

## IN COLD BLOOD

### **Perry smith is the tragic figure of the text.**

Throughout *In Cold Blood*, author Truman Capote sets Perry Smith up as the tragic figure, highlighting the myriad of ways that tragedy has been central throughout Perry's life and played a pivotal role in his character development and subsequent crimes. Capote explores the overt aspects of Perry's tragedy with plenty of references to his dysfunctional childhood, as well as the more covert tragedy which afflicts him with allusions to the tragic waste of potential, as Capote makes us privy to Perry's compassionate nature. Yet despite these clear, and significant illustrations of Perry Smith as a tragic figure, one who deserves our pity and compassion, Capote nonetheless acknowledges the ambiguity surrounding Perry's nature, unsettling the reader with his lucid and unsentimental descriptions of Perry's attitude to the murders he commits, and also to other members of his family, in particular his sister Barbara.

It was Perry Smith's abusive and neglectful childhood that shapes the man we meet in Capote's non-fiction novel into a mentally dysfunctional character who does not fully understand the consequences of his actions, Capote draws our attention to the overtly traumatic aspects of Perry's childhood which was far from normal. With lack of structure, little to no education and multiple accounts of physical and emotional abuse that Perry received, it is only natural that he starts to become mentally unstable, but due to this hard childhood we start to see him as the true tragic figure of the text. He also had challenges later on in his life, when, during his teens, his mother, sister, and brother all commit suicide. These deaths had a huge effect on him, reminding him of how, "as a child I often thought of killing myself" (pg. 205), an impulse that was largely due to his parents "fighting" (pg. 138) and their addiction "to whiskey (pg. 138). Perry's mother becomes an alcoholic when Perry is still quite young, this leads to Perry and his siblings ending up in an orphanage, where once again he was abused, this time for both the colour of his skin and for his frequent bed wetting due to his weak bladder. Perry was often called a "nigger" (pg. 139) and the nuns where constantly "hitting me" (pg. 139) for wetting his bed, and we are told how, as a young and helpless boy, Perry is "nearly drowned" by nuns at the salvation army children's shelter. We start to see Perry not just as a murderer and 'evil' person, but as a vulnerable, emotionally stunted man who has had a traumatic and dysfunctional upbringing. The reader starts to feel for Perry, to empathise with him, and with these feelings a sense of tragedy emerges around Perry as a character. Though this exploration of Perry's dysfunctional childhood, we can begin to see some of the reasons that lead to Perry killing the Clutter's. Capote creates a connection between Perry and the reader, and this connection creates a vital link, as it allows the reader to begin to feel empathy for the man behind the monster, and thus see Perry as the true tragic figure of the text.

Through Capote's detailed extensive and study of Perry Smith's character, the reader also starts to connect to the more covert aspects of Perry's tragedy. Dick tells us that Perry "possessed unusual and valuable qualities" (pg. 65), that he was a "gift" (pg. 66) and a "rarity" (pg. 66), and we begin to see that Perry is much more than a "cripple" (pg ??), he is a man of intelligence and worth, and possess traits that if lost would make the world a worse place. Capote manages to create this angelic surrounding/aura around Perry, so that even though he kills an entire family, we still feel that at the heart of it he is a "good" (pg.??) man. It is not just Capote and the reader that begin to feel sorry for Perry, but Al Dewey, Joe James and Mrs Meier also elicit sympathy towards Perry. Joe James says, "Perry was a likeable kid, well liked around the neighbourhood" (pg. 4.161), and while in prison awaiting death row, Mrs Meier cooks for Perry and tries to make him as comfortable as possible, and makes an effort to talk to Perry and get to know him. Al Dewey says Perry was "not altogether uncharitable" (pg. 243) and through this we can see that Al does become slightly sympathetic towards Perry.

In this way we begin to see that Perry was also liked by many people, and that some of these characters see Perry as the tragic figure, and that his death is a true tragedy as it means the loss of a person who is both compassionate and naturally intelligent. Another key point in the covert side of Perry's tragedy, is the baffling compassion he shows towards the Clutters when he murders them. He went out of his way to make other people feel comfortable, putting a piece of cardboard under Herb stating, "I didn't feel I ought to have him stretch out on the cold floor" (pg. 243). Just minutes before killing him Perry asks Herb if his rope is "too tight" (pg. 244), and he "stuffed a pillow under his (Kenyon) head" (pg. 244) even as he prepares him for his death. The most courageous and compassionate act of all may be Perry telling his 'friend' Dick to "leave her (Nancy) alone" (pg. 246), a pivotal moment where Perry stands up to Dick for the first time, and in the process saves Nancy from another cruel fate that Dick had planned all along. Through these scenes we can see that Perry is a compassionate and thoughtful man, and that even though he did the unspeakable of killing a family, he did it in a compassionate way, and he didn't "want to harm them" (pg. 244) and thought of Herb as "a very nice gentleman" (pg. 244). In the end it becomes clear that Perry kills the family for Dick, because he wants to feel loved, appreciated and acknowledged by someone. Capote has created Perry as the tragic figure in the text, who has been misunderstood, his tragedy being the family and circumstances into which he was born.... had he been dealt a different hand, would have lived a very different life.

Despite the undisputed tragic and traumatic childhood Perry experienced, there is, nonetheless, some ambiguity surrounding Perry's tragic status, which may discredit, or at least challenge the notion of him as the tragic figure of the text. Capote describes Perry as a deeply complex figure, who on the one side is compassionate and intelligent, yet the flip side to that is a psychologically distorted character who was "spooky as hell", a "natural killer" (pg. 66), one who "draws up the bed covers" (pg. 73) on his victims, and who provides the comfort of "pillows" (pg. 75) for someone who will be murdered, ideas that illustrate Perry as a mentally unstable character, thus creating confusion in the readers response to him, on the one hand we feel pity for him and the other we are repelled by his irrational thoughts and actions. Through Barbara we see another side to Perry, as she describes him as a "fool" (pg. 185), someone who has "no respect for anyone" (pg. 184), stating that she is "afraid" (pg. 185) of Perry, that she fears for her life. Perry himself confesses to wanting to kill Barbara, saying "the only real regret I have - I wish the hell my sister had been in that house" (pg. 149). This statement tells us that Perry does not feel repentant for killing the Clutter family, instead he wishes his only surviving sister was there too, so he could have killed her as well. Through this we see that Perry is not that man he may seem to be, but that perhaps he has "fooled" (pg. 185) us, creating a false sense of security around our reaction to him. Capote's examination of Barbara's character also shows us that it may not be Perry's abusive childhood that has made him the man he is now, she too had the same arduous childhood and she has not become a cold blooded killer. Rather Barbara is depicted as an upstanding American citizen who has created a life for herself and her family, in a "pleasant house" (pg. 183), with a play area for the children within a "white picket fence" (pg. 183), all things Perry does not have but longs for.

Through this exploration we as the reader can see that Capote has clearly painted two sides to Perry, the first being the obvious overt side of the tragic figure who has been shaped and undeniably damaged by his dysfunctional childhood, and the less obvious, more covert tragedy that is seen in his inability to explore his full potential due to his circumstances outside his control, leading to his death, and the loss of a compassionate and intelligent man. Yet we are also asked to see the other side of Perry, the warped dark side, the angry unforgiving son and brother, and this challenges his role as being the true tragic figure of the text.