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Two Worlds: Aspects of Shelley's *Frankenstein* in Miller's *Capote*

Some works act as master narratives for our culture, evolving and being appropriated by each successive generation to take on new meanings; shed old ones; and to mirror, challenge, and/or critique the contemporary culture. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has become one of these stories. While the book remains in wide circulation through numerous editions, *Frankenstein*'s greatest triumph may be its role in shaping numerous tales that follow it. One such work is Bennett Miller's film *Capote* (2005).

The similarities between *Frankenstein* and *Capote* are not as apparent on the surface as *Frankenstein*'s own connections to Prometheus, Faust, or *Paradise Lost*. Most initial reviews of *Capote* compare it only to the book it is about—Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, which details the death of the Clutter family in Holcomb, Kansas, a husband and wife and two children who were murdered by Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. Nevertheless, the narrative structure of *Capote* and the depiction of its Truman Capote character not only parallel but borrow from several of the themes and narrative structures of Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

This essay illuminates these points of similarity between *Capote* and *Frankenstein* to illustrate the ways in which Shelley's work remains an inspiration for contemporary American narrative. I focus on the ways in which *Capote* has transformed essential themes into another genre and time. By comparing the similarities in narrative structure between *Frankenstein* and *Capote*, I create a series of intersections through which the two works can be compared—the preparation for creation, the ambivalence of creation and abandonment, the two narrative worlds, and the final reconciliation/destruction. While the makers of *Capote* likely did not actively appropriate these themes from *Frankenstein*, the parallels between the two texts demonstrates

how the *Frankenstein* story has become so wholly incorporated into our collective narrative consciousness. First, however, I will briefly discuss at the metanarratives of both works to highlight the ways in which *Capote* both draws from and departs from Shelley's work.

METANARRATIVE

In "The Ambiguous Heritage of *Frankenstein*," George Levine points out that many scholars bemoan the replacement of Shelley's Creature with James Whale's Universal horror film version of the Monster, played by Boris Karloff (1931). However, Levine argues instead that Shelley's *Frankenstein* remains alive, not just as a classic book or required reading on college campuses, but also as "a metaphor for our own culture crises" (25). He outlines several ways in which the *Frankenstein* story frames the discussion of issues that continue to be debated in subsequent periods, one of which I will return to. *Capote* continues in this tradition, as many of the binaries in Shelley's tale of creator against creature remain useful in examining Miller's film. These structural and thematic connections imply that many of the issues and struggles raised by *Frankenstein* have become imbedded in the storytelling traditions of the Western world.

On the other hand, I do not want to reach too far in claiming similarities between the two works, lest I be willing to make an error of overstepping my bounds like Victor Frankenstein did (though I hope that, even if the reader finds my claims to be a stretch, the error won't have as dangerous of consequences as Victor's). The dissimilarities between the two texts are glaring. One of the most notable caveats is that *Capote* is a film and, thus, many of its narrative structures follow a rich filmic history. The ways in which Miller tells the story differ from the nineteenth century writing conventions used in *Frankenstein*. Features such as the use of black-and-white and the generic construction of a biopic in *Capote* build on established filmic conventions that

help set a particular mood and mode of storytelling. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley draws on many of the autobiographical conventions of novels and travelogues from her time period to construct Victor Frankenstein's tale. The narrative comes in the tradition of the Gothic novel and the style of the Romantic period. Many features of Shelley's writing are most feasible in the novel, for instance the use of letters to further the plot and explicit psychological drama through first-person explanations of frame-of-mind. *Capote* can also depict psychological characteristics and utilize varied storytelling devices. However, Miller must do so through the conventions of filmic language, where editing devices, facial expressions, lighting, and myriad other methods are used to convey the psychological motivations of characters.

Perhaps even more important than the difference in medium are the divergent inspirations of the two narratives. For Shelley, *Frankenstein* builds on the work of John Milton and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the narratives behind their work, as well as the myth of Prometheus. Conversely, Bennett Miller recreates the life of a famed historical figure in Truman Capote and depicts the writing process of a book based on facts, as Capote plays a mixture of novelist and journalist. This "real"/fictional distinction is important to keep in mind, as it places important restrictions on the ways in which *Capote* can be read in the tradition of *Frankenstein*. Because *Capote* tells the story of the life of a fairly recent historical figure, Miller must contend with issues of fidelity and the inevitable comparisons to biographical details of Capote which viewers and critics can trace through various other sources. On the other hand, Shelley's tale is an original fictional creation, even as it builds on familiar myths of Western civilization.

Despite the limitations of this study, there are ways in which, even structurally, *Capote* is reminiscent of *Frankenstein*. One such similarity is in the complexity of the mediation of each story's telling. In *Frankenstein*, Shelley uses Captain Walton as a framing device. Walton

recounts Victor Frankenstein's story throughout the novel. Furthermore, his impressions of the Creature are Walton's version of Frankenstein's story, aside from the final encounter Walton has with the Creature directly. Therefore, the version of the Creature we meet appears via the mediations of Frankenstein and Walton, as well as the author Shelley.

Capote focuses on the ways in which Truman Capote gathered information for the writing of *In Cold Blood* and specifically his relationship with Perry Smith. Thus, Perry Smith's "story" and what happened to the Clutter family that night are narrated by Smith through Capote, then through Gerald Clark's novel and Dan Futterman's screenplay, to become Miller's film. The differences between these remediations of the Creature's and Perry's story are glaring, since all of the framing tales in Shelley's story are fictional, while many of these frames around Perry Smith's story are not only based on "reality" but are actual remediations (from Capote's diary to biography novel to screenplay to film) and not framing tales inside the actual story. Nevertheless, the multiple layers of framing and retelling are important to note because both *Frankenstein* and *Capote*, aside from their narrative content, are stories about the telling of stories, the reliability and subjectivity of conveying a narrative, and the motivations behind characters' framing of stories. For Shelley, all of these remediations take place directly in the text. In *Capote,* the many remediations of Perry Smith's story to reach the version of the film exist both preceding and within the work: Miller's telling of Futterman's telling of Clark's telling of Capote's telling of Perry Smith's telling of what happened. Both narratives raise questions about the authenticity of the objective voice, narrator motivations (especially those of Victor Frankenstein and Truman Capote), and other issues of remediation inherent in all storytelling forms.

PREPARATION FOR CREATION

The actual content of both stories follow a sometimes-similar trajectory, despite the great disparity of the actual events depicted. Both stories begin with a foreshadowing. This first segment in *Frankenstein* is much lengthier than in *Capote*. Miller's *Capote* supposes prior audience knowledge of who Truman Capote is and his authorship of *In Cold Blood*, one of the canonical American books of the twentieth century. In *Frankenstein*, we get an indication of the story's ending at the beginning, as Captain Walton views the Creature from afar and later finds Dr. Frankenstein, who then tells his story. Shelley then gives us voluminous information about Victor Frankenstein's life previous to his creation of the Creature through Victor himself, who gives a chronological account of his upbringing and education.

This form of starting *in medias res* works differently in *Capote*. The work begins with the first lines of *In Cold Blood*, whose publication will be the endpoint of the film. Miller then introduces Capote at a point in his life before the tragedy in Holcomb has even happened. He has just published *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and is now at the height of his arrogance, telling stories about literary rival Jimmy Baldwin. Only in one of the next scenes, while Truman looks through a copy of the *New York Times* and chances on a small blurb about the murder of the Clutter family, does the story of his relationship with Holcomb, and later Perry Smith, begin.

Although through very different tactics, the beginnings of both stories juxtapose drastically different points in each character's life to produce similar foreshadowing effects. The opening segments—the discovery of Dr. Frankenstein near death and the first few lines of *In Cold Blood* depicting the discovery of the Clutter family's bodies—serve as a chilling foreshadowing which remains in the reader's/viewer's mind throughout the proceeding "happy" scenes. The arrogance of both Victor Frankenstein and Truman Capote depicted in these stories

clash with our subsequent memory of what will happen in both of their lives: Capote's involvement in investigating a brutal story that will drag him far from the New York City penthouses of the intelligentsia who laughs at his jokes, and Frankenstein's current state of terrible health and his traveling through the arctic. Both characters demonstrate an overriding arrogance, Victor through his studies and his growing feeling of power through the knowledge of science and Truman through his finally being at the center of attention and captivating and controlling a crowd.

Capote quickly launches into Truman's discovery of Holcomb and his decision to write a piece for *The New Yorker*. While *Frankenstein* may take a little longer to exit the expository phase, Victor leaves his innocence and his happiness behind for good when he begins to obsess over constructing and giving life to the Creature, barely writing to his father and Elizabeth. Through first-person narrative, Victor demonstrates his frame-of-mind and his growing obsession with the creation, studying and robbing graves for body parts, "pursu(ing) nature to her hiding places" (32), all in preparation for constructing a being who would make him forever known, whose creation would give him the ultimate power at the pinnacle of scientific achievement.

Although the objective of Frankenstein and Capote is quite different, the path Capote travels is, in many ways, very similar. He quickly becomes fixated on the story that will become *In Cold Blood*. He sees it as his pinnacle of literary achievement, the work that would make him forever known. He declares it, "The book I was always meant to write." Soon, just as Victor did, Truman turns away from everyone, including his partner Jack and friend and early ally in Holcomb, Harper Lee. Jack calls him repeatedly, urging him to come home or to go to Spain on

a retreat. Instead, just as Victor becomes estranged from his former life, Truman refuses contact

and completely immerses himself in the Holcomb story.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF CREATION AND ABANDONMENT

Truman soon meets Perry Smith, and his understanding of the Holcomb story changes

forever. He becomes fascinated with him, a relationship which leads Truman to tell not only the

Clutters' story and the police's story but also capture the perspective of Perry and Dick. Truman

is simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by his relationship with Perry, feeling a connection to

him but also seeing himself in another class. At one point, after he and Perry have compared

their childhoods in detail in one of their prison interviews, Truman says, "It's as if Perry and I

grew up in the same house. And one day he went out the back door, and I went out the front."

This identification closely resembles Victor's feeling of identification with the Creature, even as

he is repulsed by his creation's actions.

While Truman didn't "create" Perry Smith, he does create the Perry Smith character in *In

Cold Blood* and the public's perception of the man and his involvement in the murders of the

Clutter family. So, the Perry Smith discussed in contemporary society is almost as much

Truman Capote's creation as the Creature is Frankenstein's. And it is fitting, then, that the

ambivalence of creation plays an important role in *Capote*, as it does in Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

The Creature repulses Victor:"I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but

now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust

filled my heart" (35). Yet, despite (and through) Victor's repulsion, many critics have seen how

clearly the Creature acts as a double for Victor, and how Victor may, in some ways, see the

Creature's violent actions as a lashing out against societal forces (Levine 33). Truman Capote

explicitly states through the quote mentioned above that Perry has become a doppelganger for him, an example of what would have happened if he had "gone out the back door."

Furthermore, the ambivalence of Victor toward his creation leads to repeated abandonment. First, he abandons him at the point of creation. Later, when the Creature does find him and Victor agrees to make a mate for him, he backs out of his promise and again leaves the Creature. This pattern exists throughout *Capote* as well, as Truman initially helps Perry and Dick find representation for an appeal but later rejects helping them further, sinking into a melancholy very similar in many ways to Victor's mood after the deaths of William and Justine, when "remorse extinguished every hope" (60). Likewise, Truman is ambivalent toward his involvement with Perry and finds refuge in sinking back into himself and into his former life, ignoring his role in shaping the events to come and in giving Perry hope through their interaction. Truman begins ignoring Perry's correspondence and sinks into the writing of the book, waiting while Perry's execution nears.

TWO WORLDS

If the Creature and Dr. Frankenstein are two halves of one man, as scholars like Levine suggest, the two halves are often in opposition, as the doppelganger model would suggest. Dr. Frankenstein is a respected and reputed man in Swiss society, the member of an upstanding family and an accomplished student. On the other hand, the Creature's physical deformity leaves him shunned by society, unable to participate even though he initially feels a great desire to love and be loved by others, as is demonstrated through his relationship with the De Lacy family. The Creature, when trying to persuade Dr. Frankenstein to create him a mate, draws several times on his being cut off from society. "I am alone, and miserable; man will not associate with

me" (97), he says, in an attempt to convince Dr. Frankenstein to create a bride for him, later adding, "It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world" (99).

This imagery echoes in Capote's claim of Perry and he growing up in the same house but taking different paths. In *Capote*, Perry has experienced the world from a completely different perspective than Capote. While both had similar disadvantages in childhood, Capote went on to become a heralded writer and a New York socialite, whereas Perry is on death row. Yet Truman reminds Perry, "We're not as different as you might think." Indeed, part of the horror of both stories is that both Dr. Frankenstein and Capote see themselves in their creation. The unemotional logic of the Creature appalls Frankenstein, although it echoes his own extreme logic in creating the Creature in the first place, when he dedicated himself to the "one secret which (he) alone possessed" (32).

At one point in *Capote*, Truman tells a reporter, "Two worlds exist in this country: the quiet conservative life and the lives of these two men—the underbelly, the criminally violent. Those worlds converged that bloody night." Yet, Truman's inability to cope with the story comes not from "that bloody night" but rather from the similarities he sees in himself and Perry, that he is "not that different" from the one he declares "the underbelly." As with Frankenstein, Capote becomes consumed with issues of his own culpability, both in the plight of men like Perry and the motivations which drive them to violent action. Capote's ethical accountability for creating this depiction of Perry after the murder certainly pales in comparison to Victor Frankenstein's responsibility for literally giving life to his creature. Nevertheless, both works share an underlying theme—that the "two worlds" these doppelganger characters inhabit are not actually separate but drastically different experiences of the same place, the creator's clearly privileged over the creation's.

FINAL RECONCILIATION/DESTRUCTION

The fates of all four characters described here—Victor and The Creature in *Frankenstein* and Truman and Perry in *Capote*—end in tragedy. The Creature and Victor destroy each other. Similarly, Perry's execution, in some ways, leads to Truman's death as a writer, as the final text of the film informs us he never completed another book, implying that it was the emotional impact of the project and his involvement with Perry and Perry's subsequent execution which led to the death of his career.

The ending of *Capote* raises an interesting question that serves to sum up this comparison between *Capote* and *Frankenstein*: Who is really monstrous? The ambiguity of *Frankenstein* allows for not only both Creature and Victor, two halves of the same man, to be the monster but even society itself, since the Creature's exile is caused by society's inability to cope with his deformities. Similarly, not only are both Truman and Perry monsters but also the intelligentsia who praises Truman for his stories which use "the underbelly" to feed its art and entertainment. Capote tells Perry, "If I leave here without understanding you, the world will see you as a monster. Always. And I don't want that." Yet, he gets Perry's story to create a book entitled *In Cold Blood*, blatantly lying to Perry about the tone of his work, which is not as sympathetic to Perry's side as the prisoner had been led to believe. And he only thinly veils his thinking Perry and Dick's hanging would make the perfect ending to the book, which leads, in part, to his refusal to help them in their final stage of appeal of their execution.

CONCLUSION

The ambiguity in both works, then, and the tradition that extends from *Frankenstein* to current works such as *Capote*, is the question of where the "monstrous" really lies. Who is really culpable for these creations? In *Frankenstein*, society and Victor Frankenstein's lack of

responsibility are as much to blame as the Creature. In *Capote*, the truly monstrous creation is not as much Perry's character but *In Cold Blood* itself. Although a canonical novel that spawned a new genre, the book creates an obsession in Truman which leads to his abandonment of Perry's case in order to get the ending that he wants and subsequently leads to the end of his writing career—and, as the film indicates, possibly to Truman Capote's life as well, as he drinks himself to his death in the proceeding years.

While the *Frankenstein* story may be eclipsed by Whale's *Frankenstein* in popular culture, the narrative remains a direct influence on works that, at first glance, would seem far from derivative of Shelley's novel. *Capote* is a biopic, a different genre in a different medium with vastly different conventions than the *Frankenstein* novel. Yet, much of the language and the structure of *Capote*, the various layers of mediation, and issues of the monstrous and the doppelganger relationship (not to mention the homosexual aspect of the doppelganger many have read into Shelley's *Frankenstein* which are much less hidden in *Capote*) bear the influence of the *Frankenstein* story and its many descendants in Western culture since the printing of Shelley's work. Because many of its themes continue to be adapted to current issues, Shelley's novel remains a useful lens through which to examine and contrast contemporary works, as this examination of *Capote* demonstrates.

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