Children have an innocent quality about them which consequently renders them exempt from many adult judgments and penalties. Many parents find it painful to severely punish children for misbehavior, and as a result, seek to teach and guide the children instead. Most adults look upon children with patience and tolerance, and even when a child misbehaves, the adults excuse the misbehavior by saying, “But he’s only a child.” This may be part of the reason that Perry Smith is depicted as childlike in Truman Capote’s novel *In Cold Blood*. Throughout this novel, Perry Smith, murderer of the entire Clutter family, is described as childlike both in his physical appearance and in his demeanor. At the same time, there are many reminders that Smith’s partner Richard Hickock is an adult, and while he is not the actual killer, he is capable of masterminding the entire grisly crime. Through subtle depiction of Smith as childlike, Capote evokes considerable compassion and sympathy for Smith from many of the novel’s characters and the narrator. Because of Capote’s personal feelings for Smith, this manipulation of sympathies is intentional, placing Smith in the best possible light.

Throughout this novel, Perry Smith’s physical appearance is many times described as childlike. Capote’s first physical description of Smith reveals that “when he stood up, he was no taller than a twelve-year-old-child” (15). After the murders, Smith and Hickock make their way to Mexico where they “pick up” a vacationing Hamburg lawyer, Otto. Otto obviously sees a boyish quality in Smith, as evidenced by Otto’s illustration of Perry in a sketchbook:

It was a passable likeness, and the artist perceived one not very obvious aspect of the sitter’s countenance—its mischief, an amused, babyish malice that suggested some unkind cupid aiming envenomed arrows. (19)

Later in the novel, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation assigns eighteen of their most able investigators to the murder case. Despite their years of experience with crimes and criminals, even these calloused lawmen seem to have
difficulty describing Smith as anything but childlike. As KBI Investigator Harold Nye watches the interrogation of Perry Smith, Nye is fascinated that Smith’s “feet, as small as a child’s, couldn’t quite make the floor” (224). Similarly, agent-in-charge Alvin Dewey remembers his first meeting with Smith in the interrogation room in the police station in Las Vegas. He recalls Smith was a “dwarfish boy-man . . . his small booted feet not quite brushing the floor” (341). The detective also describes Smith’s hanging, saying he sees again “the same childish feet” (341). William Nance agrees that “in addition to being a murderer . . . Perry is a childlike dreamer” and his “physical appearance is that of a grotesque child” (204). Nearly all the novel’s physical references to Smith contain some language that is linked to his childlike features.

In addition to his physical appearance, Perry Smith’s behavior is often described as childlike. George Garrett asserts that Perry Smith has “all the right characteristics,” including “a rich and childish imagination” (86). The story’s first mention of Perry Smith includes the fact that he never drank coffee, but like a younger, “he preferred root beer” (14). From the very beginning, reminiscent of a child’s security blanket, Smith hauls along a box of basically worthless “books and maps and songs, poems and old letters, weighing a quarter of a ton” (14). Tony Tanner also describes this carting around of memorabilia, calling it “most touching” (100). Smith also never outgrows his boyish fantasy of finding buried treasure, dreaming of “a drowned cargo of diamonds and pearls, heaping caskets of gold” (17). Smith pursues his search for treasure while he and Hickock are in Mexico. While there, Smith begins to ponder that there is something wrong with them because they have done such an evil thing. At this point Hickock gives his single most revealing description of Smith’s childlikeness:

But Perry—there was, in Dick’s opinion, “something wrong” with Little Perry . . . Perry could be “such a kid,” always wetting his bed and crying in his sleep . . . and often Dick had seen him “sit for hours just sucking his thumb and por-ing over them phony damn treasure guides.” (108)

Sadly, Smith’s behavior remains childish even to the gallows. Smith is chewing a “hunk of Doublemint gum” and his final task in life is to spit the gum “into the chaplain’s outstretched palm” (340).

Unlike Smith, Dick Hickock is consistently portrayed as a reasonably mature adult throughout the novel. George Plimpton reports that Capote calls Hickock “practical and pragmatic,” (60). The novel reveals Hickock was “twice married, twice divorced, now twenty-eight and the father of three boys” (24). Well into the second section of the novel, Smith reiterates this
fact in an almost wistful way. "That Dick had been married—married twice—and had fathered three sons was something he envied. A wife, children—those were experiences 'a man ought to have'" (98). Like most normal adults, Hickock was easily able to obtain decent jobs such as ambulance driver and car mechanic, and consequently, he was unemployed only when he chose to be. An uncommon skill Hickock had acquired by adulthood was that of swindling others, and Smith is impressed by Hickock’s method in Kansas City. "Dick! Smooth. Smart. Yes, you had to hand it to him . . . it was incredible how he could 'con a guy'" (97). In contrast to Smith, grown-up Hickock seems to have no trouble attracting women, and in Mexico he was "engaged" to two women at one time. Plimpton writes that Capote tells this about Hickock: "Women liked him," and "Dick went to the whorehouses" (60). As the adult, throughout their travels, Hickock decides the itinerary, Hickock earns and spends the money, Hickock bosses Smith.

Although Richard Eugene Hickock was not the one who physically committed the murders, there are many indications that he was the adult who masterminded this terrible crime. Eric Norden argues that Hickock “recognized the homicidal drive in Perry and he attached himself to it and encouraged it. Hickock was responsible for arranging the crime and the murdering was left to Perry” (129). Beginning with the first glimpse of the killers, Smith lets it be known that this was “Dick’s idea, his ‘score’ ” (14). A few pages later Dick brags, "I promise you, honey, we'll blast hair all over them walls" (22). Later, while the two men are buying the supplies needed for their gruesome task, Hickock reminds Smith that there will be no witnesses. It is noted that “the plan was Dick’s and from first footfall to final silence, flawlessly devised” (37). Hickock emphasizes, “The only sure thing is every one of them has got to go” (37). Floyd Wells, the prisoner who notified the authorities about Hickock’s plan to rob the Clutters, said that Hickock “described to me a dozen times how he was gonna do it, how him and Perry was gonna tie them people up and gun them down . . . Still and all, it happened. Just like Dick said it would” (162). The final, most convincing opinion of Hickock’s major role in the atrocity is from Smith himself. Towards the end of the novel as Smith is signing his statement of admission, he holds Hickock largely responsible for the crime. Even though Hickock was not the actual killer, Smith states, “None of it would have happened without him, in a way it was mostly his fault” (255).

Capote shows several of the novel’s characters displaying sympathetic thoughts for Perry Smith. Alvin Dewey “found it possible to look at the man beside him without anger—with, rather, a measure of sympathy—for Perry Smith’s life had been no bed of roses . . .” (246). At the hangings, Dewey’s thoughts disclose, “But Smith, though he was the true murderer, aroused another response, for Perry possessed a quality, the aura of an exiled
animal, a creature walking wounded, that the detective could not disregard” (340-41). However, Nance warns that, in this particular instance, Dewey is seeing Smith only “as Capote has presented him” (208). Furthermore, Mrs. Hickock, Dick's mother, tells a reporter during the trial, “‘And this boy Perry. It was wrong of me to hate him; I've got nothing but pity for him now. And you know—I believe Mrs. Clutter would feel pity, too’” (288). Reverend Post also “described sympathetically [emphasis mine] an encounter” (296) with Smith and later, remarking on Smith’s painting of Jesus, admits, “‘Well... any man who could paint this picture can’t be one hundred percent bad’” (306). Mrs. Meier becomes a sort of surrogate mother to Perry during the trial, and she says Perry “‘smiled kind of, and I decided—well, he wasn’t the worst young man I ever saw’” (253). The Meiers had to go out on the evening after the verdict was read, “‘But I'll always be sorry we left him [Smith] alone’” (308) Mrs. Meier recalls. Even Hickock while on death row admits, “‘Sometimes you got to feel sorry for Perry.’” (335). Finally, Capote himself as narrator elicits sympathy for Smith by the way he words much of the novel, and particularly by the imagery in this courtroom scene: “Only Perry Smith... seemed misplaced... as lonely and inappropriate as a seagull in a wheat field” (272). Capote made excellent use of the narrator and the novel’s characters to show sympathy for Smith.

Capote’s personal relationship with Smith led him to deliberately design Smith’s character in a better context than Hickock’s. Nance says that “there is much in the life and character of Perry Smith to arouse sympathy, and Capote has skillfully [sic] emphasized it” (206). At the same time, Hickock is given short shrift, and much that is written about him is disparaging in manner. During Capote’s five years of research, he became good friends with both Hickock and Smith, but he seemed to identify especially with Perry Smith. Nance writes that Capote admits that Smith was the reason he decided to write his novel because Smith was so like Capote’s fictional characters in earlier stories. Smith was also very much like Capote himself, right down to the similarity of their stature. Some of Capote’s own problems paralleled those of Smith, and Capote saw his own childhood in Smith (211). These parallels cause Capote to orient his material from objective presentation so as to favor Perry Smith.

Capote admits that his writing may be subjective at times, especially in regard to Perry Smith. In answer to Plimpton’s questions about Capote’s point of view about Perry Smith and why Perry Smith committed the murders, Capote discloses, “Of course it’s by the selection of what you choose to tell... I had to make up my mind, and move towards that one view always. You can say that the reportage is incomplete. But then it has to be” (55). Upon further questioning by Plimpton, Capote reveals that he believed that Smith did not intentionally kill the Clutters and that Smith felt real remorse
for what he did, trying constantly to understand why he had done it (60). In addition, Phillip Tompkins, unquestionably the most verbal "doubting Thomas" of this nonfiction novel, questions the factuality of *In Cold Blood*, concentrating on Capote's portrayal of Smith. Tompkins notes that Perry Smith dominates this novel, more so than any other character, including the victims (56). Tompkins also suspects that Capote "changed Perry to fit his own conception" (212).

In his biography of Capote, Gerald Clarke writes that the lives of Perry Smith and Truman Capote had become intertwined, each seeing in the other the person he might have been. Capote saw Smith as his own darker side, full of subconscious childhood hurts, angers, and fears (Clarke 325). Clarke compares Capote and Smith in this way:

Their shortness was only one of many unsettling similarities. They both had suffered from alcoholic mothers, absent fathers, and foster homes. At the orphanages he had been sent to, Perry had been a target of scorn because he was half-Indian and wet his bed; Truman had been ridiculed because he was effeminate. A psychiatrist could have been speaking about both of them when he said of Perry: "He seems to have grown up without direction, without love." (326)

Capote knew that even though his early background was similar to Smith's, Capote himself could not have committed murder, and he struggled to comprehend how Perry could have killed. Therefore, Capote offers a solution for the incongruence of childlike Smith and grisly murderer Smith. He says, "Perry never meant to kill the Clutters at all. He had a brain explosion" (Capote 60). Nance suggests that "Capote, unable to understand this side of a man who in other respects was strikingly similar to himself, transformed him [Smith] into 'an outcast and accursed poet' who could kill only under the influence of what Capote terms a 'mental eclipse' or 'brain explosion' " (213). Tompkins agrees that "for premeditated murder performed in cold blood, Capote substituted unpremeditated murder performed in a fit of insanity" (57). By adding compassion and sympathy to Smith's character, Capote tries to avert the reflection of the man in the mirror of Smith's childhood, the man Capote could have become.

In the same way a child is not held entirely accountable for deeds he does not fully comprehend, so Capote likens Perry Smith to a child, thereby purposely, yet subtly, excusing Smith's behavior. He accomplishes this in part through the interaction of the characters, and there is little doubt that many of the major and minor characters feel badly about Smith's being punished on an adult level. On the other hand, little sympathy is seen for Dick
Hickock, from either the novel’s characters or from the writer himself. Portrayed as an adult, Hickock is subject to harsher moral judgments than is Smith. Perhaps this is because as an adult, Hickock should have known better and should be held more accountable; therefore, Hickock’s punishment is deserved. In contrast, because childlike Smith does not appear to fully comprehend his misdeeds, he cannot be held entirely accountable. Capote liked Smith, he identified with him, and he sympathized with him. After becoming so close to Smith, Capote could not bring himself to write this novel any other way. Deliberately Capote designed Smith’s character to elicit sympathy--from the novel’s characters, from the novel’s narrator, and from the novel’s readers.

Works Cited


