall away, the novel also loses the power to inspire and influence. Novelists become more a curiosity than active, effectual agents of society.

Armies of the Night is keenly aware of this declining power/influence and Mailer depicts a number of key scenes over the weekend that illustrate the growing divide between the Notables—those intellectuals, critics and writers –and the new generation represented in the gathered protestors. What we get out of these scenes is a sense that the Notables have lost relevancy in this new paradigm and that their failure will lead to the failure of the Movement as a whole. For example, at the Ambassador Theatre, Mailer realizes the importance of the gathering. As he describes it, “he had been prepared to

open the evening with apocalyptic salvos to announce the real gravity of the situation, and the intensely peculiar American aspect of it—which is that the urban and suburban middle class were to be offered on Saturday an opportunity for glory” (35). In the end he ends up being just a drunken buffoon, pretending he is Lyndon Johnson’s little dwarf-alter ego and telling hecklers to fuck off. While Mailer is at least entertaining, some of the other speakers seem to bore the audience. As Dwight Macdonald steps away from the microphone, after reading from Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden,” Mailer comments, “What with the delays, the unmanageable public address system, and the choppy waters of the audience at his commencement [. . .] Macdonald had been less impressive than ever. A few people had shown audible boredom with him” (42). As Mailer’s arch-intellectual, Macdonald shows a complete disengagement from the audience. The fact that Macdonald does not see any problems in reading a racist and imperialistic text such as “The White Man’s Burden” to the politically radical audience reveals that he really does not understand them and their views. Moreover, the poem simply bores the audience and fails to get any response, positive or negative, which suggests that Macdonald and his kind simply have no relevance to this crowd.

Robert Lowell is next after Macdonald. In comparison to Macdonald his reading goes quite well and the audience seems to thoroughly enjoy him. While Mailer himself is completely enamored (and jealous) of Lowell’s command of the audience’s attention, Lowell’s participation is more removed and disconnected than Macdonald’s stuffy reading. For while Lowell’s poetry is good and the audience seems to like him, his readings have no connection to why they are there. Lowell’s poetry is personal, and self-

reflexive; it has no relevant connection to what is happening around him. As Mailer describes:

Still he made no effort to win the audience, seduce them, dominate them, bully them, amuse them, no they were there for him, to please *him* [...] They adored him—for his talent, his modesty, his superiority, his melancholy, his petulance, his weakness, his painful, almost stammering shyness, his noble strength” (44).

As Mailer describes it, the audience is there for Lowell, he is not there for them. Lowell is present at the rally only to lend his support to the Movement, his name adds credibility to the event. However, as a celebrity, his work does not reflect the reason people are there. Lowell does not give anything—he takes. In a way, Lowell’s reading contradicts the purpose of this gathering. The poetry, though good, is completely disconnected from the event and the circumstance that these people have gathered. It fails to provide any sort of meaning or understanding for the audience. Although it was enjoyable Mailer hints that it was as irrelevant and absurd as Macdonald’s reading. Lowell himself does not seem that excited about it: Mailer suggest that he “did not seem particularly triumphant. He looked still modest, still depressed, as if he had been applauded too much for too little” (46). On the whole, this round of speeches is seen as a genuine failure on the part of the Notables to do anything for these radicals.

The ramifications of this disconnect between author and audience can be seen quite clearly throughout *Armies of the Night*. Through his depiction of the march on the Pentagon Mailer tries to demonstrate the significance of this separation and how it begins to manifest itself. In one example during the march, Mailer places special emphasis on the relations between the Black and White protestors. In the thick of the speeches right

before the march to the Pentagon is about to begin, most of the Black contingent leave.

As Mailer points out:

The Negroes had left to make their own demonstration in another part of Washington, their announcement to the press underlining their reluctance to use their bodies in a White War. That was comprehensible enough. If the Negroes were at the Pentagon, and did not preempt the front rank, they would lose face as fighters; if they were too numerous on the line, they would be beaten half to death. (102)

This 'White' cause has put Black protestors in a catch-22: they are singled out for either not participating enough or for participating too much. Mailer also points to the first sign that the unity of the Movement (that by stopping the war many of America's problems will be solved) is under stress. For the Civil Rights groups, there is no guarantee that the end of the war will bring forth equality in the races. There was racism before the war, so why should the black protestors believe that it will get better by trying to end it? For them, Mailer suggests, it is better to concentrate on their own goals.

In some ways, the March transcends itself and becomes a crystal ball for the future of the Movement. In this world of no objective truth, where everyone is on their own, it is unreasonable to think that the Movement, so based on a singular goal, can survive. The sheer variety of backgrounds of the differing groups and organizations is both what gives the Movement its strength and is the key to its downfall. As Mailer shows, these groups have their own views, their own goals, and staying unified might delay or even be counter-productive to their objectives. The events of 1968 might have thrown the rocks that finally shattered the Movement, but *Armies of the Night* shows that the cracks were already present.

Another such episode in the narrative can be seen just as the march to the Pentagon is underway. As the protestors gather into a solid block in order to start the march, Mailer and the Notables are directed to the front to lead the procession. Mailer does not waste the metaphoric nature of this position as he struggles to remain in its front rank. As he describes it, “the notables in consequence were shifted down from the forward most line to what was now no more than the third line, to Mailer’s disappointment, for he had been pleased to be in the front rank, in fact had fought doggedly to keep there” (107). The whole scene that follows, with the march starting and stopping, lurching forward thirty, forty feet at a time, people becoming irritated, frustrated, pushing at the Notables in hopes they can spur the action on. “Picture then this mass, bored for hours by speeches, now elated at the beginning of the March, now made irritable by delay, now compressed, all old latent pips of claustrophobia popping out” (108). The scene is one of barely restrained anarchy: Mailer and the others are powerless to make the march go any faster, while at the same time they are struggling to keep their positions of authority and respectability at the head of the march. Yet, as impatience grows, frustrations turn against them. ““Why don’t we just move ahead?” said a boy behind Mailer. He literally pushed against the line of notables, thus jamming into a professor named Donald Kalish, one of the leaders of the Mobilization. ‘I came here to get to the Pentagon,’ said the boy, ‘not to wait in line like this’” (110).

The status of the Notables is really put to the test when they finally reach the Pentagon. For all of their prestige and influence this group of notables quickly finds out that they are not the threats that think they are. In fact they can barely get arrested. As Mailer writes:

a line of soldiers left the west wall of the Pentagon and advanced gently on the notables, moving forward slowly, expressionlessly, and with a lack of violence which was bewildering, for they passed silently through the [notables] without striking any of them, indeed made every effort not to touch them. (264)

The soldiers are clearly not after the Notables, but are more concerned with the general mass of the protestors. Perhaps it is because they know that arresting the Notables would draw media attention and therefore give them what they want. At the same this episode shows that the Notables are really not a genuine threat to the Establishment and that both sides know it. It takes some doing and some agitation but eventually only one of the Intellectuals, Noam Chomsky, is arrested, along with two of the march organizers, Dave Dillinger and Dagmar Wilson, leaving Lowell, and Macdonald along with the most notable Dr. Spock “alone. The storm had passed. They left, unhurt, and eventually went home” (265). Mailer here leaves us with a deflated sense of the influence and power of not only this group of people but intellectuals and writers in general. For Mailer, these are clear examples of the failings of literature. It is telling that Mailer calls his trio of Macdonald, Lowell, and Mailer in the universal terms of the Critic, the Poet and the Novelist. These characters figuratively become the embodiment of literature, and therefore their failures. The Notables are artistically as well as politically irrelevant to their audience. As literature attempts to turn its back on reality, it then makes the novelist, once the king of cultural commentary, little more than an amusing entertainer.

For Mailer (both writer and character) the point of *Armies of the Night* is to make himself and his work relevant once again. In fact most of the novel describes Mailer’s quest to become relevant as he looks around him to see the failure of literature and

journalism to relate to their audience. And Mailer sees this lost relevance as a symptom of the problem with America. “The realistic literature had never caught up with the rapid change in American life,” as Mailer points out:

and the novel gave up on any desire to be a creation equal to the phenomenon of the country itself: it settled to be a metaphor. Which is to say that each separate author made a separate peace. He would no longer try to capture America; he would merely try to give life to some microcosm of American Life, some metaphor. [...] The country could be damned. Let it take care of itself.

And of course the country did. Just that. It grew by itself. Like a weed and a monster and a beauty and a pig. (*Spooky* 300-1)

Mailer makes a direct link between the role of the novel and the state of the nation. For Mailer, the events of the sixties are a direct result of the growing irrelevance of literature. *Armies of the Night* delineates a sense of a nation out of control without any vision to guide it. As Mailer says:

If one could find the irredeemable madness of America (for we are a nation where weeds will breed in the gilding tank) it was in late afternoon race track faces coming into the neon lights of the parimutuel windows or those early morning hollows in the eye of the soul in places like Vegas where the fevers of America go livid in the hum of the night. (*Armies* 151)

Mailer consequently implicates contemporary literature into this distorted nightmare:

You did not have to look for who would work the concentration camps and the liquidation centers—the garrison would be filled with applicants

from the pages of a hundred American novels, from *Day of the Locust* and *Naked Lunch* and *The Magic Christian* [...] There was something at loose now in American life, the poet's beast slinking to the marketplace. [...] Technology had driven insanity out of the wind and out of the attic, and out of all the lost primitive places: one had to find it now wherever fever, force, and machines came together, in Vegas, at the race track, in pro football, race riots for the Negro, suburban orgies—none of it was enough—one had to find it in Vietnam; that was where the small town went to get its kicks. (152-3)

Perhaps it is too simple to say that all of this violence and chaos is caused by the failure of literature to be continuously relevant to its audience, but, for Mailer, it is all part of the same process. By abandoning the search for meaning in the everyday, literature had failed. By only seeing the absurdity and meaninglessness of modern life, literature created a climate of passivity and thereby could not fully confront the angst in the nation's soul. For Mailer then this angst is like a cancer within American society and now left unchecked it has itself spread across the world in the form of violence and war. As Hellmann points out, Mailer suggests that “with the possibilities and mysteries which Americans had originally sought in this new land now eliminated, contemporary Americans have found perverted versions of them in contemporary fragmentation and apocalypses” (Hellmann 48). Mailer feels the need to recover the relevance of the novelist in order to try to curb these fragmenting forces, while at the same time he seems to understand that this is an impossible task.

The way to relevance at this time, as Mailer sees it, is through action. According to Mailer, it is action that this generation (that of the late sixties) seems to be more

inspired by. The conflict between passivity and action underlies a lot of the tension within *Armies of the Night*. At the beginning of the novel, Mailer wavers about going to the march for, as he says, “One’s own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam” (9). At this point, Mailer still believes that writing has power and influence. This belief becomes quite apparent in the Ambassador Hotel where Mailer takes over the M.C. role order to try to connect with the audience. He is loud, vulgar, witty and obnoxious as he tries to engage and rally the ‘troops’ for battles to come. Mailer attempts and fails in this regard and hence his sudden need actually to do something this weekend rather than simply march. The demonstration at the Justice Department causes Mailer to rethink his role in these protests. As he says, “[Mailer] wondered if he would burn or surrender his own draft card if he were young enough to own one, and he did not really know the answer. How could he advise others to take the action, or even associate his name?” (20). Then later, “he was a figurehead, and therefore he was expendable, said the new modesty—not a future leader, but a victim: there would be his real value” (78). In Book Two, Mailer documents how many different groups are partaking in this event, and how they all want their own speaker on the podium. With so many speeches and so many views the intellectual’s voice is so lost in the cacophony of opinion. After hearing Dr. Spock, Mailer comments, “That was nice and about par for the speeches. They said almost nothing one had not heard before, but the sentiments were incontestable” (99). Mailer thus addresses the impotence of the writer/intellectual, stressing how, in this new world of action, words no longer hold the vaunted position they once did. Therefore the writer, whose power comes from words and writing, no longer has the cultural capital to effect change upon the system.

I believe that Mailer feels it necessary to get himself arrested precisely because of this need to effect change upon the system. For Mailer, being arrested is the ultimate action that he can perform and it makes him part of the Movement, not just a spectator. It allows him to do and not just say. He feels that with his arrest he will reconnect with his audience for he'll be with them doing not just watching. It is a way to be relevant again, a way to influence and inspire those around him. As he puts it he "had the conviction that his early arrest might excite other to further effort" (119).

After being arrested, "[Mailer] felt as if he were being confirmed. (After twenty years of radical opinions, he was finally under arrest for a real cause). Mailer always supposed he had felt important and unimportant in about as many ways as a man could feel; now he felt important in a new way" (138). Mailer feels excited, alive, for the first time in years. His one action at this protest will in some ways speak louder than all his words. He feels anchored in the present, in the moment. "He felt his own age" as Mailer puts it, "felt it as if he were finally one age, not seven, felt as if he were a solid embodiment of bone, muscle, flesh, and vested substance rather than the will, heart, mind, and sentiment to be a man, as if he had *arrived*" (my italics 138). In a novel that is very much about the fragmentation of the author (public/private, author/character) Mailer achieves a kind of unity here for the first time. He has arrived at the new role of the novelist, that as participant in the everyday. Much like his American Existentialism, meaning is not imposed from the outside, but found within the subject. This meaning is hidden, yet can have a profound impact when revealed, allowing readers to understand the world around them in a much more specific way. Hence, upon his arrest, Mailer feels that he is now reconnected and relevant once again. Thoughts and action have come together to provide a powerful symbol, both social and literary.

Moreover, Mailer's newfound relevance and unity as a novelist is the reason why he takes such exception to the *Time Magazine* article that prefaces *Armies of the Night*. Not only does the article misinterpret what Mailer did and why he did it, the reporter also misquotes him, providing only the statement of guilt rather than a statement of defiance and protest. The article thus robs Mailer of the recognition of his action. Mailer wants his action to be known, not only that he got arrested but, more specifically, that he *willingly* got arrested. At his hearing, a couple of days after getting arrested, he wants to enter a guilty plea rather than *Nolo Contendere* (no contest). *Nolo Contendere* would be a passive defense, whereas to plead guilty is, for Mailer, a matter of principle and a political statement through and through. He does not care of the consequences. Hence, when the *Times* article makes it appear that he was somehow drunk at the time, or did not know what he was doing when he got arrested, it nullifies the whole relevance of the actions that Mailer performed on that weekend.

In a way, though, this report details a positive development in Mailer's quest for relevance. For, as action is good for its sake, it is nothing—not political, not relevant—if no one knows about it. It's this notion that forces Mailer to push this action to its ultimate limits in an attempt to make Mailer and the novelist relevant again. In doing so Mailer then cannot turn to the basic realist novel, for it has no power in these events; likewise, journalism, even New Journalism, cannot handle the literary weight that would be required to recount this story. In response, Mailer decides to mix the novel and journalism together to get at what he wants. To recount what actually happened that weekend, in all its dimensions, Mailer needs to blend history and fiction together in order to show both symptoms and solution. In the act of writing *Armies of the Night* Mailer sets out to carve a new relevance for literature, to demonstrate that literature can work

within the new post-modern epistemological paradigm while at the same time not giving up on searching for the meaning and understanding that Mailer feels is at the root of all art and life.

Conclusions

In the end, *Armies of the Night* had a literary impact on America. In 1968 it was the first book of its kind to win not one but two of the country's highest literary awards—the Pulitzer and the National Book Award. Like *In Cold Blood*, Mailer's work allowed for realism to be used again, albeit in a more symbolic form. Unlike Capote's first non-fiction novel, however, Mailer was able to make his novel much more immediate while at the same time still tapping into universal themes and ideas that continue make the book relevant almost forty years later. *Armies of the Night* also revitalized Mailer's flagging career, making him again one of the leading voices in American literature. The novel suggests that Mailer believes in the importance of this story, not only for his own ego but also for literature and America. His next two books, both non-fiction works as well, did not come close to the power or the impact of *Armies of the Night*. *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1969) is more a New Journalistic piece than a non-fiction novel, emphasizing the reporting of what happened at these events rather than the meaning behind them. In *Fire on the Moon* (1970) Mailer attempts again to tap into a moment of national importance, this time with the race to the moon. This could be seen as a failed non-fiction novel (which I suppose makes it one nevertheless), as Mailer's attention seems to be more focused on his failing marriage than the moon launch itself. Mailer failed again with *Marilyn*, a novel in which he used rumour and warped facts (which he calls factoids) to try and discover the real reason behind Marilyn Monroe's untimely death. Even Mailer's other big non-fiction novel, *The Executioner's Song* (1979)—which won him his

second National Book award—is far more a novelized true-crime novel (somewhat like Capote’s *In Cold Blood*) than the experimental and chaotic trip of *Armies of the Night*. In a way, Mailer’s turn to the more stable *In Cold Blood* style says something about the state of the non-fiction novel at this point and the literary direction Mailer was heading. Not only is *The Executioner’s Song* more novelistic in its approach, but it is also Mailer’s last non-fiction novel. As the crisis in journalism and the novel both resolved themselves Mailer took up his old mantle of the novelist and essayist. However, it is important to point out that this period in Mailer’s career is far more than a blip, and is in fact one of his most creative and influential periods of his writing life. Not only does *Armies of the Night* transcend the topical nature of the subject matter but it has established itself as one of the great American literary works of the last century. It is one of those books that can claim to being both *avant guard* and populist at the same time; for not only did Mailer create a truly post-modern text but he also framed it in such away that it would be read by a general readership thereby insuring that its message (both in form and content) would be disseminated throughout America. It would be hard to find someone else in American letters at the time, with the right combination of ego and sensitivity that would have been able to accomplish this feat. This is Mailer’s legacy.

Chapter 4: Further Reflection and Musings on the State of the Nonfiction Novel

In studying *In Cold Blood* and *Armies of the Night* we really capture the two bookends of the nonfiction novel. Both examples use literary and journalistic devices in different ways and styles, however their aims are virtually the same; to attempt to use the novel as a mode for truth in an era which is rapidly claiming that truth is far too subjective even to attempt. However, the search for a grand specific truth is not visible in Mailer and Capote, rather each works towards a type of universal truth that can only come from a work of art or literature. This truth, while universal, is a subjective truth that comes about through the interaction between the reader and the text. Moreover, Capote and Mailer use this form of truth to extend meaning beyond their subjects and encompass the greater social reality of their era. In this way, both novels use the literary to pull a greater meaning out of localized stories that they are 'reporting' on. They not only collect the facts but they masterfully order them to create some of the most insightful texts of the Sixties. However, these texts do differ when it comes to how meaning is revealed within them.

In *In Cold Blood*, Capote infuses the textual landscape with meaning and literary significance. Capote's approach to the factual elements of his story is to use them as building blocks for the novel's aesthetic and themes. As a sculptor uses clay, Capote uses the 'real' elements to fashion his telling of this story; at times even molding and shaping them slightly in order that they conform to the overall unity of the piece. While this practice of modifying some small details had many critics dismissing the novel as an untrustworthy text, this shaping separates this work from the realm of journalism or true crime and locates it in the literary domain. For Capote the text was a work of art, which

pointed not to the localized truth of ‘what happened that night in Kansas,’ but rather to a universal/literary truth that reflects the climate of the day. The events, characters, even setting all resonate with meanings that would be normally beyond them. Capote is able to masterfully show that these events can be infused with as much meaning and aesthetic control as any fictional story. Moreover, Capote wants to demonstrate that more meaning, or perhaps that a more pluralized meaning is possible through the novel’s use of nonfiction.

Mailer’s use of the nonfiction novel is similar to that of Capote’s through his use of the real to reveal meaning, however, Mailer is more interested in discovering the meaning in the subjects themselves rather than imposing one into it. As we see in *Armies of the Night*, Mailer is very much interested in what the march reveals about the future of not only the antiwar movement, but of the American condition as well as his place in the world. It can be seen then that Mailer is being much more of a literary journalist in this text as he takes the next step from ‘what happened’ to ‘what does it mean.’ Mailer is far more interested in reflecting back on the events and trying to read them like tea leaves to see if any portents or signs exist for the future. And, in fact, he is able to, for not only can Mailer see the cracks that are forming within the Movement as a whole, but he also sees the fracture that started it all: the recent denial of objectivity. Mailer does not only report these findings; he also prescribes a solution. For if, Mailer seems to be saying, talking and writing about things no longer have the power they once did, then action must also be taken. No longer can the intellectual or novelist sit in the stands and comment from afar. As objectivity gives way to the subjective, authors must find new ways to have their voices heard in the popular discourse. It is through engagement and participation that the new novelist will have a direct impact on their readers and society.

But where the majority of novels and journalism were busily trying to ignore the problems that the new post-modern condition extolled on their forms, the nonfiction novel attempted to come to terms with this new reality. What we can see now is that the nonfiction novel did not shy away from the causes of these radical changes, and in fact plunged right into the schism. Furthermore, far from the abandonment of fabulism or the willful ignorance of the traditional novel at this time, the nonfiction novel used these perceived changes as an opportunity to explore the hitherto uncharted region that lies between fiction and reality. Moreover, the nonfiction novel was not interested in simply reporting, even in a different way, what was going on. It was far more interested in what those actions meant or what they revealed about the national character at the time. Also, in response to the changes of the Sixties, these novels allowed a pluralism in the way that they approached their subjects. Whether it is the multi-narrative of *In Cold Blood* or the meta-subjectivity in *Armies of the Night* the nonfiction novel was quite aware of its involvement in its search for meaning. The narrative techniques of the nonfiction novel reflect the contemporary climate and the social fabric beginning to unravel. Truth was no longer a two-sided coin but a multifaceted prism that no longer allowed the simple dichotomies of the past to persist in their usual form.

The flexible form and ideas of the nonfiction novel made it sociologically important at the time. It is amazing how quickly the nonfiction novel faded when these crises in objectivity were resolved. By the mid-seventies, with the help of the New Journalistic experiments as well as the Watergate scandal, journalism suddenly found a new voice. It was the breadth and scope that newspapers could afford to give to a story, as opposed to the limited space of a television newscast, that allowed the *Washington Post* to expose the corruption within the heart of a presidency. After Woodward and

Bernstein's celebrated exposé, print journalism found its footing once again within American society and no longer worried about the shifting nature of objectivity.

The novel on the other hand did not have such a reconciliation. By the mid-seventies two distinct classes of novel became entrenched in the literary landscape: the popular novel and the academic novel. For some in the literary set, such as Gore Vidal, the Best Seller lists became pejorative indexes of everything that was wrong in literature and society at large. Academic novels became novels of ideas and art gave way to the growing importance of theory. With the rise of cultural theory in the seventies and eighties, the academic novel became more self-referential and insular. As Malcolm Bradbury writes:

It is not surprising that contemporary fiction has been preoccupied with our presence in history, with the rising of systems, the dehumanizing of experience, the death of the subject; nor is it surprising that it has looked enquiringly at its own history as a form, challenged past modes of imaginative expression, and sought to call on new acts of the creative imagination (Bradbury 186).

Popular novels began to be seen as only in it for the money; the realm of less serious and talented writers that are more concerned with profit than prose. The split then did not only affect the writing of novels, it divided the reading audience as well. Reading Donald Barthelme, for example, reinforced one as part of an elite who not only knew what to read, but also in the age of increasing complexity of styles and prose, how to read.

Within this context the nonfiction novel began to fade from the literary view. While some in the *avant-garde* continued to explore the realm between fact and fiction,

authors such as Paul Auster retreated into the personal sphere rather than the public. Even among the general public the nonfiction novel no longer held the power that it did upon its dramatic appearance in the Sixties. Capote's last attempt at the nonfiction novel, "Handcrafted Coffins" barely registered on the public's radar. This short nonfiction novelette differed quite a bit from its older sibling: in it Capote changed the names of the places and people and wrote it from the first person. The novel feel was completely removed as he used the text to transcribe a series of interviews connected together with a narrative of how Capote gathered the material. Perhaps Capote was trying to follow Mailer's path of the nonfiction novel (though he would never have admitted such a thing) by putting himself into the narrative. For whatever reason the text was almost virtually ignored.

Mailer's last nonfiction novel, *The Executioner's Song* (1979), ironically, is very much like Capote's *In Cold Blood*; Mailer even admits his influence. *The Executioner's Song* is very much written like a novel and provoked a very similar argument against it that *In Cold Blood* had fourteen years before. However, most critics and scholars were familiar with the form at this point and were ready to accept it for what it was, and Mailer won his second National Book award. However, *The Executioner's Song* does not only signal Mailer's last nonfiction novel, but in fact the last nonfiction novel of this tradition. Albeit, there are novels that combine reality and fiction together, nevertheless, none have set about to deliberately mix journalism and the novel in the same way. For example, Don DeLillo's *Libra* seems at first to be in a similar vein as previous nonfiction novels, however, DeLillo's tale of Lee Harvey Oswald is not meant to reflect anything truly factual as he states in the author's note at the end of the novel, he "made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination" (DeLillo 462).

Libra is more like a piece of historical fiction, as is Gore Vidal's *Julian* or *Lincoln*, than a nonfiction novel.

Does this mean that the nonfiction novel as a genre is confined to Sixties? Or that its impact and relevancy is frozen within that turbulent era? Well yes and no. The nonfiction novel was a reaction to the very specific conditions (i.e. the crises in the novel and print journalism) and therefore related to its audience from within that context. Once those cultural forces began to sort themselves out, the nonfiction novel as a genre was no longer meaningful. As a genre it began to lose its importance to authors and their audience. By the end of the Seventies the crisis that had helped set the stage for the nonfiction novel had either been resolved or was no longer seen as a problem. However, as I have tried to chart out in this thesis, the conditions that led up to the creation of the nonfiction novel in the first place are cyclical. Issues of objectivity and truth will always be raised both for journalism (now both electronic and print) and for literature. And as these issues come to a head every so often the nonfiction novel has proven itself to be a form that allows for a complex yet accessible domain for these debates. In it in this way that the nonfiction novel has proven itself one of the most dynamic literary forms of the late twentieth century.

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