

Justice in a Small Town: *In Cold Blood*

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The deliberate act of killing another human being is a close definition of murder. But what if the victim was actually the perpetrator of a crime so heinous that it shook your community to its core? Is killing this person also murder? No matter how just a given idea is in the abstract, when the time comes to carry out a death sentence, there are people who cannot find justice in the actual taking of an eye for an eye. Additionally, sometimes passion for justice dies out with the crowds as those affected by the crime have no choice but to replace their passion with patience and to turn colder as they wait for the system to mandate a moral end to the ordeal.

In my small town, many people have been forced to consider the notion of justice, as the rape and murder of a seven year old girl on the property of my own public school has tested the community's character. The alleged murderer is behind bars and has pled not guilty for the past year. Even with the death penalty on the table, the man has refused to plea bargain. I suppose I should not be surprised to know that many good-hearted people of my town, who I feel to be righteous and who I know to act in the interest of the greater good were more than satisfied with the possibility of a death sentence for this man. Some of them have even said that if this accused man is acquitted, they feel that a lynch mob will, "take care of him anyway." I know I should not be surprised to hear these things, but I am. I also know that these God-fearing people are probably right: the accused is a dead man, no matter the outcome of the trial. I can't help but wonder whether the public of a large city would feel the same way the rural people do when something like this happens. Does the hustle and bustle of city life help people distance themselves from crimes like this one? Are urbanites more desensitized to murder, and therefore less likely to demand a death penalty in response to a heinous crime?

A few months after the murder in my community, I read *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote in my AP English class. I found that Capote's words still rang true as I read about the murder of the Clutter family so long ago in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas, a town a lot like mine. I contend that *In Cold Blood* offers contemporary readers insight concerning justice according to rural American society. At the end of the third section, titled "Answer," Capote recounts the emotional response of the communities surrounding Holcomb, Kansas to highlight the mixed feelings the rural citizens have concerning what to do with killers Dick and Perry when it was time to bring them to justice. The author accomplishes this through a cinematic writing style and compassion-invoking comparisons. Capote does this in order to broach the question of morality concerning the death penalty. Due to the unfamiliarity of Capote's wider audience with small town perspectives, this passage is vital to the reader's understanding of the townspeople's plight and paints a picture of the emotional process tied to the moral dilemma of defining justice as a response to a monstrous crime.

Capote introduces Garden City through an anecdote involving an inseparable pair of tomcats who are both "peculiar and adroit in nature," particularly so in their habits, which consist of picking bird carcasses from the grilles of vehicles parked in the territories they frequent (246). Solitary wanderers of the opening landscape, the cats in this wide-angled shot of the town square outside the jail are a diminutive and understated representation of the murderers, Dick and Perry. This is conveyed through

the way the cats are described as "always together" and "dirty strays" because these qualities are easily associated with Dick and Perry's codependent natures, and because Dick and Perry are social outcasts, a title commensurate with "dirty strays" (246). The author also uses cats to represent the criminals so that he can illustrate them in a non-threatening way. As most of us know, cats can be curious, loving, and endearing to us, and as many people would have compassion for two stray cats who are forced into this living condition, Capote suggests that perhaps the isolated outcasts Dick and Perry can be pitied as well.

Capote also uses the cats as a transition to the time in which the rest of the passage is set by describing the unusually ample supply of deceased birds found by the cats on this particular day. Capote then continues to describe the significance of the day, being that it is the day Dick and Perry are to arrive at the town to be held in the county jail until their trials. Capote begins this section by detailing news reporters showing up in advance, and the predicted atmosphere of the town square, the area where Finney County residents chose to congregate in wait for the prisoners. The author reveals that press from a variety of surrounding states came as much as three days early to highlight the rampant publicity of the event. The air here is filled with anticipation of a hostile response from the people congregated there, but Capote ends this section of the passage with police Captain Murray's remark, "Don't look like a necktie party to me" (247). This sets up the contrast between the prediction that the town would respond in a hostile manner with the reality of the town's high morale.

The following paragraphs highlight the festive attitude of the gathering at the square. Instead of somber or hostile, the assemblage of people is jubilant and carefree, as if they were in attendance at the opening of a carnival. Here it says, "High school students chanted cheerleader rhymes, bubbled bubble gum, and gobbled hot dogs and soda pop," and, "Men strolled about with young children perched on their shoulders" (247). These details emphasize the lightheartedness of the people early in their wait. The sun is shining warmly on the innocents as they celebrate together their hope of a swift execution of justice. They are finally safe again.

Capote adds to this air of festivity by including quotes collected by a news reporter gathered from an array of different townspeople, including one from a typical rural character: "I believe in capital punishment. It's like the Bible says-an eye for an eye. And even then we're still two pair short" (248). This quote combined with the previously mentioned mood of the crowd at large implies the townspeople are, at the time, dismissive of the ideas that the Clutter murders are more than an open-shut case, and that the perpetrators of the crime deserve punishment less barbarous than death.

This out-of-sorts welcoming party is followed by a shift in weather. As the prisoners draw closer to the town, the sun begins to set, taking with it the warmth and celebration. This temperature change influenced many of the group to return home, leaving the remaining few cold and grumbling about the lengthy wait, right as Dick and Perry arrive at the court house steps. The shift from warm to cold as Dick and Perry appear symbolizes a forthcoming shift in the mentality among the spectators and townspeople. Here Capote offers an abstract analogy between the weather and the overall temperature of the people as they endure the marathon of the judicial process. Contrary to popular

desire, justice comes slowly, and even the most passionate people can turn cold before it is finally carried to its bittersweet end.

The final two paragraphs in the closing passage of section three of *In Cold Blood* pertain to the effect of the actual arrival of Dick and Perry in the town. Much to the surprise of the journalists, rather than shouting abuse at the murderers, the townspeople who weathered the cold were silent, "as though amazed to find them humanly shaped" (248). This shows that the townspeople originally saw the murderers as monstrous, something twisted and evil, something non-human, and in this manner of characterizing the two, it was easy to judge them harshly and without mercy. But after seeing the men in person, those who bore witness have trouble doing anything, let alone condoning the slaughter of their fellow man, despite the heinous degree of their crimes.

After the criminals pass through the jail house doors, everyone promptly left, and the cats are again left to reign the cold, empty streets. Capote concludes the passage with the following quote: "Warm rooms and warm suppers beckoned them, and as they hurried away, leaving the cold square to the two gray cats, the miraculous autumn departed too; the year's first snow began to fall" (248). Once more, there are parallels between the fugitives and the gray cats and the town people and the weather. While the spectators return to the warmth of their own homes, the cats are left in the cold. This again reflects the isolation of Dick and Perry. The snowfall arriving as the crowd departs contributes a feeling of totality to the isolation represented by the cold. As the temperature drops, fewer and fewer people stayed at the square; by the time everyone left, snow dusted the empty ground. The snow is also a representation of the severity of the shift in opinion held by the townspeople. The cold before the snow represented the original shift, and since snowfall is used to illustrate the growing intensity of the coldness, the inference can be made that this is a metaphorical parallel to the shift of the townspeople's mood. They grew cold in their wait, and what's worse, winter is long. So is the judicial process.

Capote's audience may have been originally comprised of those who view small towns and their culture as almost entirely foreign, as early readers of this nonfiction novel were likely to live in densely populated areas like New York. Capote had an earnest following among city socialites, but in areas like Holcomb, Kansas, his name was not a likely or common utterance until the book was published. An audience of urbanites would have most likely been somewhat desensitized with the notion of murder, even murder in cold blood. Therefore, they may have needed this passage from chapter four to help them understand the effect a case like Dick and Perry's has on a small town. This passage provides an up-close view of the profound effect of rural crime in order to evoke introspective thought regarding the idea of whether capital punishment is necessary and whether it provides justice within their own society, or if capital punishment simply serves a need of the community to gain swift vengeance and a sense of security by permanently removing criminals.

As I prepare to submit this essay, I find that my town remains in much the same shape as Holcomb, Kansas. Winter is soon to fall upon us, and our murderer is not set to go to final trial any time soon. All of the pink tribute ribbons, all of the yard signs, and all of the tee shirts that once heralded support for the victim's family have been set aside. There are no more daily reminders of what happened here, and the passion for justice has turned cold. In spite of this, the accused man sits isolated in the county jail,

awaiting his trial like a stray cat caged by animal control. And like a cat in this predicament, a long life is most likely not in the cards for him.