

THE MIRROR OF SENSIBILITY: STYLE AND TRUMAN CAPOTE IN *BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S*

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RESUMO: Em entrevista para *The Paris Review*, em 1957, o escritor americano Truman Capote revela idéias sobre estilo literário que serão aplicadas em uma de suas obras mais conhecidas, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, de 1958. A precisão e a objetividade utilizadas para escrever essa obra abrem caminho para seu projeto posterior, *In Cold Blood*, de 1965, onde o estilo jornalístico tem como objetivo revelar da forma mais neutra possível a “verdade” dos fatos. *Tiffany's*, ainda, demonstra a habilidade de Capote para a descrição mais exata de seus personagens, ao mesmo tempo em que desvela a cidade de Nova York a partir dos olhos de um escritor encantado com o que ele descreve como sendo “a única verdadeira cidade que existe.”

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: estilo - Nova York - descrição

ABSTRACT: In an interview to *The Paris Review* in 1957, Truman Capote reveals his ideas about literary style, soon to be applied to one of his best known works *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, published in 1958. The precision and objectivity used to develop *Tiffany's* will eventually lead to his most famous work *In Cold Blood*, 1965, in which the journalistic style aims at revealing the “truth” of the facts in the most neutral form. In *Tiffany's*, Capote demonstrates a unique ability to describe character in the most precise form, while, at the same time, unveiling New York City from the charmed eyes of a writer who affirms that it “is the only real city-city”.

KEY-WORDS: style - New York - description

Fifty years ago the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* would launch the iconic character of Holly Golightly, dark glasses, pearls and chic black dress, in the figure of actress Audrey Hepburn. In these last fifty years she has become the symbol of what it is to be a young woman in search of love and a place of her own in the city of New York, all to the sound of Mancini and Mercer's beloved “Moon River”, a modern classic in its own right.

However, I would like to address and pay tribute to the story that inspired the film, the *Breakfast at Tiffany's* of Truman Capote, himself an icon of class and jet-setting, self-made writer as he was, the artist and stylist behind the involving story of Holly Golightly. Inspired by a number of fascinating women with whom Capote had established connections, not least importantly his own mother (who, like Holly, whose name originally was Lula Mae, had changed her name from Lillie Mae to Nina), Holly is a character like no other: an American girl intent on making it on her own terms, reinventing herself at every stage of the way. Of the way to *what* is

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evidently the crux of the matter in *Tiffany's*. According to Sam Wasson, author of *Fifth Avenue, 5 a.m.*, Truman Capote's novel/short story/novella (the genre it represents is in discussion) brought up several themes that were a novelty: a young woman whose occupation, i.e., to please men and keep them company (an American geisha of sorts), did not make her into the "bad" girl of traditional lore. Though considered shallow and not well developed by some critics who read the story at the time it was released, Norman Mailer stated that Capote "is the most perfect writer of my generation, he writes the best sentences word for word, rhythm upon rhythm". (WASSON, 2010, p. 65)

In relation to Capote's writing skill, I would like to specifically refer to an interview that Truman Capote gave to *The Paris Review* in 1957, therefore a year or so before the publication of *Tiffany's*, entitled *The Art of Fiction, no. 17*. In this piece Capote refers to the artistic challenge undertaken in the writing of fiction, mentioning important aspects of style, in which he somewhat ironically states that Henry James is the "maestro of the semicolon". One should recall that James' *The Art of Fiction* has for generations been a recurrent manifesto on the capacities needed to become a serious writer.

Truman Capote became well-known as a writer because of his short stories. These included "A Mink of One's Own," "Miriam," "My Side of the Matter," "Preacher's Legend," and "Shut a Final Door". At the time he gave the interview in *The Paris Review* he had yet to publish *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, which would come out in 1958. Nevertheless, Capote's insight into the craft of short story writing is made clear in his statements to the journal. His idea that the short story requires control and discipline from a writer is quite evident in the development of *Tiffany's*. Every sentence has its rhythm, which, Capote explains, is one of the foremost elements of style. *Tiffany's*, which is over 100 pages long, seems to present itself in a transitional form between that of a short story (for its number of pages deems it far from "short") and a novel. Perhaps the term novella would be appropriate. Nevertheless, I would like to demonstrate that the control Capote showed in writing stories was present in every work he produced, especially in his 1965 novel *In Cold Blood* in which he develops a form that is known as non-fiction fiction.

The narrator in *Tiffany's* is a possible alter-ego of Capote himself, however he may also be inspired by Gloria Vanderbilt's friend Russell Hurd, whom Gloria revealed was gay, a fact that did not stop them from being in love which other "ever since the day we tea danced at The Plaza" (WASSON, 2010, p. 50). Capote uses his connections with New York's café society well and crafts a narrator who speaks from a distance of several years from the time in his life in which he met and befriended the wonderful and (somewhat) inscrutable Holly Golightly. His rapport with the reader is established from the start, in which shorter sentences are intermingled with longer ones, setting a conversational tone that draws the reader to follow events from his perspective. The fledgling writer the narrator is reveals himself in his enthusiasm with the place he will live in and in the form used to describe it:

I felt in my pocket the key to this apartment; with all its gloom, it still was a place of my own, the first, and my books were there, and jars of pencils to sharpen, everything I needed, so I felt, to become the writer I wanted to be. (CAPOTE, 2008, p.3)

The “emotional and stylistic upper hand” over his material, as Capote makes clear in his interview, is present in every choice of a comma or semi-colon right from the outset of the story. After reading the name on the mailbox, *Miss Holly Golightly; Traveling*, our narrator reveals that “it nagged me like a tune” (ibid, p.11), expressing in a short and exact form the effect of a name. The tune he refers to turns out to be a haunting melody for years and years to come – such is the impression, even before he ever meets the woman tied to the name, caused by Holly. That the narrator chooses to unfold Holly to us in much the same way as she is shown to him is no mere coincidence, evidently. At first, Holly is a character in a story Joe Bell, the bartender who worships her, has heard from others. She is a common link between the narrator and the bartender, one they will share forever, a woman they have loved in the most platonic fashion, in this way indicating several possibilities of love between a man and a woman. Gradually, Holly is revealed in name, then in voice and finally, and most unexpectedly to the narrator and to the reader, in person as she slides into his apartment through the fire-escape. In every form, Holly is the central figure. Even before the reader can “see” Holly’s participation in the development of events, she is present, hauntingly nagging like a tune.

Capote is emphatic in the interview to *The Paris Review* that the devices associated to writing are as obvious as those related to painting and music. With the term obvious Capote does not intend to hint at their being simple but to make it clear that for the author, knowing techniques that will bring out the “laws of perspective, of light and shade” is part of the art of fiction writing. The work involved is not stated in the text unless the reader realizes how all the minor details placed so carefully and intentionally are there in order to cause a desired effect. Capote emphasizes “work” as the necessary tool when one is not born knowing. To be born knowing is an evident impossibility as we can understand from the example Capote gives of James Joyce’s oeuvre: “Even Joyce, our most extreme disregarder, was a superb craftsman: he could write *Ulysses* because he could write *Dubliners*.” Naturally, Capote himself could write *Tiffany’s* because he could write “Miriam”, and *In Cold Blood* because of *Tiffany’s*. For, even if one considers what a break from the former style *In Cold Blood* represents, as Capote himself explains, a writer may need to “rearrange the rules to suit [himself]”.

Holly’s occupation, so to speak, is never charged with hints of criticism or censure. Her gentlemen friends are viewed as the necessary evil to be found in most professions. Some of these men are childish, others rogues, but mostly they are the means to Holly’s quest for freedom and autonomy. The narrator sees one of Holly’s visitors with her (the first time he has ever seen her, in fact) and places judgment on “the way his plump hand clutched at her hip [that] seemed somehow improper; not morally, aesthetically.” (ibid, 13). The material of the writer must, to Capote, be seen

in this light as well. The themes and dealings of the characters are necessarily uncensored – and in order for the writer to be able to deal with his creation, he must have established the necessary distance from it way before beginning to write. Emotions and feelings about what is being written must have long been exorcised when the writer sits down to develop his material, as Capote further explains below:

My own theory is that the writer should have considered his wit and dried his tears long, long before setting out to evoke similar reactions in a reader. In other words, I believe the greatest intensity in art in all its shapes is achieved with a deliberate, hard and cool head.

The example Capote sets for himself in this case, alongside Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart”, is Katherine Anne Porter’s novel *Noon Wine*. The combination of intensity and control in the writing, according to Capote, makes it evident that Porter was not involved with her story at the moment of writing. Thus, the plump had the narrator described must have seemed grubby, somewhat greedy, at some moment to both the narrator and the reader (for that is what can be inferred), but, when time came to describe the connection between Holly and this man, the negative effect has been transferred to the term “aesthetically”, thereupon shifting our own perspective as readers – we now can realize what an association is made between the hunger these men have for Holly and the sheer unsightliness contained therein.

When Holly presents herself to the narrator by entering his apartment through the fire-escape wearing a robe, she is merely trying to escape a predicament: to get away from “the most terrifying man downstairs” (ibid, p. 17). Throughout, she is talking nonstop, not in the least fazed with the fact that there is a stranger (ready to bite her) in her apartment. The description allowed to us of Holly is that of a squinting young woman whose large eyes were “a little blue, a little green, dotted with bits of brown: varicolored like her hair” (ibid, p. 18). The variety in hair and eye color leads us to see Holly as perhaps lightheaded or flighty, which she may very well be. Nevertheless, Holly’s straightforward opinions about everything do not hide the generosity she displays to those she admires or even, once in a while, a deep-set angst, which she refers to as the “mean reds”.

The narrator’s writing ability, as well as his vanity, is soon put to the test by Holly when she asks him to read what he has produced, for, as he says “Very few authors, especially the unpublished can resist an invitation to read aloud” (ibid, p. 21). Holly, literary critic on the spot, is not impressed with his story of two female schoolteachers who are close friends and are badmouthed by gossip when one of them gets engaged.¹ To Holly the innuendos and subtleties are secondary:

“Is that the end?” she asked, waking up. She floundered for something more to say. “Of course I like dykes themselves. They don’t scare me a bit. But stories about dykes bore the bejesus out of me. I just can’t put

¹ This story is, probably not by coincidence, a reference to Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, published in 1934 and made into film in 1961 with Audrey Hepburn (this evidently a coincidence) playing one of the teachers.

myself in their shoes. Well really, darling,” she said because I was clearly puzzled, “if it’s not about a couple of old bull-dykes, what the hell *is* it about?” (ibid, p. 21)

The narrator decides to hold his tongue and keep his pride in check – after all, if the story need be explained, what was the point? Angry at what he sees as Holly’s tactlessness, beyond that, he is also concerned with the possibility that his work has not hit the mark as it should - the narrator/author has perhaps not taken what Capote deems the necessary distance to deal with his work more objectively. As Capote declares in the interview mentioned above, a writer must take this distance from his material before sitting down to write. Before this moment, there are still too many emotions to deal with which interfere with the needed control one must have. It is only in this way that one can achieve style, or “the mirror of an artist’s sensibility”.

Capote’s style stands out when he describes his characters. Rusty Trawler was

... a middle-aged child that had never shed its baby fat, though some gifted tailor has almost succeeded in camouflaging his plump and spankable bottom. There wasn’t a suspicion of bone in his body; his face a zero filled in with pretty miniature features, had an unused, a virginal quality: it was as if he’d been born, then expanded, his skin remaining unlined as a blown-up balloon, and his mouth, though ready for squalls and tantrums, a spoiled sweet puckering. (ibid., p. 36)

Holly’s friend, Mag Wildwood, stuttering and tall, was

a triumph over ugliness, so often more beguiling than real beauty, if only because it contains paradox. [] ... the trick had been worked by exaggerating defects; she’s made them ornamental by admitting them boldly. Heels that emphasized her height, so steep her ankles trembled; a flat tight bodice that indicated she could go to the beach in bathing trunks; hair that was pulled straight back, accentuating the sparseness, the starvation of her fashion-model face. Even the stutter, certainly genuine but still a bit laid on, had been turned to advantage. It was the master stroke, that stutter...” (ibid, p. 44)

If style mirrors the artist’s sensibility, as mentioned above, Capote’s marked insight is revealed in the flaws and peculiarities contained in Holly’s friends. Through the narrator’s observations, Rusty and Mag are brought to life in all their awkwardness, hidden beneath a worldly stance. In these descriptions there is the physical contrast between the characters: Rusty’s roundness, soft as a baby; Mag’s thinness and angles, a tall willow-like figure who makes the most of her defects. The physical descriptions uncannily bring out the personalities of these two apparent extremes: Rusty’s overindulgence and Mag’s need for attention stand out without, at least until this moment, the two having effectively acted in the story.

José Ybarra- Jaeger’s Latin good looks (another character who will eventually become involved with Holly) are described in such a way as to indicate a narrator

much more interested in beauty (perhaps preferably masculine) than he would easily admit. When José comes to his door by mistake, the narrator states that he had been “charmed”:

He’d been put together with care, his brown head and bullfighter’s figure had an exactness, a perfection, like an apple, an orange, something nature had made just right. (ibid, p. 47)

Despite a few mistakes made in the story as to José’s Brazilian background (the position of last names, the *fado* as a Brazilian rhythm), one sees in José the South American charm that points to unknown and magical regions of the world – at least to Holly. As he swaps hands (from Mag to Holly), José is transformed into a ticket for Holly’s escape from her “mean reds”.

The anguish at the root of her heart is evident in her relation to Cat, the pet she refuses to name. Holly’s reflection on the pet’s predicament strikes her fully in the face when, once more, she decides it is time to move out again. Though the narrator promises to find it a family, Holly is almost paralyzed with fear, in spite of her exterior confidence:

“Because it could go on forever. Not knowing what’s yours until you’ve thrown it away. The mean reds, they’re nothing. The fat woman, she nothing. This though: my mouth’s so dry, if my life depended on it I couldn’t spit.” (ibid, p. 109)

Sentences are short and marked by an oral register, indicating Holly’s background and childhood fears. They carry in them all of Holly’s insecurity, temporary as it may be. Gone is the young woman’s cosmopolitan sophistication, gone the ease with which she shakes off men, gone the confidence of being a “wild thing” no one can pin down.

Regardless of the outcome of Holly’s choices, everything she imagines and longs for can be translated into the idea contained in Tiffany’s. As the standard against which everything is gauged, Tiffany’s is the unattainable dream of all dreams, not because of what it sells (for, as Holly says, she doesn’t “give a hoot about jewelry”), but because of the “quietness and proud look of it”:

...nothing very bad could happen to you there, not with those kind men in their nice suits, and that lovely smell of silver and alligator wallets. If I could find a real life place that made me feel like Tiffany’s, then I’d buy some furniture and give the cat a name. (ibid, p. 40)

The elusiveness of Tiffany’s, in Holly’s point of view, is what she is after. The smell of the place, the air of dignified charm and the achievement of serenity would allow Holly to find her place in the world. This search is at the core of her being, the attainment of which would calm her angst, or the “mean reds”. From New York she flies to Rio de Janeiro, then to Buenos Aires, writing to the narrator that this last city was “not Tiffany’s, but almost.” From this point on, the narrator loses contact with

Holly, leading us to the start of the story in which Joe Bell has heard about her having been in Africa.

Though New York City is not quite Tiffany's, in Holly's quest it had become as close to a home as possible – from the hick girl married and living in Texas, it is the city in which she reinvents herself and where she visualizes her unattainable dream in the store of that name. Some of Capote's best descriptions in the story are in reference to New York, understandably so, for in *The Paris Review*, the writer affirms that "New York is the only real city-city." The subjectivity of his view can be seen as both romantic and charming, exactly what the city is to Holly and the narrator. On a "beautiful day with the buoyancy of a bird" (*ibid*, p. 53) the two have time to enjoy the city's best features. On Fifth Avenue, a parade is on its way, with "flags in the wind, the thump of military feet" seeming, however, "to have nothing to do with war", a harsh reality which only affects them with Holly's brother Fred's demise.

The final days of summer in New York are described in Holly and the narrator's walk through the city:

We walked all the way to Chinatown, ate a chow-mein supper, bought some paper lanterns and stole a box of joss sticks, then moseyed across the Brooklyn Bridge, and on the bridge, as we watched seaward-moving ships pass between the cliffs of burning skyline, she said: "Years from now, years and years, one of those ships will bring me back ...they *must* see this, these lights, the river – I love New York, even though it isn't mine..." (*ibid*, p. 84)

Capote's narrator is speaking of a New York that has long changed, even from the standpoint of the ten years that have gone by since he has last been with Holly. In the New York of the 1940s, stables in Central Park allow the characters to go horse-back riding on an autumn day, entering "a riding path dappled with leaves denuding breezes danced about." (*ibid*, p.87) In the experience of city life, the narrator expresses not only his feelings for New York, but also those that arise within him for Holly:

Suddenly, watching the tangled colors of Holly's hair flash in the red-yellow leaf light, I loved her enough to forget myself, my self-pitying despairs, and be content that something she though happy was going to happen. Very gently the horses began to trot, waves of wind splashed us, spanked our faces, we plunged in and out of sun and shadow pools, and joy ,a glad-to-be-alive exhilaration, jolted through me like a jigger of nitrogen." (CAPOTE, p. 87)

Truman Capote's writing of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* already points to a break from the "florid swirls" mentioned by Sam Wasson, though, as with all his work, he tackled it with "a cold, almost scientific precision." (WASSON, p. 61):

With Tiffany's he intended to ... move toward a more measured, more subdued prose style. Out went the likes of "he was spinning like a fan blade through metal spires; at the bottom a yawning-jawed crocodile

followed his downward whirl with hooded eyes,” and in came a new technique, literal and direct. The page, he told those who asked, was no longer his playground; it was his operating room, and like a surgeon – like Flaubert, one of his heroes – he endeavored to keep surprises to an absolute minimum. (ibid, p.61-2)

In *Local Color* and in *The Muses Are Heard: An Account*, published in the 50s, Capote’s accounts of trips in Europe and Russia reveal a difference in style that will eventually lead to his best known work, *In Cold Blood* (1965). The “unusual detachment” described in *The Paris Review* interview, attempting to report the truth as closely as possible, creates a style that combines fact and fiction. As Capote explains in the interview, his intention in doing reportage “was to prove that I could apply my style to the realities of journalism.” Again, Capote reinforces the need to curb emotion in writing so as to maintain control over one’s material.

With the 1961 release of the movie version of *Tiffany’s*, Capote’s heroine Holly Golightly was revealed to the world in a slightly different light in order for it to pass the tight censorship in movies that still prevailed in the late fifties. With the movie, as Wasson states, Holly’s character will make “the late fifties into the early sixties”, allowing viewers to see a new type of woman still in the making: stylish, charming, comfortable with her sexuality, but still in search of her place in the world.

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