SIGNIFICANT PARALLELS IN THEODORE DREISER'S *AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY* AND TRUMAN CAPOTE'S *IN COLD BLOOD*

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CAPOTE'S IN COLD BLOOD

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PREFACE

I first became interested in Truman Capote's work while enrolled in an American literature class under Dr. Clinton Keeler in 1959. Capote's new book In Cold Blood had just been published and his self-styled "new artform" received considerable class discussion. After having read his book I was intrigued by Capote's claim to having written a "non-fiction novel" and requested of Dr. Keeler that I might pursue the subject as a topic for a term paper.

In preparing the paper I researched the work of other writers who I felt had written in a similar style. Among these were some of Hemingway's earliest works which were considerably more reportage than fiction, John Hersey's Hiroshima, Lilliam Ross's Picture, Alfred Levin's Compulsion, and John Barlow Martin's Why Did They Kill? Dr. Keeler suggested I might find an interesting comparison in An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser, and it was here that I found myself so thoroughly engrossed in the parallels which emerged that long after I had completed my paper on the history of the "non-fiction novel," I returned again and again to a more thorough study of the two works, An American Tragedy and In Cold Blood. It was this research which culminated in the subject for my thesis based on significant parallels.

As I studied the two works I became aware of the similar manner in which the ideas of the two were conceived and the striking parallel

in the method of research. Also there were obvious similarities in structure; I began to compile a list which included the conventional classical structure of books divided into chapters of varying lengths, the use of contrasts, foreshadowing, flashbacks, letters, fantasy, and dreams. Recurrent themes of nature are present in both works in the form of animals, trees, snow, rain, and water; and buildings become a framework which separate the outsider who vainly presses his nose against the window looking in from those who are on the inside looking out. Clothes in both works become symbols of membership in a social class.

A similar sociological theme is evident as the two books respectively move along in a straight narrative to culminate in a vertical piling up of details in which the human animal is portrayed as trapped. That society must share a certain degree of the blame is revealed, perhaps more obviously in Dreiser and more subtly in Capote but, nonetheless, evident.

As my list of parallels grew, I concluded that surely Capote must have been influenced by Dreiser's work; therefore, I wrote directly to Capote at his New York address asking whether or not he had ever read Dreiser's An American Tragedy. Mr. Capote replied immediately, "I've never read the Dreiser book--tried to, but found it too badly written."

The prime purpose of this study is to present an interpretation and analysis of An American Tragedy and In Cold Blood and an examination of the technical and artistic means by which Theodore Dreiser and Truman Capote respectively turn a murder case into a moving timeless story.

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CHAPTER I

NARRATIVE

An American Tragedy[1] is the story primarily of Clyde Griffiths, the son of two religious-minded people who held preaching services on the streets of Kansas City, and who conducted the "Door of Hope Mission" for "down-and-outers." Clyde is not very religious, however, and is always ashamed and embarrassed because of his parents' actions, the shabby mission where he lives in the quarters partitioned at the rear, and his inability to dress like other persons of his own age. Clyde finds it difficult to reconcile all the work his parents do for God with their state of habitual poverty; he fails to understand why his father and mother constantly proclaim the love and mercy of God when God seemingly does nothing for them. Clyde finally manages to get a job as a bellboy at the Green-Davidson Hotel in Kansas City, and for the first time in his life he is able to dress well, enjoy himself, and have plenty of money. Clyde gains new friends and becomes well acquainted with drinks and brothels. Then, one evening while riding in a stolen car with friends, Clyde is involved in an automobile accident which results in the death of a little girl. Clyde flees and goes to Chicago where he contacts a wealthy uncle, Samuel Griffiths, who gives him a job in his collar factory in Lycurgas, New York. Clyde's cousin Gilbert, whom he resembles, resents his presence and gives him a menial job in the factory. Later, Clyde's Uncle Samuel intervenes and Clyde is moved

to a more important and lucrative position more befitting the name of Griffiths. Clyde is attracted to one of the employees, Roberta Alden, and becomes friendly with her. Their friendship develops into a love affair, but they must meet secretly because of a company policy forbidding personnel from dating other employees. Roberta is a virtuous young woman before she falls in love with Clyde and will not yield to him at first, but to keep from losing him she rents an apartment in which she can entertain him. Clyde continues the affair with Roberta, but because his name is Griffith, he begins to be drawn into the Griffiths' social life. He meets Sondra Finchley, a society girl, who eventually is attracted to Clyde. The setting for tragedy is laid when Clyde decides he wants the superficial Sondra rather than the genuine Roberta. Here Dreiser reveals Clyde's tragic character—a person who yearns after wealth and position which are beyond his reach. Sondra is a means for acquiring all this. He begins breaking dates with Roberta because Sondra's money and social position draw him. Just when the social status he had always yearned for seem within his grasp in the prospect of marrying Sondra, Roberta tells Clyde she is pregnant; he tries to arrange an abortion but his efforts fail. In desperation, Roberta demands that Clyde marry her.

In the meantime, Clyde continues to see Sondra and to plan with her all the wonderful times they will have together during the coming summer. He realizes he cannot give up Sondra and the new life he has found with her and her friends; he feels trapped and desperate. Then one day he reads a newspaper account of an accidental drowning of a young couple at a lonely lake in Massachusetts—only the body of the girl, however, had been found. Slowly a plan begins to form in Clyde's

wavering mind.

Clyde tells Roberta he will marry her and asks her to accompany him to an isolated lake resort. He takes her out on the water in a rented boat, but when he stands up in the boat to carry out his plan his courage fails him. Roberta, startled by the expression on his face, starts toward him. In confusion and blind anger, Clyde strikes at her with a camera he holds in his hand. The boat lurches and they are thrown into the water. Roberta struggles in the water and calls to Clyde for help, but Clyde ignores her cries and strikes out for shore.

Book III is the story of Clyde's mental anguish as he goes through the motion of enjoying himself with Sondra and her friends at a summer camp nearby. Clyde, however, is in such a state of nerves that he leaves the party early and in desperation runs into the woods where he is soon apprehended. His one request is that he not be made to face Sondra and her friends. Sondra's family makes hurried plans to keep her name out of the papers; she is referred to only as Miss X. The remainder of the book, approximately two-fifths, is devoted to the actual trial and lengthy, drawn-out question and answer scenes in the courtroom. The outcome of the trial has special significance for both the defense attorney and the prosecuting attorney; each has aspirations for the nomination for the county judgeship. Clyde, however, has clumsily left a trail of incriminating evidence; after the jury has met, the verdict is almost immediate. Clyde sends a cable, "Dear mother--I am convicted--Clyde."

Clyde's mother attempts to raise money for an appeal by giving lectures in churches and theaters but is forced to discontinue her efforts due to the illness of Clyde's father. On Death Row Clyde broods over the prospect of the electric chair. Eventually, a minister, Duncan

McMillan and Clyde's mother break the news to Clyde that his appeal had been denied, and Clyde, knowing that all hope was gone, tells his mother in the last minutes of his life that he was going to his death resigned and content and at peace with God.

The story ends as it begins with a little band of street-missionaries on a summer evening performing on a street corner in San Francisco. Clyde Griffith's counterpart is recognized in the little boy, Clyde's sister's illegitimate son, who is made to participate in the service. However, back at the shabby Door of Hope Mission, the grandmother gives the boy a dime for an ice cream cone and admonishes him to "come right back."

Approximately four decades after the publication of An American Tragedy, another murder-for-money story was made public in the form of Truman Capote's In Cold Blood.

Holcomb, Kansas, a small village in the western part of the state, provides the setting for the brutal slaying of the Herbert Clutter family. Mr. Clutter was the community's most widely known citizen, prominent both there and in nearby Garden City, the county seat. He was a member of the Federal Farm Credit Board during the Eisenhower administration and currently chairman of the Kansas Conference of Farm Organizations. Mr. Clutter's wife Bonnie was a semi-invalid who suffered "little spells" but to her relief and her family's joy had recently been told that the source of her misery was physical, a matter of misplaced vertebrae; after undergoing an operation she would be well again. The sixteen-year old daughter Nancy was the "town darling," whose best friend was Sue Kidwell, and whose boy friend was Bobby Rupp, a neighboring farm boy and the local school basketball hero. The Clutters' son Kenyon, who

was fifteen, spent his time with guns, horses, tools, machinery, and even books. Mr. Clutter's domain consisted of over eight hundred acres owned outright and three thousand more worked on a rental basis. From this scene of affluency and tranquility, Capote by means of the rhetorical device of the flashback takes the reader to the little town of Olathe, Kansas, where an exconvict awaits a reunion with a former cellmate who has plans for the two to make what is known in the underworld vernaculer as "the perfect score." Actually, Dick Hickock had obtained information from his cellmate, Lloyd Wells, who had formerly worked for Herbert Clutter, that Clutter kept a great deal of money in a safe in his study; Dick had written his buddy Perry Smith asking him to meet him to help carry out his plan. It was Wells who provided the tip to authorities which resulted in the capture of the two murderers, but not before the residents of the Holcomb had not experienced weeks and sleepless nights of terror and suspicion.

Dick and Perry, both on parole from prison, had agreed to leave no witnesses to their crime; thus, when they set out to rob the home of Herbert Clutter whom they have never seen, and having secured what little money the Clutters have on hand (their informant had been wrong; there was no safe), they are about to leave when Perry suddenly cuts Clutter's throat and shoots him. While Dick holds a flashlight on the faces of the remainder of the bound victims, Perry then methodically murders Kenyon, Nancy, and Mrs. Clutter. Dick was furious; he felt cheated because he had not been the one to do the actual killing.

Alvin Dewey was in charge of the investigation; this was inevitable and appropriate for Dewey since he was a former sheriff of Finney County and, prior to that, a Special Agent of the Federal Bureau

of Investigation, and was "professionally qualified to cope with even as intricate an affair as the apparently motiveless, all but clueless Clutter murders."[3] In addition, he had a personal interest in the case since he and his wife "were real fond of Herb and Bonnie,"[4] and furthermore, he stated, "however long it takes, it may be the rest of my life, I'm going to know what happened in that house: the why and the who."[5]

Finally a total of eighteen men were assigned to the case full time, among them three of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation's ablest investigators, Special Agents Harold Nye, Roy Church, and Clarence Duntz.

Part II of In Cold Blood, entitled "Persons Unknown," gives background information concerning the participants in the search and the effect of the incident on the inhabitants of the surrounding community. Part III, "The Answer," is devoted to the killers as they are apprehended and returned to Garden City, Kansas, on a freezing day in January, and is followed by the final portion of the book aptly entitled "The Corner." The last portion of the book gives details of the trial, the tedious hours of the convicts in their cells, the conviction, and the final lap of their trip to Leavenworth where they would wait three years on Death Row.

The story concludes much as it began with a pleasant, tranquil scene under the Kansas sky. Alvin Dewey strolls along the quiet paths of the local cemetery where the graves of the Clutter family, gathered under a single gray stone, lie in a far corner, but as he approaches he sees that another visitor is already there. She smiles at him and he wonders who she is; it is Sue Kidwell, Nancy's friend. After exchanging pleasantries, Sue skips away; then Dewey starts home, "leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the windbent wheat."[6]

FOOTNOTES

[1]Theodore Dreiser, An American Tragedy (New York, 1926). (Subsequent references to this text will be footnoted as Dreiser followed by the page number.)

[2]Truman Capote, In Cold Blood (New York, 1965). (Subsequent references to this text will be footnoted as Capote followed by the page number.)

[3]Capote, p. 96.

[4]Capote, p. 96.

[5]Capote, p. 96.

[6]Capote, p. 384.

CHAPTER II

GENRE

Theodore Dreiser and Truman Capote have contributed to the literary form which has culminated in the development of a new genre, reportage. This form is unique to the twentieth century; what poetry was to the seventeenth century, the essay to the eighteenth, and the long novel to the nineteenth, reportage is to the twentieth century. This new form which Dreiser seemingly introduced and which Capote, consciously or subconsciously, imitated contains neither the emotional exploration of the novelist nor the footnoted distractions of the scholar, but combines facts and words imaginatively to present the truth.

Since the beginnings of his days as a newspaperman, Dreiser had been aware of a certain type of crime seemingly produced by financial and social aspiration; he saw the situation as one which was produced by the very society that condemned the outcome. For years the writer had been fascinated by a kind of murder that regularly made headlines in American newspapers, a crime in which the killer was motivated less by hatred than by a desire to be recognized, to be seen, to be less an "outsider." One of Dreiser's most pervasive thoughts seems to indicate that men and women are haunted by poverty, and all are helpless in the clutch of relentless fate. After pondering several other cases suggested by newspaper accounts, Dreiser chose, for what was to

become his best-known work, the drowning of Grace Brown by Chester Gillette in Moose Lake, Herkimer County, New York, in 1906. Dreiser's center of interest was not in crime and detection, but in contemplating a victim of the contemporary American dream. All his previous literary accomplishments, as well as his newspaper experiences, merely served as a proving ground for this one great effort which he was to call An American Tragedy. His first step was to call a female companion. In her book My Life with Dreiser, Helen Dreiser, who was then Helen Richardson, relates:

> One day in June, Teddie phoned me to say he was taking a trip to upper New York state to gather more data for An American Tragedy, and did I wish to go along? Of course I wanted to go.
>
> We packed our things and were soon on our way through New Jersey, northward along the Delaware River toward Port Jervis, Monticello, Cortland, Utica and Herkimer County, up into the lake section, where the actual crime of Chester Gillette and Grace . . . had taken place in 1906.

Thus, with Helen, Dreiser traveled to Cortland which was to become the Lycurgus of the novel. The two toured the various sections of the city to get an overall impression of the area. They visited the residential area in which he located Wykeagy Avenue which would be the home of the wealthy Griffiths. They viewed the factory section of the city where the collar plant might be authentically set. Again, they drove through the middle and lower class parts of town where he chose to locate Mrs. Cuppy's boardinghouse and chose where Roberta Alden's lonely room would be located. Helen and Dreiser drove to nearby South Otselic which he was to rename Blitz and which was Roberta's home in the book; they drove down the dusty road which led to Grace Brown's shabby country home which Dreiser later describes

so vividly in his book when Clyde Griffith stops there by chance while on an outing with the wealthy socialite Sondra Fenchley to request road information from Titus Alden, Roberta's father.

The the two drove northeast to Herkimer where the trial was held; later they drove over the Adirondack country to the remote Big Moose Lake where the actual murder occurred. Big Moose Lake was renamed Big Bittern in his book. The two stayed at the Glenmore Hotel while Dreiser soaked up the atmosphere of the place where the frightened Chester Gillette, whom Dreiser was to rename Clyde Griffith, had brought the unsuspecting victim a few years earlier.

Finally, they visited the Old Forge which was Gun Lodge in the book. Dreiser found a boat attendant who had been employed at the Old Forge at the time of the incident who remembered Gillette and pointed out the spot in the lake where Grace's body had been found. So Dreiser and Helen rowed out upon the lake, drifted into the quiet, tree-lined inlets. Helen gives her impression of the scene:

> It was after we passed this point and found ourselves drifting into a quiet, deathlike stillness, that the mood of the most dramatic note of the Tragedy seized us both. Here it was that the girl had met her death, and her unheeded cries had rung out over the waters that closed about her. As we sat there the hypnotic spell of it frightened me a little . . . . The air was motionless, as though we had been raised to a different level of existence or had become a minute part of the ether itself. It was a little as one feels when, looking over the side of a very tall building, one is tempted to jump. I wished something would break the awful spell of the moment.[2]

But Dreiser still was not content with merely saturating himself with the atmosphere of the surroundings where the incident took place. Already at his disposal were the official court records of the

Gillette trial and an impressive stack of newspaper clippings saved since the event, yet he proceeded with relentless thoroughness to further authenticate the atmosphere of the crime.

With Abraham Brill, noted Doctor of Psychology, Dreiser discussed the psychology of murder; with Clarence Darrow, well-known criminal lawyer, he discussed the intricacies of the courts of law. Then he visited a shirt factory at Troy to observe shirt collars being made so he could accurately describe Clyde's duties in his uncle's shirt factory.[3] Next, Dreiser hoped to confirm his rendering of the death house scenes by visiting execution row in Sing Sing. He wanted to know how many cells were in a death block and by what arrangement of tiers. He was curious as to the dimensions of a condemned man's cell and how it was furnished, the color of its walls and the thicknesses of its doors. He requested permission to visit the prisoners in order to know the nature of the inmates but was refused. By the intervention of his friend H. L. Mencken an arrangement with the New York World was found possible whereby he might enter the death house as a special reporter.[4] The result is the authentic documentation which comprises Book Three of An American Tragedy in which the death house takes shape almost brick by brick, tier by tier, before the reader's eyes, each sentence moving toward the moment when Clyde Griffith follows his cellmates through the door of the chair room. In such a sequence Dreiser is "at the height of his powers," comments Philip Gerber, who continues, "His mass of detail is no inventory or mere catalog, but an accretion of incident constructing single-mindedly and with heartbreaking inevitability the mirror of reality, typical and unmistakable."[5]

The genesis of Truman Capote's In Cold Blood was not prompted, it is true, by the powers of acute observation typical of the newspaper reporter as in the case of Dreiser. Capote, however, was familiar with certain aspects of the publishing business; he had at one time maintained a position with the New Yorker magazine.[6] One does, nevertheless, find striking similarities in the manner in which Capote chose the subject for his book. In an interview with George Plimpton for The New York Times Book Review Capote revealed that he had for many years considered the possibility of writing a true account of an actual murder case. To Plimpton he confided, "The decision was based on a theory I've harbored since I first began to write professionally, which is well over twenty years ago. It seemed to me that journalism, reportage, could be forced to yield a serious new art form: the 'non-fiction novel,' as I thought of it."[7] Then one day in November of 1959, Capote, like Dreiser before him, saw a brief story in the newspaper which he immediately decided was the basis for the book he had long planned to write. The headline in the New York Times read: WEALTHY FARMER, THREE OF FAMILY SLAIN.

> Holcomb, Kansas, November 15 (UPI) A wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged . . . .[8]

The crime intrigued Truman Capote; he decided this was the case he had been waiting for and he reacted just as Dreiser had done years before. He called a female companion and asked her to accompany him to the scene of the crime so that he might gather material for a book he had in mind. His friend was an old childhood friend, Harper Lee, who had just finished her bestseller, To Kill a Mockingbird. Capote's

plan was reminiscent of that of Dreiser in that he planned to glean as much authentic detail as possible from the scene, the locale, the persons connected with the crime in any way, and then to retrace the steps of the criminals from deed to their apprehension. Harper Lee reacted in much the same manner as Dreiser's companion:

> "When he first called me," says Harper Lee, a husky pleasant-looking woman with short dark hair, "he said it would be a tremendously involved job and would take two people. The crime intrigued me . . . and boy, I wanted to go. It was deep calling to deep." Capote and Miss Lee took a train to St. Louis, rented a car and arrived in the grim and somber Garden City.[9]

Upon his arrival Capote, too, must have sensed the foreboding atmosphere of the strange surroundings for, according to reporter Jane Howard, "Distracted by the grief and rage and suspicion the murder of the Clutters had caused, the people of Garden City were not impressed to find Capote in their midst," and Capote stated to Miss Howard that "It was in many ways the hardest thing I've done in all my life. I often think that if I'd had any idea of the all but unendurable things that lay ahead, I'd never even have stopped in Garden City that first time. I'd have gone straight on. Like a bat out of hell."[10]

Truman Capote waited on the steps of the courthouse when word came that the two young killers had been apprehended and were being returned to Garden City after their arrest in Las Vegas. Capote had become acquainted with the police, and two days after the manacled prisoners were returned, Capote was told he could interview the two criminals if they would permit him to do so. By the intervention of a photographer friend who presented Capote's request, he was eventually granted a fifteen minute interview for fifty dollars payment to each of the two prisoners. From then on they welcomed

Capote whenever he could get permission from the authorities to see them in their cells. Meantime Capote, as Dreiser had done, established a residence in the town and proceeded to soak up the atmosphere of the locale. "His mission was to dig to the roots of every aspect of the Clutter crime, to comprehend the viewpoints of the victims, the criminals and the mourners . . . . He set about learning all he could from Garden Citians, applying a craft at which he is a master: listening."[11]

Meantime, like Dreiser before him, Capote made it his additional business to retrace all the steps the two killers had taken in their desperate journey following the crime. He went from Garden City to Kansas City where the two fugitives had gone on a wild "paper hanging" spree, their term for cashing hot checks. Then Capote drove down into Mexico as far as Acapulco where the two had picked up two other men and had gone deep sea fishing. Again like Dreiser, Capote stayed in the same hotel where the murderers had stayed. From Mexico the trail led up to California, then down to Miami Beach where the culprits lolled on the beach near the luxurious Fontainebleau. Next, he crossed the Gulf to Texas and on to Las Vegas where Sheriff Alvin Dewey and his colleagues finally had caught up with them.[12]

To further authenticate his novel, Capote did months of comparative research on murder, murderers, and the criminal mentality. In January of 1970 the author made a personal appearance on the Johnny Carson Show in which he stated that he had interviewed over two hundred murderers prior to the completion of his book in addition to numerous psychiatrists and criminal lawyers.

While both Dreiser and Capote chose the experimental form of

reportage to present their work, each writer still practiced certain literary license in making certain alterations in the original facts of the murder cases in order to give them artistic form and to cast them into acceptable prose. Also, both writers chose to present a picture of society "in its own time," when persons involved with the respective cases might be living; certain alterations then were necessary "to protect the innocent."

For instance, the name of the participant in the actual murder case of Dreiser's story was Chester Gillette, which was altered to retain the initials only with the name Clyde Griffith. The names of others involved were given fictitious names. The actual murder case of Dreiser's story occurred approximately fifteen years prior to Dreiser's account of it; these years ushered in many changes in society in the form of automobiles, movies, phonographs, so the author included these changes in his book to lend credibility. For the same reason, he substituted a camera as the death weapon on the fatal lake outing in lieu of the tennis racquet which was actually used.[13] Such fictionalizing devices are skillfully inserted, however, and do not detract from the plot.

Capote likewise has occasionally departed from the form of reportage in its strictest sense in order to protect those connected with the case who might be detrimentally affected if their identity were revealed.

In such an instance, Capote gave the name of "Willie-Jay" to Perry Smith's prison mate and confidant, Perry's sister had been able to rise above her desolate childhood and had acquired a "middle-class, middle-income" status in a San Francisco community where she lived

with her insurance salesman husband, two little sons, a baby girl, and a dog. Therefore she had persuaded Capote that to reveal her identity would jeopardize all this. Capote gave her the fictitious name of Mrs. Johnson. At one point in their desperate flight they found the "ideal setup" when a traveling salesman picked up the hitchhiking killers and was saved only by the fortuitous appearance of another hitchhiker. Perry was going to "smash in his head from a seat behind, but the driver was saved when he slowed down to pick up another hitchhiker, a negro." The salesman convinced Capote that his job would be in jeopardy if his true name was revealed in that he had violated company rules by picking up hitchhikers while driving a company car.[14]

As Dreiser had done, Capote altered certain facts to heighten and intensify contrasts. Bobby Rupp, the last person (other than the killers) to see the Clutters alive stated that Capote "put things in there that to other people make good reading but the people who were actually involved know that he exaggerated a little bit . . . . He makes me out to be some kind of great athletic star and really I was just an average small-town basketball player."[15] The typical all-round American boy is a glaring contrast to the youthful killers. Again, Capote states that Nancy Clutter's riding horse Babe was sold to a Mennonite farmer for a plow horse for seventy-five dollars and "As he led her out of the corral, Sue Kidwell ran forward; she raised her hand as though to wave goodbye, but instead clasped it over her mouth."[16] Actually Seth Ernest, father of the postmaster, bought Babe, and he is neither Mennonite by religion nor farmer by occupation. "I wanted her for a couple of reasons," he told Philip Tompkins.

"One was sentimental and the other was that she was in foal to a registered quarter horse, Aggie Twist, and I wanted the colt."[17] The significant point about these rather minor interpolations is that it provides a creative, yet fictional, flourish to heighten the drama of the incident.

Both Dreiser and Capote selected their subjects from a newspaper account of a murder, and, similarly, each had traveled miles for background information, had faithfully retraced the steps of the killers, talked with lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists and each had visited murderers in prisons and on Death Row. Their work would alike be both condemned and commended. In each instance, their critical contemporaries would accuse them of plagiarism and indecency for their having utilized actual court records word for word, and for reprinting personal letters verbatim. John Castle, in his The Making of An American Tragedy, justifies the subtle changes Dreiser made to give meaning to a story of murder for money: "The method of transforming factual records into literature seems to be as legitimate as imaginative processes in creating an original and reputable work of art."[18] This would seem to apply to Capote's work as well. At any rate, both Dreiser and Capote chose to experiment with a genre which would ultimately be known as the "non-fictional novel," which enables the writer to write truthfully in his own time. Literature in general profited in that both dreiser and Capote proved that reportage and literature are as intimately connected as daily events and history. The fact that Capote wrote his story nearly four decades after Dreiser wrote his account, and found that while such tragedies in society are unfortunately repeated, that the situations which both writers recorded occurred

in such a remarkably similar manner as to justify the role of the writer as a prophet.

FOOTNOTES

[1](New York, 1951), p. 21.

[2]Helen Dreiser, My Life with Dreiser (New York, 1951), p. 85.

[3]John J. McAleer, Theodore Dreiser, An Introduction and Interpretation (New York, 1968), p. 470.

[4]Philip S. Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York, 1926), p. 132.

[5]Gerber, p. 132.

[6]Current Biography, 1951, p. 93.

[7]Irving Malin, ed., Truman Capote's In Cold Blood: A Critical Handbook (Belmont, California, 1968), p. 28.

[8]New York Times, November 16, 1959, p. 39. OSU Microfilm services.

[9]Newsweek, January 24, 1966, p. 59.

[10]Jane Howard, "Horror Spawns a Masterpiece," Life, January 7, 1966, p. 79.

[11]Jane Howard, p. 70.

[12]Malin, ed., p. 30.

[13]John Castle, The Making of An American Tragedy (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1952), p. 32.

[14]George Plimpton, "The Story Behind A Nonfiction Novel," Irving Malin, ed., Truman Capote's In Cold Blood, p. 30.

[15]Robert Pearman, Kansas City Times, January 26, 1966, reprinted in Malin, p. 45.

[16]Philip K. Tompkins, "In Cold Fact," Irving Malin, ed., Truman Capote's In Cold Blood (Belmont, California, 1968), p. 46.

[17]Tompkins, p. 45.

[18]Castle, 1952, p. 62.

CHAPTER III

STRUCTURE

Truman Capote and Theodore Dreiser have a great deal in common in the structure of their respective novels. Each has employed the third person point of view and presents his story in a detached, journalistic style. Each has divided his novel into "books" with three for An American Tragedy and four for In Cold Blood. In both stories the final book is devoted entirely to the courtroom trial and execution. The previous books follow a horizontal pattern lacking in intensity, for the reader already knows the details of the crime, who is the victim, and who is the killer.

Dreiser utilizes a simple but effective "framing" or "envelope" device in that he virtually duplicates his opening and closing chapters. In each he takes the reader into the deep canyon of a big city on a summer night and shows the Griffiths family group lifting their voices in song "against the vast scepticism and apathy of life." His story begins:

> Dusk—of a summer night.
>
> And the tall walls of the commercial heart of an American city of perhaps 4,000,000 inhabitants—such walls as in time may linger in a mere fable.
>
> And up the broad street, now comparatively hushed, a little band of six,—a man of about fifty, short, stout, with bush hair protruding from under a round black felt hat, a most unimportant-looking person, who carried a small portable organ such as is customarily used by street preachers and singers. And with him a woman perhaps five years his junior, taller, not so broad, but solid of frame

> and vigorous, very plain in face and dress, and yet not homely, leading with one hand a small boy of seven and in the other carrying a Bible and several humn books. With these three, but walking independently behind, was a girl of fifteen, a boy of twelve and another girl of nine, all following obediently, but not too enthusiastically, in the wake of the others.
>
> It was hot, yet with a sweet languor about it all.[1]

And the last chapter begins:

> Dusk, of a summer night.
>
> And the tall walls of the commercial heart of the city of San Francisco--tall and gray in the evening shade.
>
> And up a broad street from the south of Market--now comparatively hushed after the dim of the day, a little band of five--a man of about sixty, short, stout, yet cadaverous as to the flesh of his face--and more especially about the pale, dim eyes--and with bushy white hair protruding from under a worn, round felt hat--a most unimportant and exhausted looking person, who carried a small portable organ such as is customarily used by street preachers and singers. And by his side, a woman not more than five years his junior--taller, not so broad, but solid of frame and vigorous--with snow white hair and wearing an unrelieved costume of black . . . . At her side, again, carrying a Bible and several humn books--a boy of not more than seven or eight . . . although none-too-well dressed boy. With these three, again, but walking independently behind, a faded and unattractive woman of twenty-seven or eight and another woman of about fifty apparently, because of their close resemblance, mother and daughter.
>
> It was hot, with the sweet languor of a Pacific summer about it all.[2]

Dreiser's use of the framing device is an effective tool for portraying the full cycle of events. The reader is left with the uncomfortable feeling that the end of the story is the beginning. One senses that nothing has really changed; events of the story must inevitably happen again. It did happen, and it has--both figuratively and literally. Approximately thirty years later Truman Capote wrote the story of a crime in which he inferred that society must share the burden of guilt. And here again the author, like Dreiser, chose the "envelope" method to suggest the boundaries for his story:

> The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call "out there." . . . the country-side with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far Western than Middle West. 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 temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.[3]

Capote concludes his story with a conversation between characters in his story who by chance have met again for the first time since the fateful events which brought them together six years before. It is the same scene, same characters; only time has taken its toll. But once again the reader is discomfited by the feeling that it could happen again; it happened in Cortland, New York; it happened in Holcomb, Kansas. Capote ends his book with a comment on the Kansas sky:

> "And nice to have seen you, Sue, Good luck," he called after as she disappeared down the path, a pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining--just such a young woman as Nancy might have been. Then, starting home, he walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat.[4]

Both Capote and Dreiser begin their stories with a horizontal narrative-type structure. They follow a chronological continuity which is episodic in nature. Occasionally the authors employ the rhetorical devices of foreshadowing and flashback.

For instance, in An American Tragedy Dreiser has Clyde's older sister Esta weary of her drab existence to such an extent that she seeks escape by running away with a lover. Later she is deserted and returns home to bear an illegitimate child. Clyde reflects that this is typical of everything that happens in the Griffith family, of their repeated rhythm of failure. Still, Clyde cannot share in the stock emotion of blaming the whole affair upon the seducer; his mixture of

feeling foreshadows what they will be later in his own affair with Roberta.

Then later, when Clyde first meets Roberta away from the factory and invites her out in an amusement park boat, she asks, "Will it be perfectly safe?"[5] This foreshadows the insecurity of her relationship, which will end at a far more distant and deserted spot when she steps again into a boat with Clyde and ultimately meets her death.

Capote, too, adroitly injects foreshadowing to intensify his story. On one occasion Mrs. Clutter, a wraith-like individual whose seizures of despondency often send her wandering from room to room in a hand-wringing daze, sees fit to share her views with a friend. She remarks that wherever Mr. Clutter traveled he always remembers that "I dote on tiny things."

> "Little things really belong to you," she said, folding the fan. "They don't have to be left behind. You can carry them in a shoebox."
>
> "Carry them where to?"
>
> "Why, wherever you go. You might be gone for a long time."

Also, the only book which occupied her bedside table was a Bible. A bookmark lay between its pages, a stiff piece of watered silk upon which an admonition had been embroidered: "Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is."[7]

Dreiser skillfully utilizes the flashback technique to present scenes and incidents which occurred prior to the opening of the work. The device provides an interesting relief from the continuity of the horizontal narrative pattern. In Book II Roberta waits impatiently at her parent's rural home for Clyde to come for her so that they may

be married; and fearful that "in the state that I'm in that Papa and Mama may make me tell the whole affair or that they will find it out for themselves,"[8] she writes one of two letters to Clyde desperately urging him to write her. Actually, Clyde cannot answer immediately for he is spending a weekend with the glamorous Sondra at Three Mile Bay, a small lakeside resort some twenty-five miles north of Lycurgas, and from there to Big Bittern. This is not revealed, however, until the following chapter which places Clyde back in his room in Lycurgas reading the two letters from Roberta, a scene which is followed by a flashback to the Big Bittern scene. Dreiser symbolically uses words such as "decadent," "funeral or viperous vines," "bogs and tarns," green slime," "rotting logs," "snakes and poisonous grasses," to describe the Big Bittern locale; and Clyde "did not realize it, but at this moment his own subconscious need was contemplating the loneliness and the usefulness of such a lone spot as this."[9]

Capote effectively employs the flashback to register the immediate impact of the news that the Clutter killers had been apprehended. In Chapter Sixty-One Hickock has just made the statement in the Las Vegas City jail, "It was Perry. I couldn't stop him. He killed them all."[10] The following chapter is a flashback to Hartman's Cafe in Holcomb, Kansas, where customers for their coffee break heard via the radio, ". . . news of a break in the case has met with little reaction in the town of Holcomb, a half mile from the Clutter home. Generally, townspeople in the community of two hundred and seventy expressed relief . . ."[11] The next chapter immediately picks up the thread of continuity where Chapter Sixty-One ended as the agents, Dewey and Duntz with their prisoner Smith, take the lead in a two-car

caravan out of Las Vegas and headed for Garden City.

The legend "How Long Since you Wrote to Mother?"[12] appeared in small type in each window of the store building which served as both meeting place and home for the Asa Griffith family and foreshadowed Theodore Dreiser's affinity for the use of letters as a literary device. Clyde had been away from home for a year and a half living under an assumed name to avoid complications as a result of an automobile mishap in which a child was injured, before he wrote his mother. In her reply to his letter Clyde's mother urged him to write to his uncle about a position in his collar factory, a position which later served as one of many factors which brought about his downfall. The deception foreshadows the pattern of deceit which will plague him in the future.

On another occasion Dreiser heightens the contrast between Sondra and Roberta as Clyde receives two letters in one day--one from each girl; from Sondra he receives gay notes and promises of what he might expect upon his arrival later—blue water, white sails, tennis, and kisses; the other letter is from an unhappy Roberta pathetically begging him to write her just to cheer her up and promising her gratitude. Later, after Roberta's death a bundle of letters from both Sondra and Roberta are found in Clyde's room and their contents spell out the tragic story for the arresting officers. The affluent Finchleys are able to keep Sondra's letters from the public but Roberta's letters are copied and hawked in the streets. Thus Dreiser utilizes the letters as a rhetorical device not only to further the plot of the story but also to contribute to the sociological theme. Finally, Clyde after his conviction would receive a brief typewritten letter without date or place or name; "'Clyde—This is so that you will not think that

someone once dear to you has utterly forgotten you . . . . and wishes you freedom and happiness.'"[13] Then, ironically but effectively, Dreiser concludes his story with the small group of street missionaries entering The Star if Hope, Bethel Independent Mission where there is a sign in each window proclaiming "God Is Love," and underneath in smaller type, "How Long Since You Wrote To Mother?"

Capote, too, artfully employs letters as a means of characterization and to establish, like Dreiser before him, the theme of the "haves-and have-nots." And here again, it was a letter which set in motion the interplay of one force upon another; Dick Hickock had written his former cellmate, Perry Smith, and had extended an invitation to join him on a perfect "score." The letter written by Perry Smith's sister provides an interesting psychological angle which adds pathos to the story and plays upon reader sentiment much as the pathetic letters of Roberta Alden. Roberta sought escape from a shabby, desolate environment and failed; Smith's sister "Bobo" was also a victim of unbelievably tragic circumstances--a prostitute mother, drunken father, a brother and a sister who had committed suicide--and yet she had seemingly been able to rise above her surroundings. Later, when Smith was imprisoned, he was shown a postcard from his father which was addressed to the warden. The letter asked "What did he do wrong and if I come there could I see him . . . ?"[14] The card served only to revive love and hate emotions, but, significantly, the father never came. Then one day Perry received another letter from a Don Cullivan who had remembered Perry from army days and recalled " . . . the first time I realized the wild streak in you."[15] The letters Capote selected to include in his book reveal circumstances which tend to indict

society for not recognizing, or caring, about conditions which would inevitably result in violence.

Both Dreiser and Capote chose critical moments to dip into the consciousness of the characters to present important fragments of their experiences. Each author resorts to contrasts, fantasy, and dreams to portray a particularly dramatic and psychological point: In both An American Tragedy and In Cold Blood the protagonists seek escape through fake wedding plans.

Roberta insisted that he marry her, and combined with the danger of losing Sondra, Clyde Griffith's mind cast about for an exit; he remembered the remoteness of Big Bittern and "It would be so easy to go to a place like Big Bittern—for an alleged wedding trip . . . ."[16] He also remembered reading an aritcle in the newspaper about a couple who had drowned while on a boating outing and his thoughts took shape: "A row-boat or a canoe upset in such a lake and Roberta would pass forever from your life. She cannot swim! . . . And how easy for you and Roberta to go there—not directly but indirectly—on this purely imaginative marriage-trip . . . ."[17]

Dick Hickock had contrived a plan which would provide for him and Perry a means of escape, a "pretty fair stake—enough to get them to Mexico."[18] Upon entering a clothing store Dick introduced Perry to the clerk as "a friend of mine about to get married," and went on, "I'm his best man. Helping him kind of shop around for the clothes he'll want. Ha-ha, what you might say his—ha ha—trousseau."[19] Since the clothes would have to be altered, Dick reassured the clerk there was plenty of time since the wedding was "a week tomorrow." They then selected a gaudy array of jackets and slacks regarded as

appropriate for a "Florida honeymoon" at the Eden Roc. The clothes were paid for with a check made out for eighty dollars more than the bill totalled. From there they went to a jewelry store, and Dick tells Perry, "' So you're going to get married next week? Well, you'll need a ring.'"[20] After purchasing a diamond wedding band, they drove to a pawnshop to dispose of the items. Perry was sorry to see them go since he had begun to half-believe in the make-believe bride. It had served its purpose, however, and the two had sufficient means to finance their trip to Mexico. As with Dreiser, Capote had utilized something which ordinarily symbolizes joy and a beginning to perpetuate that which is ugly and evil; such contrasts are frequently in evidence throughout the two books.

The Door of Hope Mission, a yellow single-story wooden building with the one large window containing two glass panes, and situated on a narrow side street, provides a sharp contrast to the vast luxury of the Green-Davidson Hotel. For Clyde the hotel is the actual world in contrast with his family's shakily based idea; such surroundings mark a social superiority which convinces him that the chief end of life was having and spending money. Mr. Griffith, tolerant and forbearing, is a contrast to his son, Gilbert, who is self-centered, vain, and meanly arrogant; and the contrast at the same time provides a frame of reference for the patriarchal spirit of the fathers who have known and have not forgotten poverty, and the younger generation which was born into a monied aristocracy. Roberta Alden, plain, poor, lonely, from a bleak rural background, finds hope and escape in Clyde, and at the same time provides a dramatic contrast for the socially prominent, vain, glamorous Sondra who finds escape from boredom in

Clyde. The contrast forces comparisons not only from the reader but from Clyde. Perhaps the most dramatic contrast is drawn with Clyde and his cousin Gilbert, for here the two are nearly the same age and have the same name but Clyde, while grounded in the poverty which Roberta knew equally, at the same time is considered by Roberta as outside her sphere because of the Griffith name. Clyde is aware that he has not really been accepted by Sondra's family and that he stands firmly nowhere.

In his book, Capote contrasts the solid, generally sunny life of the murdered farm family with the dismal twilight world of Dick and Perry. The small Midwest town represents a panorama of homemade pies, 4-H picinics and the simple life. The family which consisted of Herbert Clutter, a member of the Federal Farm Credit Board, his sickly wife Bonnie, their sturdy teen-age son Kenyon, and their teen-age daughter Nancy, the "town-Darling," represent all that the local townspeople valued and respected. Of the two killers, Dick, who was the more masculine of the two but had an unwholesome record of marriages and divorces, of passing bad checks, and of a strong attraction for nymphets, constantly reassures himself with "I'm a normal." Perry Smith was the product of a wretched childhood punctuated with vivid memories of brutal beatings for bed-wetting, traumatic scenes featuring his alcoholic-prostitute mother, a father who was a chronic loser, and their separation, which resulted in his being subjected to institutional experiences which filled him with resentment. His only brother and one of his two sisters committed suicide.[21] Capote brings sharply into focus the contrasts between the "have's" and the "have-not's."

To heighten the unearthly quality of his work, Dreiser draws upon the language of fantasy, for "there had now suddenly appeared, as the genie at the accidental rubbing of Aladdin's lamp--as the efrit emerging as smoke from the mystic jar in the net of the fisherman--the very substance of some leering and diabolic wish or wisdom concealed in his own nature . . ."[22] It was this genie of his darkest and weakest side which compels Clyde to lure Roberta to a secret meeting in Utica and on to the more remote Big Bittern. "It seemed as through the Giant Efrit that has previously materialized in the silent halls of his brain, was once more here at his elbow--that he himself, cold and numb and fearsome, was being talked through--not actually talking himself."[23] The Giant Efrit was Clyde's darkest self. At the catastrophic moment before Roberta sinks beneath the surface of Big Bittern lake, she cries, "Oh, my God, I'm drowning, I'm drowning. Help! Clyde, Clyde! And then the voice at his ear!"[24] The voice convinces him that this is the way it should be, that this was an accident. "And apart from that, nothing--a few ripples--the peace and solemnity of this wondrous scene. And then once more the voice of that weird, contemptous, mocking, lonely bird."[25] In this manner Dreiser builds up an acceptance of the involuntary nature of the catastrophe.

Capote's Perry Smith is not entirely without his Giant Efrit; a yellow towering "sort of parrot" had flown into his life when he was seven years old to discipline a nun who repeatedly beat him for wetting the bed. It was after one of these beatings that "the parrot appeared, arrived while he slept, a bird 'taller than Jesus, yellow like a sunflower,' a warrior-angel who blinded the nuns with its beak, fed upon their eyes, slaughtered them as they 'pleaded for mercy,'

then so gently lifted him, enfolded him, winged him away to 'paradise.'"[26] In the years that followed the bird, a hovering avenger, continued to deliver him from his particular torments, older children, his father, a faithless girl.

Dreiser utilizes dreams to portray the stark fears and morbid depths of the human mind. As Clyde Griffith contemplates the solution to his problems with Roberta's death his dreams take the forms of snakes which writhe and coil and bind him:

> . . . he found himself dreaming of a savage black dog that was trying to bite him. Having escaped from the fangs of the creature by waking in terror, he once more fell asleep. But now he was in some very strange and gloomy place, a wood or cave or narrow canyon between deep hills, from which a path, fairly promising at first, seemed to lead. But soon the path, as he progressed along it, became narrower and narrower and darker, and finally disappeared entirely. And then, turning to see if he could not get back as he had come, there, directly behind him were arrayed an entangled mass of snakes that at first looked more like a pile of brush. But above it waved the menacing heads of at least a score of reptiles, forked tongues and agate eyes . . . And in front now, as he turned swiftly, a horned and savage animal--huge, it was--its heavy tread crushing the brush--blocked the path . . . .[27]

Perry Smith's subconscious brings him to task, and, interestingly enough, his dreams also take the forms of snakes and jungles:

> Since I was a kid, I've had this same dream. Where I'm in Africa. A Jungle. I'm moving through the trees toward a tree standing all alone. Jesus, it smells bad, that tree; it kind of makes me sick, the way it stinks. Only, it's beautiful to look at--it has blue leaves and diamonds hanging everywhere. Diamonds like oranges. That's why I'm there--to pick a bushel of diamonds. But I know the minute I try to a snake is gonna fall on me. A snake that guards the tree. This fat son of a bitch and I can't get hold, he's crushing me . . . . Now comes the part it makes me sweat even to think about. See, he starts to swallow me. Feet first. Like going down in quicksand.[28]

Both Dreiser and Capote have run the gamut of structural devices,

and in many instances the results are so similar that they could be juxtaposed without loss to the plots in either case. The horizontal narrative--punctuated with the occasional use of the tricky flashback, frequent use of letters and dreams permitting dimensional characterization, contrasts by which the reader must draw profound realizations--moves along quickly and easily to a cumulative point where the narrative becomes vertical. Place, rather than motion, becomes paramount and in both works the final "book" is devoted entirely to the courtroom trial and execution. Here the action becomes more intense and the structure represents a piling up of scenes, each scene a dramatic snapshot of time and place: the jail in which the prisoners are held, the jury, the trial, the conviction, the prison, then Death Row, and finally The Chair.

The conclusion of An American Tragedy leaves the reader with the feeling that nothing had really changed, and that all that had happened to make up the story of An American Tragedy could happen again. A similar instance occurred forty years later when Truman Capote wrote In Cold Blood.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Dreiser, p. 7.

[2]Dreiser, p. 811.

[3]Capote, p. 13.

[4]Capote, p. 384.

[5]Dreiser, p. 260.

[6]Capote, p. 39.

[7]Capote, p. 42.

[8]Dreiser, p. 454.

[9]Dreiser, p. 458.

[10]Capote, p. 260.

[11]Capote, p. 261.

[12]Dreiser, p. 13.

[13]Dreiser, p. 789.

[14]Capote, p. 358.

[15]Capote, p. 294.

[16]Dreiser, p. 463.

[17]Dreiser, p. 465.

[18]Capote, p. 114.

[19]Capote, p. 114

[20]Capote, p. 116.

[21]Rebecca West, "A Grave and Reverend Book," Harper's Magazine, February 1966, p. 108.

[22]Dreiser, p. 461.

[23]Dreiser p. 471.

[24]Dreiser, p. 493.

[25]Dreiser, p. 493.

[26]Capote, p. 110.

[27]Dreiser, p. 442.

[28]Capote, p. 110.

CHAPTER IV

IMAGERY: CLOTHES, BUILDING, WATER, ETC.

According to John J. McAleer in his book entitled Theodore Dreiser, "The true artist does not structure his story on symbols, he functions through them. As a symbolist, Dreiser never has been given his due."[1] And Dreiser himself has said, "I simply want to tell about life as it is, the facts as they exist, the game as it is played! I am pointing out no moral."[2] Although Dreiser's statement may not indicate symbolism one frequently detects various levels of meaning in his work. Truman Capote's words bear a striking similarity to Dreiser's as he is quoted by The Saturday Review of Literature in relation to the subject matter of his work: "All I want to do is to tell the story and sometimes it is best to choose a symbol. I would not know a Freudian symbol as such if you put it to me."[3] The works of both writers persist in the symbolism of motion as a means of flight and escape, and nature seems to foreshadow certain events in the form of weather, snow, water, birds, and animals. Clothing and buildings are symbols of membership in a desired social class.

Toward the conclusion of Book I Clyde had been riding with friends in a stolen car and had become involved in an automobile accident resulting in the fatal death of a little girl. Clyde's girlfriend "suddenly set off south along 35th Street, toward the city where lights and more populated area. Her own thought was to reach her own home as

speedily as possible in order that she might do something for herself."[4] And Clyde too "took to the open fields. Only instead of running away from the city as before, he now turned southwest and ran toward those streets which lay to the south of Fortieth."[5] Later Clyde and Roberta board separate cars on the train to the destination which Roberta is led to believe will be their honeymoon, but for Clyde will be his temporary illusion of freedom after her death; the reader seems to be caught up in the motion as each reflect on views outside their window: "five birds winging toward that patch of trees over there," "those three automobiles out there running almost as fast as this train," "the train was following the exact curve of this stream . . . ."[6] Then, again, at the conclusion of Book II Clyde is again running, this time from his own crime: "Had anyone seen? Was anyone looking? Then returning and wondering as to the direction! He must go west and then south. He must not get turned about!"[7] Clyde's thoughts reflect the confusion and turmoil in his own life. Flight is established as his characteristic method of meeting a crisis.

After the Clutter murder, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock began an erratic ten thousand mile odyssey from Kansas, across Oklahoma, moving restlessly south in Mexico, crisscrossing America. Their only stops were for petty thievery--to siphon gas, or steal a car, steal and switch license tags--all objects to further their flight. "Smith and Hickock were in a sense victims of the 'open road' which has been such a familiar component of American romance," according to David Galoway in an article "Why the Chickens Came Home to Roost," "but the myth has been inverted; speed recklessness, unchecked mobility were the cheap narcotic in which Hickock and Smith (whose length of siphon

hose was his prized 'credit card') sought adventure and escape from a society which had cheated, from the crimes they committed, and finally from themselves."[8]

The cold weather and the surrounding ice and snow seemed a prelude to Hortense's frigid responses to Clyde's advances as they and their friends reached a rural pond for the purpose of skating. "She turned and kicked at the ice with the minute toe of her shoes, and Clyde, . . . put his arms about her, and crushed her to him, at the same time fumbling at her breasts and putting his lips to hers . . . . She broke away . . . hadn't agreed to be as nice to him to-day as he might wish."[9] Later, this same indifference was present in his attitude toward Roberta as she waited at her parents' home and pondered how she could be more sure of Clyde's emotional support, as well as marriage. "She got up and walked to the window and looked out . . . . The scene was miserably bleak and bare. The thin icy arms of the trees--the gray swaying twigs--alone, rustling leaf somewhere. And snow."[10]

The reader is reminded periodically throughout In Cold Blood that the snow was late in coming to Kansas that year. Nature seemed to be waiting for the capture of the killers, for snow began to fall almost immediately following the arraignment of Smith and Hickock. A crowd had gathered near the courthouse in Garden City awaiting the arrival of Dewey and his prisoners. "As long as the sun lasted, the day had been dry and warm . . . But when the sun descended . . . the coldness as well as darkness numbed the crowd. Newsmen, cursing the undue delay, stamped their feet and slapped frozen ears . . . . Suddenly, a murmuring arose on the south side of the square. The cars

were coming . . . . the miraculous autumn departed; the year's first snow began to fall."[11] The weather worsens as the evidence piles up against the two killers. "A month passed, and another, and it snowed some part of almost every day. Snow whitened the wheat-tawny countryside, heaped the streets of the town, hushed them."[12] Nature seemed to be trying to cleanse the land or at least, to cover up for man's misdeeds. A death row companion named Andrews who had killed his entire immediate family on a cold and rainy night preceded Dick and Perry to the gallows also on a cold and rainy night. Dick crossed the courtyard to The Warehouse, the inmates' name for the gallows, during a heavy rainstorm, and his partner in crime Perry followed shortly behind while "The rain rapped on the warehouse roof sound not unlike the rat-a-tat-tat of parade drums,"[13] and heralded Hickock's arrival. As "a hearse, its blazing headlights beaded with rain, drove into the warehouse, and the body, placed on a litter and shrouded under a blanket, was carried to the hearse and out into the night,"[14] it seemed that only nature wept for these young men.

In An American Tragedy water images are used consistently; Clyde himself is characterized as confused and disturbed as "having a temperament as fluid and unstable as water,"[15] but generally water is used to portray a means of escape.

Shortly after going to work for his Uncle Samuel in Lycurgas, Clyde sought out the pleasures of nearby Crum Lake in order to escape the monotony of his dreary rooming house. Here it was that he met Roberta Alden whom he invited for a canoe ride: "Why don't you get in here with me? There's plenty of room and I can take you anywhere you want to go." Ironically, Roberta had replied, ". . . maybe I'd

better not. Is it safe?"[16] Clyde's first social meeting with Roberta had taken place while in a boat on a lake' the crime also took place in a boat on a lake; Roberta's death will be Clyde's escape.

> And as they glided into this, this still dark water seemed to grip Clyde as nothing here or anywhere before this ever had--to change his mood. For once here he seemed to be fairly pulled or lured along into it, and having encircled its quiet banks, to be drifting, drifting--in endless space where was no end of anything--no plots--no plans--no practical problems to be solved--and the water itself looking like a huge, black pearl cast by some mighty hand.[17]

After the "accident" on the lake with Roberta, Clyde once more finds himself on a lake, this time in a speedboat. He returns to Sondra and as though nothing has happened accepts an invitation to go boating with her society friends: "And Burchard, throwing the boat from side to side as swiftly as he dared, with Jill Trumbull, anxious for her own safety, calling: 'Oh, say, what do you want to do. Drown us all?'"[18]

Water imagery is also prevalent throughout In Cold Blood and tends to symbolize a form of escape from reality, both visionary and real. Of Kansas, which was normally dry and parched, Mr. Clutter often remarked, "an inch more of rain and this country would be paradise--Eden on earth."[19]

After Nancy Clutter's death, Bobby Rupp, her "steady," would sit by the river and watch the "snaky, slow-movin, brown piece of the Arkansas."[20] He remembered Nancy had once told him that she had seen the exact place where the Arkansas River began in Colorado. "You wouldn't believe it though," she had said, "It's not the same color. But pure as drinking water. And fast. And full of rocks. Whirlpools."[21] To Bobby the river seemed transformed, and he did not see

the muddy slow stream sluggishly crawling across the Kansas plains, but the river which Nancy had described, a chilly, crystal torrent speeding down a moutain valley, as Nancy had been, energetic, joyous.

For Perry Smith, too, water formed a visionary form of escape.

> Since childhood, for more than half his thirty-one years, he had been sending off for literature (Fortunes in Diving! Train at Home in Your Spare Time . . .), answering advertisements that stoked a longing to realize an adventure his imagination swiftly and over and over enabled him to experience: the dream of drifting downward through strange waters, of plunging toward a green sea-dusk, sliding past the scaly, savage eyed protectors of a ship's helk that loomed ahead, a Spanish galleon--a drowned cargo of diamonds and pearls, heaping caskets of gold.[22]

Alvin Dewey, for whom the case had become a near obsession, locked himself in a room in the sheriff's office, and promptly fell into a state of exhausted slumber. But sleep brought no surcease from his relentless vigil. He dreamed:

> Hickock and Smith! But the moment of recognition was mutual . . . Dewey leaping after them, sped along Main Street . . . . then around the corner and down to the depot and in and out, hide-and-seek . . . Dewey drew a pistol, and so did Duntz, but as they took aim, the supernatural intervened. Abruptly, mysteriously (it was like a dream!), everyone was swimming--the pursued, the pursuers--stroking the awesome width of water that the Garden City Chamber of Commerce claims is the "World's Largest FREE Swimpool."[23]

Clothes and buildings form a prominent pattern in An American Tragedy; they become a symbol of the achievement and prestige of the social scene. Both serve to dramatize human beings trapped in illusory materialism--"exterior symbols of show and display which furnish ultimately no nourishment of the soul."[24]

Clyde Griffith's job as soda-clerk is the ultimate measure of success until he graduates to bellboy at the Green-Davidson Hotel. By his standards he is handsomely uniformed and magnificently paid,

and the hotel becomes a symbol of the world Clyde's nature starved for; the very sight of that massive tower of brick and green marble causes Clyde to tremble with excitement for within those walls he rubs shoulders with wealth and display and also learns the delights of sex.

> Clyde stared, even while pretending not to. And in his state of mind, this sight was like looking through the gates of Paradise. Here were young fellows and girls in this room, not so much older than himself, laughing and talking and drinking even . . . . And then around and between these walking or sitting were such imposing men and women, young men and girls all so fashionable dressed . . . . The wraps, furs and other belongings in which they appeared, or which were often carried by these other boys and himself across the great lobby and into the cars or the dining-room! Such grandeur. This, then, most certainly was what it meant to be rich, to be a person or consequence in the world--to have money.[25]

Meantime, Clyde has become enamored of a young lady by the name of Hortense who has promised him sexual intimacies in return for a certain coat she yearns for, a fact which re-enforces Clyde's conviction of the power which clothes have to open the way to good fortune. Later, after Clyde has wearied of his affair with Roberta, he constantly contrasts her clothing with that of the sleek, sophisticated Sondra. Then on one occasion while riding with his affluent new friends, he gets out of the car to ask directions of the shabby, threadbare occupant at a dilapidated farmhouse. Then he reads the name on the mailbox and realizes the pathetic figure must be Roberta's father, and he wants more than ever to escape the gloomy, poverty-stricken arms which seem to bind him. In both these glimpses, clothes play a central symbolical role.

Clyde's life could be traced as a desperate flight punctuated by buildings which seem to hold promise but eventually bring about his downfall. It begins with the structure of the Door of Hope Mission which was a source of humiliation and embarrassment to him; the comfort which it promised provided no solace in his most desperate hour of need. At the Green-Davidson Hotel he learns that clothes and money might compensate for imperfections of the body or the personality and that doors would be opened which might otherwise be closed; this knowledge only served to provide him with false values which ultimately resulted in his downfall. At his uncle's shirt factory he becomes conscious of the power of status and caste and the unwillingness of those who possessed it to compromise. Mrs. Cuppy's boardinghouse becomes the setting for his clandestine affair with Roberta, and ultimately culminates in his admittance to another more imposing structure, the County Courthouse, where he is shuttled back and forth from cell to courtroom until convicted. From here Clyde is removed to Auburn, the Western penitentiary of the State of New York, where he was to be restrained in the "death house" or "Murderers' Row" until retried or executed.

> That other room! It was in here somewhere too.
> This room was connected with it. He knew
> that. There was a door. It led to that chair.
> THAT CHAIR.[26]

Clothes and dwellings similarly play an important role in In Cold Blood. Clothes provided an identity which stamped one as successful or unsuccessful and which provided the means to open doors to buildings otherwise closed.

Perry Smith, one of the youthful killers, was one of four

children of a prostitute Indian mother and an Irish father who followed rodeos as trick riders. As a child he had been jeered and stared at because his clothes were "different." This stigma dogged him throughout his life. After his release from the army he went to New York to look for work and was finally hired at a penny arcade "next to an Automat. Which is where I ate--when I ate. In over three months I practically never left the Broadway area. For one thing, I didn't have the right clothes. Just Western clothes--jeans and boots."[27] Later, after Perry and Dick Hickock had joined forces, the first place they decided to "hit" with bad "paper" was a clothing store. Dick pretended he was going to be Perry's best man and was helping shop for a "trousseau."

Still later, on their first "vacation" after the Clutter murder, the two youthful killers went to Miami Beach. While Perry lounged on the beach, Dick collected seashells. As a boy he had hated the son of a neighbor who had gone to the Gulf Coast on holiday and returned with a box of shells; he had stolen the shells and one by one crushed them with a hammer. "Envy was constantly with him; the Enemy was anyone who was someone he wanted to be or who had anything he wanted to have."[28] When Dick had suggested they tour the expensive hotels, the Fontainebleau and the Eden Roc--Perry had been reluctant.

> . . . he felt people would stare at them because of their khaki trousers and T-shirts. Actually, their tour of the Fountainebleu's gaudy premises went unnoticed, amid the men striding about in Bermuda shorts of candy-striped raw silk, and the women wearing bathing suits and mink stoles simultaneously. It was there Dick saw the man, who was his own age--twenty-eight or thirty . . . . he looked as though he knew the glories of money and power.[29]

The Clutters were wealthy, yet Nancy establishes the conservative

nature of the Clutter family when she comments on the work to be done on the bridesmaid dresses for Beverly's wedding, which she had designed and was sewing herself. Ironically, the date of the wedding almost coincided with the day on which the funeral was held for the four members of the Clutter family; Nancy wore her red velvet dress which she was to have worn as a bridesmaid.

Capote sees fit to devote an entire page to Mrs. Johnson's new home. Mrs. Johnson was Perry Smith's sister and the Johnsons were recent arrivals to the middle-class suburbs of San Francisco. Continuing the dwelling imagery, Capote says:

> The house, like the others on the slanting hillside streets, was a conventional suburban ranch house, pleasant and commonplace. Mrs. Johnson loved it; she was in love with the redwood paneling, the wall to wall carpeting, the picture window . . . a white picket fence, and inside it a house for the family dog, and a sandbox and swings for the children.[30]

The Clutter house seemed to epitomize all that was solid and dependable and prosperous to the townspeople. The house had "fourteen rooms and was a place people pointed out." The dwelling represented a way of life, a symbol of all that was earthy, valued and respected. In Perry's confession, he gave this impression:

> We crossed a railroad track. Dick said, 'this is it, this has to be it.' It was the entrance to a private road, lined with trees. We slowed down and turned off the lights. Didn't need them. Account of the moon. There wasn't nothing else up there - - not a cloud, a thing. Just that full moon . . . Dick said, 'Look at this spread! The barns! That house! Don't tell me this guy ain't loaded.' But I didn't like the setup, the atmosphere; it was sort of <u>too</u> impressive.[31]

Dreiser's basic and recurrent symbolic images seem to indicate that nature is in close alliance with man and that nature reflects, and frequently predicts, the forces which sweep people beyond their

control. Capote's images serve to underscore this view as he has chosen, deliberately or not, the same basic symbols. The symbols the two writers make most of is that of clothes and dwellings as giving a peculiarly representative expression of a particular culture; they are the chief means of display, of lifting a character above where he was, and by that fact above someone else.

FOOTNOTES

[1]New York, 1968, p. 72.

[2]Charles Shapiro, The Stature of Theodore Dreiser (Bloomington, 1955), p. 58.

[3]Current Biography (1951), p. 93.

[4]Dreiser, p. 143.

[5]Dreiser, p. 145.

[6]Dreiser, p. 476-8.

[7]Dreiser, p. 494.

[8]Malin, p. 154.

[9]Dreiser, p. 134.

[10]Dreiser, p. 350.

[11]Capote, p. 280.

[12]Capote, p. 286.

[13]Capote, p. 378.

[14]Capote, p. 380.

[15]Dreiser, p. 338.

[16]Dreiser, p. 259.

[17]Dreiser, p. 489.

[18]Dreiser, p. 537.

[19]Capote, p. 23.

[20]Capote, p. 233.

[21]Capote, p. 233.

[22]Capote, p. 27.

[23]Capote, p. 225.

[24]Philip Gerber, Theodore Dreiser (New York, 1926), p. 185.

[25]Dreiser, p. 47.

[26]Dreiser, p. 758.

[27]Capote, p. 160.

[28]Capote, p. 228.

[29]Capote, p. 229.

[30]Capote, p. 207.

[31]Capote, p. 266.

CHAPTER V

IMAGERY: ANIMAL

Dreiser's An American Tragedy is an archetypal American example of naturalism which is generally regarded as having had its origin with the Goncourt Brothers and Zola. The novels produced in this school have tended to emphasize either a biological determinism, with an emphasis on the animal nature of man, particularly his heredity, "portraying him as an animal engaged in the endless brutal struggle for survival, or a socio-economic determinism, protraying man as the victim of environmental forces and the product of social and economic factors beyond his control of his full understanding."[1] The depression era in America seemed to mark the end of emphasis to naturalistic writing although remnants of the school are evident in later works.

Throughout An American Tragedy Clyde is portrayed as a hunted animal; his actions are described as one might describe an animal in flight. At the end of Book I Clyde flees the scene of an automobile accident in which a small child has been fatally injured:

> ". . . he took to the open fields. Only instead of running away from the city as before, he now turned southwest . . . . Only much space being before him before he should reach them, and a clump of bushes showing in the near distance, he ran to that and for the moment dropped behind it . . . . Clyde began crawling upon his hands and knees at first in the snow south, south and west, . . . to lose himself and so escape--if the fates were only kind . . . ."[2]

Clyde and Roberta were forced to meet secretly because a company rule prohibiting employees from dating; their trysting place was apart from the city. Clyde leaned against the old wooden fence that enclosed a fire-acre cornfield and waited for Roberta: "She looked trim and brisk and yet nervous, and paused at the street end and looked about like a frightened and cautious animal."[3]

In the early stages of their relationship, Roberta and Clyde arrive by separate trains at "Starlight Park, a pleasure park situated around a small band-stand out on an island near the center of the lake and on the shore a grave and captive bear in a cage."[4] The bear which Dreiser mentions only briefly, but significantly, is symbolic of everything which conspires to rob Clyde of his dreams: nature, heredity-and-environment, predestination, mechanistic materialism, fate. Later the bear materializes, just as briefly but effectively, in Clyde's nightmare after he first realizes that he is contemplating Roberta's murder, "a horned and savage animal--huge, it was--its heavy tread crushing the bush--blocking the path."[5]

While Clyde and Roberta rowed about upon the body of water which was to be her tomb, Clyde is conscious of the "voice of that weird, contemptuous, mocking, lonely bird," and after the deed has been committed and nothing but a few ripples disturb the surface of the water, Clyde again hears "the cry of the devilish bird upon that dead limb--the weir-weir."[6] The haunting cry of the weir-weir bird represents the flight of the soul, and is symbolic of the darkness and mystery in life. Book II ends as the first book ended, with Clyde on all fours, scrambling out of the water onto the bank and "making his way through a dark, uninhabited wood."[7] Clyde's actions continued to be

animal-like; as he makes his way back to camp where his society friends await him, some trappers and hunters encountered him and "on his encountering them in the woods thus, he had jumped back as though startled and worse--terrified--as though about to run."[8] Deputy Swenk had been given orders in the event he should locate the suspect, to fire one single shot to reveal his location but should try to "avoid frightening the prey or losing him."[9] Clyde had rejoined his companions and again was out on the water with Sondra and two companions; he heard the warning shots and "Clyde looked in the direction of the sound and listened like a hunted animal."[10] Orville Mason, the district attorney approached Clyde as "might an angry wasp or hornet,"[11] and then eyed him "as one might an unheard-of and yet desperate animal."[12] Clyde is no longer the hunted animal but has become the trapped animal; as he waits out the months of trial and appeal in the small cell with barred windows he is not unlike the caged bear he had seen at the amusement park with Roberta in much happier days; he is kept alive, fed and clothed, but he is, through forces he could not control, denied the right to walk free. Dreiser is quoted by F. O. Matthiessen as having said, "I never can and never want to bring myself to the place where I can ignore the sensitive and seeking individual in his pitiful struggles with nature--with his enormous urges and his pathetic equipment."[13]

A similar strain of naturalism is evident in Truman Capote's In Cold Blood. In a recent personal interview on the Johnny Carson Tonight Show, Capote stated that he had visited over two hundred murderers in their cells, and many on death row, and had found that these individuals possessed one particular characteristic in common; they

seemed to have become "de-humanized." This de-humanization seems to closely parallel Dreiser's naturalistic imagery.

After the two youthful assassins had completed their grisly deed they hastened toward the final door "panting like wolves."[14] They had crossed the border at Laredo, Texas, and were heading toward Mexico City when Dick gunned the motor and swerved toward a dog that trotted alongside the road. "It was an old half-dead mongrel," Perry later said in his confession, "brittle-boned and mangy, and the impact when it met the car was little more than a bird would make. But Dick was satisfied. 'Boy!' he said--and it was what he always said after running down a dog, which was something he did whenever the opportunity arose. 'Boy! We sure splattered him!'"[15] At another point in their desperate flight their route took them across the Mojave desert where they scavenged the ditches and waysides like stray animals for empty bottles which they sold in order to purchase food. The hunters were in pursuit and the trail led to a cheap-rent rooming house in Las Vegas, Nevada, where Perry had left a cardboard box in the landlady's safe-keeping. A warning was crayoned across the top! "Beware! Property of Perry E. Smith! Beware!" As Detective Nye undid the cord, "a cockroach emerged, and the landlady stepped on it, squashing it under the heel of her gold leather sandal."[16] Meantime the net was closing in on the two unsuspecting killers and the weary sheriff and his staff, Dewey and the imported team of K. B. I. agents conversed in hushed tones: "It was as though, like huntsmen hiding in a forest, they were afraid any abrupt sound or movement would warn away approaching beasts."[17]

Finally, the two killers were apprehended in Las Vegas and taken

to the city jail for interrogation. Capote continues the symbolic meaning when he describes Perry as "not pretty; the pink end of his tongue darted forth, flickering like the tongue of a lizard."[18] When word reached Holcomb as to Hickock's confession, the townspeople expressed their emotion in metaphors which reinforced the animal imagery with Mrs. Hartman of Hartman's Cafe commenting, "I don't wonder the varmint fainted"[19]; and Arthur, Mr. Clutter's younger brother, traveled a hundred miles to "get a good look at them. I just wanted to see what kind of animals they were."[20] Sheriff Dewey's wife Marie had voiced her opinion when the sheriff preceding his trip to Las Vegas to pick them up showed her the pictures of the two killers: "Marie, transfixed by Hickock's eyes, was reminded of a childhood incident--of a bob cat she'd once seen caught in a trap, and of how, though she'd wanted to release it, the cat's eyes, radiant with pain and hatred, had drained her with terror."[21]

One of the earlier chapters of <u>In Cold Blood</u> is devoted to direct description of the two murderers. Of Dick Hickock the author says, " . . . the lips were slightly aslant, the nose askew, and his eyes not only situated at uneven levels but of uneven size, the left eye being truly serpentine, with a venomous, sickly-blue squint that although it was involuntarily acquired, seemed nevertheless to warn of bitter sediment at the bottom of his nature."[22] Continuing the serpent image Capote describes an occasion on which Dick and Perry and two casual friends, Cowboy and Otto, spend the day in Acapulco deep-sea-fishing. While Cowboy skippered the boat, Otto fished, Perry fished and sang, but Dick did nothing but complain of the motion and "lay about sun-drugged and listless, like a lizard at siesta."[23]

Floyd Wells, a former inmate and cellmate of Hickock, was the informer who provided the information which led to the final apprehension of the two killers, but since he was in danger of retaliation from other inmates, Wells had never been publicly identified as the informer. In order that he might safely testify he had been removed from the prison and lodged in a small jail in a nearby county; nevertheless, "Wells' passage across the courtroom toward the witness stand was oddly stealthy . . . and, as he walked past Hickock, Hickock's lips writhed as he whispered a few atrocious words. Wells pretended not to notice; but like a horse that has heard the hum of a rattlesnake, he shied away."[24]

A large crowd had congregated in Garden City's town square around four o'clock which was the hour the county attorney had given as the probable arrival time of Hickock and Smith. The atmosphere of the crowd would more nearly indicate they were expecting a parade, or attending a political rally. Capote devotes an entire chapter to the arrival, and significantly introduces the chapter with a commentary which begins:

> Among Garden City's animals are two gray tomcats who are always together--thin, dirty strays with strange and clever habits. The chief ceremony of their day is performed at twilight. First they trot the length of Main Street, stopping to scrutinize the engine grilles of parked automobiles, particularly those stationed in front of the two hotels, for these cars, usually the property of travelers from afar, often yield what the bony, methodical creatures are hunting: slaughtered birds--crows chickadees, and sparrows foolhardy enough to have flown into the path of oncoming motorists. Using their paws as though they are surgical instruments, the cats extract from the grilles every feathery particle.[25]

The analogy was not lost on Perry Smith, who as the weeks went by had become familiar with life on Courthouse Square and was at first puzzled

by the behavior of the two thin gray tomcats. Mrs. Meier explained that the cats were hunting for dead birds caught in the vehicles' engine grilles, and from then on the sight became a painful experience for Perry. "Because most of my life," he told Mrs. Meier "I've done what they're doing. The equivalent."[26]

Like Dreiser almost four decades before, Capote had aptly utilized nature in the form of animal imagery to reveal the ruthlessness of man who preys upon his fellowman after the manner of creatures. It would appear that the strong succeed for a time, but that eventually both strong and weak, the Clutters and the killers, go down before forces which are beyond their control.

FOOTNOTES

[1]William Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (New York, 1960).

[2]Dreiser, p. 145.

[3]Dreiser, p. 272.

[4]Dreiser, p. 278.

[5]Dreiser, p. 442.

[6]Dreiser, p. 498.

[7]Dreiser, p. 494.

[8]Dreiser, p. 302.

[9]Dreiser, p. 550.

[10]Dreiser, p. 551.

[11]Dreiser, p. 558.

[12]Dreiser, p. 558.

[13]Theodore Dreiser (London, 1951), p. 189.

[14]Capote, p. 277.

[15]Capote, p. 132.

[16]Capote, p. 203.

[17]Capote, p. 215.

[18]Capote, p. 254.

[19]Capote, p. 258.

[20]Capote, p. 314.

[21]Capote, p. 188.

[22]Capote, p. 42.

[23]Capote, p. 139.

[24]Capote, p. 106.

[25]Capote, p. 278.

[26]Capote, p. 128.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Theodore Dreiser and Truman Capote had each, respectively, yearned to write a novel based on facts, and each reached his decision as to subject matter from the actual account of a murder-for-money incident in a newspaper clipping. Dreiser had chosen to solicit the company of a female companion, Helen Richardson, to accompany him on his research tour for his work; Capote had asked a childhood friend and companion, Harper Lee, to accompany him. To further the comparison, both Dreiser and Capote chose to research their material painstakingly by returning to the scene of the crime, retracing the steps of the murderers, interviewing witnesses, and thoroughly submerging themselves in the locale of the actual occurrence. Furthermore, each writer interviewed doctors, lawyers, psychiatrists, and each visited penitentiaries and talked with murderers, viewed the death cells and death chair. In each instance, the writers had access to the actual court records and to news files which they copied, in many instances, verbatim. For this, each writer has, with some justification, been accused of plagiarism by some critics. In addition, the two works reveal striking similarities in structure and basic symbolic devices.

Dreiser had begun his actual writing on An American Tragedy in 1920 and completed it six years later in 1926. Capote began his book in 1959 and completed it in 1965, also six years. Each writer was to

choose for the title of his book three words which conveyed a wealth of meaning. Dreiser's title suggests that the most typical thing that can happen to an American is the destruction of himself in the pursuit of riches. Clyde's mother, Mrs. Griffith, does not understand how Clyde's fate came to pass; nor does society understand. Thus, Dreiser indicates that men must go on repeating the same mistakes, lamenting the sorrows of a harsh destiny. An American Tragedy is primarily the story of a young man who would not normally have become a murderer but who became one because of a desire for money; at the same time Dreiser indicts society for maintaining the social and legal values which would stimulate a young man's actions and then insist on punishing him for that action. Capital punishment is likewise implicit in the title of Truman Capote's In Cold Blood. It, too, is a reflection on American life and reveals a collision between the desperate materialistic, savage part of American life and that which is insular and safe, more or less. The youthful killers, like Clyde Griffith, are suspended between self-expression and self-destruction and each is a product of an impoverished environment yearning for simple freedom. The two separate works are so similar in theme that one reporter was prompted to entitle an article, "In Cold Blood, an American tragedy."

The similarities continue, for each book, in its own time, was an immediate success far surpassing any work either author had previously written. And in each instance the authors received the highest accolade a writer could hope for when they were given a bid by the motion picture industry. The first movie made of Dreiser's An American Tragedy was a disappointment and resulted in months of bitter wrangling, but the most recent reproduction was a success, and,

produced under the title A Place in the Sun, realized box office success with stars Elizabeth Taylor, Monty Clift, and Shelly Winters. Capote voiced complete satisfaction with the portrayal of his work and the movie was an immediate box office success. Both movies were filmed in black and white. Interestingly enough, A Place in the Sun was being re-run on television simultaneously with the showing of In Cold Blood on movie screens throughout the country.

Since Dreiser, who wrote his An American Tragedy in the early part of the 1929's, extolled the hopes and failures of the American Dream, man has made many dreams come true. He has conquered polio, he put man in space, walked upon the surface of the moon, and witnessed the miracle of the transplantation of human limbs and organs. Yet four decades after Dreiser's work was both acclaimed and criticized by his contemporaries, Truman Capote produces another story of the hopes and failures of the American Dream, and it, too, both challenges and offends, for it reveals all too plainly the failure of the family unit, of the business ethic, of religion. Literature not only reflects society but it is a record of that era, and when one considers that history repeats itself with amazing frequency then one must conclude that literature in general, and certainly the two works studied here, contains certain prophetic qualities. Rebecca West in an article entitled "A Grave and Reverend Book" points out that there is a hateful continuity between the world of literature and the world of criminals, and concludes with the cogent remark that "Literature must go its own way, sometimes a blessing to its age, sometimes a curse, for no soothsayer can ever predict when it is to be one or the other."[1]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Harper's Magazine (New York, 1966), p. 110.

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