

Attention to details as  
a way to manipulate a  
reader's mind



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Famous novelist, Truman Capote, in his non-fiction book, *In Cold Blood*, recounts the murders of the Clutter family committed by Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Although this book is considered non-fiction, critics have questioned the authenticity of Capote's story over the years. Specifically, in two segments of text found on pages 107-113, Capote contrasts the two characters as they recount the same day from each of their perspectives. He manages to distort the reader's perception of the two main characters in order to support his personal opinions of them. The placement and distortion of the juxtaposed texts allows Capote to manipulate his readers into viewing Hickock and Smith as he intends them to be perceived.

Capote contends with Smith's hard upbringing throughout the entire book. In emphasizing the tribulations Smith dealt with, Capote appeals to the sympathetic emotions of his readers. "It was 'painful' to imagine that one might be 'not just right'—particularly if whatever was wrong was not your own fault, but 'maybe a thing you were born with.'" (Capote 110). It is undoubtedly Capote's own interjections that lead the audience to associate Smith's actions with his family and childhood experiences. The quotation marks indicate he was directly quoting Smith, while the other words may have been mixed with his own thoughts. Capote continues to appeal to the emotions of his readers by deliberately breaking the fourth wall by directly addressing the readers and Smith in this text, allowing them to directly connect with Smith. Capote is not only conveying his thoughts to the reader, but to Smith as well. This effectively strengthens the narrative voice and the personal connection one feels to Smith. He claims culpability of Smith's current lifestyle to his childhood, referencing his sister and alcoholic mother

who had both committed suicide, “ Look at his family! Look at what happened there!” (110). Capote continues to make his own interjections rather than purely narrating the scene. The reader becomes conscious of this and subconsciously agrees with Capote. This tactic continues to evoke sympathy from his readers. In contrast, Hickock is not portrayed as someone who suffered as a child. The immediate contrast between these two characters allows Capote to elicit compassion from the readers and for them to understand Smith’s actions. Dick expresses his normality repeatedly, claiming, “I’m a normal,” (108). His claims convince the readers that he is ordinary compared to Smith and has experienced no tribulations that have caused his actions. “ And Dick meant what he said. He thought himself as balanced, as sane as anyone,” (108). Capote interjects again, expressing his opinion on Hickock, distinctly different from that of Smith’s. As a reader, one’s opinion typically coincides with that of the author due to his use of rhetorical strategies. Capote’s interjections force the reader to become attached to Smith, while becoming disconnected to Hickock. These two clashing personas contribute to Capote’s intention for the readers to sympathize Smith. There is no rationale to Hickock’s actions, but Capote implies a direct correlation between Smith’s childhood and his current behaviour.

In each segment, the characters both recount Smith’s story about killing King, who was “ a nigger” (109) friend of Smith. Each point of view allows the readers to understand the story from each perspective and how it develops the character’s persona. Dick recalls the story as it provoked “ his original interest in Perry,” and “ his assessment of Perry’s character and

potentialities, was founded on the story Perry had once told him of how he had beaten a coloured man to death," (109). Capote addresses Hickock's intentions for a relationship with Smith were founded on homicidal qualities. This implies Hickock's objective to kill was premeditated. Smith recalls telling this fib, " because he wanted Dick's friendship, wanted Dick to ' respect' him, think him ' hard' as much ' the masculine type' as he had considered Dick to be," (111). Capote directly quotes Smith again, enforcing his own opinion alongside Smith's. The contrast in stories suggests a difference in character between the two. Hickock is perceived as " hard" and someone who respects others primarily on their ability to kill. The references to Hickock's masculinity support Capote's previously expressed opinion. Hickock is not to be sympathized with, as his masculinity reinforces the idea that he is capable of killing, while Smith is weak. Smith suggests that he would never be as " masculine" as Hickock was, thus unable to murder the Clutter family without remorse, making him less of a monster.

From the beginning of the book, Capote's narration relies heavily on detail in order to set his scene. However, it is the details he chooses to leave out in these two segments of text that allow the reader to perceive Hickock and Smith as he intended. The absence of detail in Hickock's version followed immediately by Smith's abundance of detail creates Smith's persona as that of a more rounded character. In Hickock's account of the scene, he nonchalantly recalls that he, " saw a dog trotting along in the warm sunshine," (110), as opposed to Smith's detailed account containing imagery of the " old half-dead mongrel, brittle-boned and mangy, and the impact, as it met the car, was little more than what a bird might make," (112). This

strong imagery of hitting a feeble dog depicts Hickock as a monster. Despite the frail condition of the dog, “ Dick was satisfied. ‘ Boy!’ he said— as 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!’ (113). Smith confirms that Hickock has previously intentionally hit dogs, but implies he does not approve of these actions. The juxtaposition of these two accounts exemplifies not only the difference between the character’s accounts, but also the contrast between their internal thoughts. Hickock’s narrative enforces the perception that he has little to no discontent in killing, as opposed to Smith, who does. Although Smith ultimately admitted to killing the Clutter family unassisted, (244-245), it was Hickock who had instigated the crime (161). The allegory of the dog indicates Smith’s remorse for killing the Clutter family. Hickock refuses to talk about the murders and does not mention the murder of the dog, where as Smith frequently expresses his guilt and that “ there must be something wrong with us,” (110). In Smith’s account of killing the dog, he enforces the idea that it was exclusively Hickock who had done the deed and enjoyed it. The dog scenario itself is significant in portraying Smith as a complex and remorseful character, which implies that Smith is remorseful of the crime he performed and Hickock was the one who initiated it.

Capote subtly manipulates his readers into feeling sympathetic toward Smith through his rhetorical strategies. He conveys Hickock and Smith as complete opposites, despite their shared crime. By influencing his readers through his personal opinion, Capote is able to sway his readers into believing Smith is not as culpable for the murders as his partner, Hickock is.