

## IN COLD BLOOD

**“Truman Capote’s text “In Cold Blood” suggests that family relationships shape our identity”.**

Truman Capote’s “In Cold Blood” appears to reflect his belief that family relationships play a significant role in the formation of personal identity. Much of the negative behaviour and mental health issues seem to stem from traumatic and broken or fragile and unstable one family relationships. This can be seen in the criminal tendencies of Perry, as his tragic past with his parents and siblings clearly demonstrates a lack of “love” or “direction”, and is thus offered as the basis on which Perry’s flawed identity was founded upon. Similarly, the case of Bonnie Clutter illustrates that while she was once a vibrant and eager person, her husband and family’s failure to address her descent into mental illness has seen her become timid and shy. As a result of this absence of a strong mothering presence, Nancy Clutter becomes an extroverted busy girl in order to fix the whole in her life. Certain behaviours that should relate to identity certainly do appear to be the result of pure inexplicable circumstance, such as in the seemingly happy life of Dick that results in him being hanged for four murders. However, Capote seems to believe that Dick’s murderous intents were perhaps the result of brain damage suffered in an accident as well as outside forces such as a mysterious inner evil. To a significant extent however, family relationships and the profound change in character’s demeanour seems to suggest that the surrounding familial forces in life indeed play an integral role in forming our identity.

The impact family relationships have on the formation of identity is perhaps most evident in the character of Perry. Since an early age, he has lived with nomad parents- an abusive father and an alcoholic mother who he saw “choke to death on her own vomit”. The torment inflicted by the nuns, and the suicide of two of his siblings further demonstrates why such personality and mental flaws manifested in Perry’s identity, which in turn would perhaps have prevented him from murdering four innocent people. It is easy to imagine that if he had been provided with loving and supportive relationships rather than abusive and exploitative ones (such with Dick and Wille-Jay) the direction and decisions he made in his life could have been vastly different. Perry’s frustration at his inability to achieve the “American Dream” and his criminal means of expressing this frustration could potentially have been tempered by the moral values and worth of human life that his parents should have instilled in his identity. Perry represents every aspect possible of what it means to come from a broken family, and in his murdering of the Clutters destroys the symbolic representation not just of the “perfect”, American Dream family, but a visibly strong and connected, moral family. Despite the obvious issues lying beneath the idealised façade that they project to the community of Holcomb, the Clutters are still clearly close, and love one another, as the jovial relationship between Nancy and Kenyon is highlighted by Capote, as is the fact that Herb’s “last words” were to ask about the condition of his wife. Perry himself seems to struggle with identity and at times cannot connect his killings to his lack of healthy familial relationships- “I wonder why I did it?” Yet Dick’s projection of feminine language onto Perry sees Perry struggling to escape from the effeminising and in this struggle murders the Clutters in order to force Dick to realize that he is a “coward” and that Perry is the masculine confident man. Perry’s identity is thus clearly the result of tumultuous relationships both with family and with friends. Capote seems to stress the importance family influences in his depiction both of Perry and his role in the obvious ending (the killings) that these negative influences force this unfulfilled man to commit.

Similarly to Perry, Bonnie’s identity is heavily influenced by mental illness, however this doesn’t manifest in such terrible behaviour. In the time frame of “In Cold Blood” Bonnie appears to have a demure, shy and timid personality, and clearly struggles with a mental illness. She does journey out into the community and obviously loves Herb and the children,

however the unaddressed issues- “the inexplicable despondency”- that she deals with have formed her once “affectionate” and “charming” self into an almost unrecognisable version of this past self, someone who cannot escape her “world of misery” and thus is terrified of “missing out on everything”. Briefly, mental illness is associated with crime, in a statement by Mrs. Hartman that gives more credit to mental instability than the American justice system of the 1950’s: “my first thought was Bonnie...a lot of people thought *maybe* on account of her spells.” However, criminal impulses are not ingrained in her identity as they are Perry’s. Clearly, the tragic character of Bonnie not only demonstrates the ability of family relationships to form, impact and change identity, but also the profound effect mental illness can have on familial interactions and personal actions.

The character of Dick, however, seems to contradict this theory of identity formation. He appears to have lived a stable and content life, with a happy childhood and loving parents. He has divorced and remarried, and briefly been incarcerated, however many people go through such events and do not become cold-hearted plotters of murder. Nor do his felonious actions indicate mental illness-if any, it was his suspected brain damage suffered in an accident that led to him identifying with a desire to kill; not a mental illness born out of a lack of, or negative, family influences like the clear case of Perry. Thus, he seems to discredit the idea that family relationships shape identity, as the loving and supportive environment he has grown up in do not support his personality of a murderous, calculating, (“Dick resolved to exploit Perry”) and destructive criminal. However, it seems that Capote does give some credit to Dick’s brain damage, as he highlights this both in his initial description of Dick, and in the analysis of Dick’s psyche in the trial; “he was the best natured little kid” according to Mrs. Hickock. But more importantly, Capote seems to be increasingly interested in the idea of sociopathy and inherent evil, as understanding the psyche of man with paedophilic tendencies and a desire to “blast hair all over them walls” otherwise becomes utterly inexplicable, and realizing the *why* behind Dick and Perry’s murderous actions seems to be one of the most integral ideas of the text. In this way, Capote explores not only the impact of family relationships on the formation of identity, but also reveals the unknown outside forces that imbue evil and maliciousness in personality development.

Thus, clearly, Capote suggests that the formation of our identity is greatly reliant on family relationships. As we see with Perry, abusive influences can result in terrible outcomes. Bonnie’s tragic identity paralysis as the result of her mental illness is also significantly a cause of the 1950’s misunderstanding of mental illness, which is reflected in her family’s interactions with her, despite their good intentions. Dick appears to be the enigma of this theory, and so Capote attributes inexplicable forces to his flawed identity. Regardless, the idea that family influences impact the formation of identity is undeniable, and an important theme of “In Cold Blood”.