

# Truman Capote's Early Short Stories or The Fight of a Writer to Find His Own Voice

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## Abstract

Truman Capote's early stories have not been studied in depth so far and literary studies on Truman Capote's short stories start with his first collection "A Tree of Night and Other Stories", published in 1949. Stories previous to 1945 such as "The Walls Are Cold", "A Mink's of One's Own" or "The Shape of things" are basically to be discovered and their relevance lie on the fact of being successful narrative exercises that focus more in the construction of characters than in the action itself. They are stories to be read "on one sitting" and stories that make the reader foresee Capote's skilful short narrative in the future. It is our aim, then, in this paper to present the first three ever written stories by Truman Capote, to analyse them and to remark their relevance for Capote's literary universe.

Dwarfed and darkened by narrative masterpieces such as *In Cold Blood* (1965) or *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), Truman Capote's short stories have never been as acclaimed or studied as his novels. Literary critics have predominantly focussed their criticism on Capote's work as a novelist emphasizing on the "Gothicism" and "the form of horror" in *Other Voices, Other Rooms* or the author's innovative techniques in *In Cold Blood*.<sup>1</sup> However, apart from the complete research of Kenneth T. Reed, there are several studies on Capote's whole literary career like William Nance's or Helen S. Garson's that, in spite of dealing with short stories, they analyse Capote's work from the appearance of his first story collection *A Tree of Night and other stories* in 1949 ignoring the writer's

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<sup>1</sup> We refer here to the works of literary critics such as J. Douglas Perry (1973), John C. Waldmeir (1999), or J. Hollowell (1997).

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stories published between 1943 and 1944. Thus, it is our goal in this paper to present Capote's three first stories –“The Walls Are Cold”, “A Mink of One's Own” and “The Shape of Things”–, and remark their importance as interesting narrative exercises on short story writing of a man who is trying to find his own personal voice. These stories are to be considered “promising” due to their rhythm, the accurate use of lexicon and the descriptive ability of the writer to construct solid characters.

The three stories we are dealing with share with the rest of Capote's short story production not only the isolated people full of “fears and emotional distortions” but also a formal and thematic set of characteristics inherited from admired short story masters that will progressively fade; Poe, Chekhov, Wilde or Welty are among those literary sources where young Truman Capote would look at, searching for inspiration for his works. In this sense, “The Walls Are Cold”, “A Mink of One's own” and “The Shape of Things”, especially these three, would perfectly fit in Poe's consideration about the extent and the unity of impression and his “limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting” (Poe, 1986: 482). It is frequent to find critics that compare positively Capote's short story to Poe's, defining both of them as “experimenters” of the genre.<sup>2</sup> Not only these three stories remind us of Edgar Allan Poe in the formal aspects but they also remind us of Anton Chekhov when discussing the creation of characters. Chekhov, in a letter to his brother Alexander, said that “it is not necessary to describe too many characters. The centre of gravity should be limited to two people: he and she”.<sup>3</sup> These really short stories contain that confrontation in their plots, as we will later analyse. However, the writer utilizes the face-to-face element as a resource to make the personality of his characters grow. Apart from those characteristics, the stories presented here lack the feeling of the South. They keep the feeling of the southern masters, for example, Eudora Welty, but the stories lack one of Capote's main aspects, which is the southern atmosphere. His characters do not resemble the colour and the heat of the South in other stories, they do not resemble the southernness of those

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<sup>2</sup> Special emphasis is made on this aspect by Ray B. West in *The Short Story in America*, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Letter written on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1886. Anton Chekhov writes to his brother about the description of nature and the creation of characters. Letters edited and selected by Louis S. Ferdinand.

other stories, but on the contrary.

“The Walls Are Cold” (1943) is Capote’s very first story and, indeed, it is a very clear example of the mentioned features: direct influence of Edgar Allan Poe’s formal aspects, Chekhov’s development of characters and lack of southern atmosphere. Short as it is in format, the story is relevant in the construction and development of the characters and in the psychological portrait of the two main narrative actors: Louise, a “small, young and perfect” (Capote, 2004: 3)<sup>4</sup> sixteen-year-old girl who could have been of Capote’s knowledge and who is giving a party in her big posh residence; and Jake, a sailor from Mississippi, who had just arrived at the party. One of Capote’s strengths from the first story is that of character revelation, and in “The Walls Are Cold”, both Louise and Jake represent two of Capote’s character types: the one who plays the writer’s role and the sufferer of the manipulation or the sufferer of the first one’s consented behaviour. From the beginning of the story, Louise, as the writer’s dominant ego, starts playing sensual tricks on Jake, while he is so astonished both by the lady’s ritual and by her residence that he is not able to react. Jake, suffering from the power and the intimidation, felt that the house and the situation was “something right out of a movie” (Capote, 2004: 5). Capote presents the story of two credible human beings living amazingly opposite worlds drawing a line that separates and differentiates them and showing a deep contrast between the rich, upper-class, self-sufficient lady and the poor southern uncultivated sailor.

Both physically and psychologically, Louise is a sketch for future female Capote characters, for future “white pompadoured” women (Capote, 2004: 15); women as cold and provocative as Louise and as cold as the walls of the story title. For instance, Louise resembles Miriam in her cold behaviour or has a hint of what Holly Golightly would become in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* or Grady Mcneil in the recently discovered novel *Summer Crossing* (2006).<sup>5</sup> Like them, like Capote, Louise wants, and it is her endeavour, to control the situation up to the point of manipulation.

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper, all references to the three mentioned stories are from the anniversary edition of *The Collected Stories of Truman Capote* published in Random House in 2004. Subsequent references to this edition will be given in parenthesis.

<sup>5</sup> *Summer Crossing*, novel published in 2004, in the year of Capote’s birth and death anniversary, has been recently found. However, it is known that Capote wrote it at the same time as these stories and previously to *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.

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Louise takes Jake, the sailor, to visit the house and when they enter her room it provokes a bad feeling, a bad impression on him because every piece of furniture was plain white but the walls were of “a dark, cold green.” While he is trying to explain why he entered the navy (“it isn’t much concern whether you like it or not [...] I’ve seen a lot of places that I wouldn’t otherwise” (Capote, 2004: 6)), she emphasizes on her flirting, first, making her gestures and movements much more evident, later, lying about her age, and finally, she provokes him by saying that she would like to be kissed by a real man and not only by “that effeminate Les” (Capote, 2004: 7). This is the manipulative manoeuvre of the bossy Louise. She produces such a charm, she is so insisting and so persuasive that Jake feels that it is his obligation to kiss her. He kisses her. Incredibly enough, the reaction of the girl is that of surprise although she got what she was looking for, a kiss. Capote’s personality blooms after the lady’s reaction when, after accomplishing her purpose, she hits him, asks him to leave the house immediately and decides to finish the party. The relationship seems to be that of master and servant; when she provoked enough to the point to get what she wanted (probably to prove to herself that she could be intelligent enough so as to modify and organize somebody else’s behaviour), she breaks the spell and remains triumphant in the mind of the reader.

Undoubtedly, Capote gained his prestige as a short story teller more than as a novelist. And part of that success came from the stories we are dealing with. The years to come, especially, 1944 and 1945 were really full of Capote’s stories and his production was mature enough to establish him among the best short story writers of the emerging generation. So, it is in 1944 that he published his second story “A Mink of One’s Own”. If in the first story, Louise and Jake are the “he and she” Chekhov mentioned, in this second story, Bertha Munro and Vini Rondo play the same role. But before pouring over the story, we think it is of great importance to stop at two meaningful, and scarcely studied aspects. First, Capote’s attraction to Eudora Welty’s stories and, secondly, Capote’s scarce use of war elements in his works.

We believe in the clear reference of Welty as a mirror for young Capote up to the point of using “Why I live at the P.O.” In “A Mink of One’s Own”, Bertha Munson is extraordinarily happy because she is going to meet her old friend Vini Rondo again after a long time. The Rondo family is the centre of the mentioned story by Eudora Welty. At

the beginning of that story by Welty's (1998: 57) we can read the following first lines: "I was getting along fine with Mama, Papa-Daddy until my sister Stella Rondo just separated from her husband and came back home again". The narrator might be the same as Capote's Vini Rondo or it may be just a coincidence. The fact is that inevitably reading the first lines of both stories the reader can find many similarities.

After five years in Europe, the mentioned Vini Rondo comes back home and her friend Bertha is "far too excited"... "Vini Rondo was coming to see her, imagine, Vini Rondo.... And this very afternoon! When she thought about it she felt fluttering wings in her stomach." (Capote, 2004: 9) A relevant aspect is that Capote refuses to enter the bellum atmosphere of the age when ignoring, on purpose, Mrs. Rondo's experience of war in Europe. "Whenever Mrs. Munson found herself in a group discussing the war she inevitably announced: 'Well, you know I have a very dear friend in Paris this very minute, Vini Rondo, she was right there when the Germans got in'" (Capote, 2004: 9-10). In the early forties many American writers were involved personally or professionally in the Second World War. The interesting aspect of this story lies precisely in how the author approaches the reality of his time but escapes from it. Compared to other contemporary writers, we can affirm that Capote was an uncompromised author of the time only engaged and devoted to him and whereabouts. In that difficult world moved by the hatred, and filled with political convulsions, Capote runs away from that literary trend and prefers to concentrate on something closer to his own world. The reason is quite simple: Truman Capote thought that it was always better to write about whatever you know best. So Capote's short story deals with the personal, with the familiar, with the autobiographical, with information received from friends and acquaintances, and most of the times, with the southern characteristics, the region and the place where he belongs to.

The moment of the re-encounter comes and Bertha does not recognize Vini although she lied trying "to keep the disappointment out of her voice" when she said "Vini, darling, I should have known you anywhere" (Capote, 2004: 10). The re-encounter is as cold as ice. Almost directly Vini starts talking straightforwardly about the real aim of her visit. She remembers how much Bertha loved her coat and that she had decided to sell it to her, which proves their friendship was close. Time, place and distance have played an important role in the story: the reader

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does not objectively know what the relationship was like before the separation, but it seems that this provoked a different development of the characters' personalities as their lives took divergent paths. For Bertha, Vini is an idyllic woman and envies her lifestyle. For Vini, Bertha is just someone who would easily fall in the web of her wicked game.

The similarities between these two stories are even more noticeable in their crucial moment; a moment where the two characters are together and try to get what they want through a careful and well-planned strategy, trying to persuade one another, making the other person fall in despair. And, what is even more important, to create a tense atmosphere, which, in fact, Kazin (1974: 211) says that "it has been Capote's natural aim as a writer".

In this second story in particular, Vini tries to get as much as she can from the coat. First, she asks for the price she said she had had to pay years ago. Second, Bertha discovers that most of Vini's acting is mere pretension and she accepts buying it but the price is \$400. When the purchase has been done, they sit together again while Bertha tries to continue their conversation. Yet, it communication was cold before it now turns to be non-existent, frozen. She cannot get a word out of Vini's mouth about anything anymore, sharp as a knife. They bid farewell and, when thinking about how to tell her husband about the purchase, she realizes when hanging it that the sleeve was torn and that nothing could be done about it. She had been tricked. In a sense, this is just what happened to Jake in the first story. He was involved in an unwanted situation, and when there is not a way-out of it, she is expelled from it rewardless. That is exactly what happens to Mrs. Munson. She is called, she is visited, she is offered a good thing and she is sent off without any reward or positive achievement.

The Capote reader can notice, step by step, how the writer is gradually finding his own voice through the forties and through the stories. In other words, we notice how he is separating himself from the influences in a more effective and productive way as time and his stories evolve. However, it is usual to find in Capote's works, like in the previous story, the influence of Oscar Wilde when insisting on the social events and on the importance of the attending people, if only for the sake of criticizing them. In "The Walls Are Cold", the motive is a party and we are told that Jake attended it without knowing that "it was any kind of party like this" (4), meaning, upper-class, stylish, etc... In "A

Mink of One's Own" we are informed of how Vini Rondo was a person like no other, meaning, "the most talented girl, interested in art and all sort of that thing.... And she had quite a bit of money.... She married some Count or Baron or something... Cholly Knickerbocker used to mention her all the time" (Capote, 2004: 10).

Paul Levine wrote in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* that "His first stories –"These Walls Are Cold" and "The Shape of Things"– are written in the painfully realistic prose associated with those young writers in transition from the *Saturday Evening Post* to the *New Yorker*... The dichotomy of good and evil exists in each Capote character just as the dichotomy of daylight and night time exists in the aggregate of his stories." Indeed, these three stories, and "The Shape of Things" (1944) is not an exception, are written in that "realistic prose" and in that "dichotomy". The storyline opens with a recurrent image in Capote's stories: soldiers on a train. This image is not only exposed in the present story we are dealing with, but also, and most importantly, in the story called "A Ride through Spain", in which, in a very folkloric and traditional picture, the political situation of Spain at the end of the forties and at the beginning of the fifties provokes the presence of a great number of soldiers on a train travelling through the peninsula. Trains and train depots are part of Capote's habitual paraphernalia and memorabilia. They constantly appear in the works of this writer marked by the building of the depot in the southern town where he grew up. In most cases, trains create a Gothic atmosphere in Capote's literature.

In "The Shape of Things", a marine and a corporal appear on a train as if they were coming back from war and it seems it is the excitement of it that made "The Corporal's head started to bob in uncontrollable jerks. A lolling pause with his head bent grotesquely forward; a muscle convulsion snapping his neck sideways" (Capote, 2004: 16). Somehow a travelling girl tries to help when the attacks start all over again. And it seems a nice remedy "What they used to do to stop it was look in my eyes... as long as I'm looking in somebody's eyes it will quit" (Capote, 2004: 18). This story is the opening of the southern stories due to the fact that the train goes to Virginia "where home is". However, for Kenneth T. Reed the main idea of the story lies in the fact that "persons like the white-pompoured woman who are well insulated from the unspeakable realities of war seem unable or unwilling to comprehend the effect of war upon those who have been touched directly by it"

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(Reed: 50-51). In fact, this quotation remarks our words about Capote's attitude towards war and his reasons for not facing the topic directly.

This really short story on a train ends leaving the reader with a strange feeling. Although it seems the Corporal uses a moment to try to flirt with the lady, as playing the mentioned role of Louise in "The Walls Are Cold", we do not really know if the soldier declares faithfully to the woman. Yet, the fact is that when he is openly rejected, he escapes quarrelling and complaining as if he were crazy. Somehow, this ending reminds us of the way Jake had to leave the house of the rich Louise in the first story commented here.

In conclusion, Truman Capote's early short stories began as an exercise in writing about a man trying to find his own voice. With "The Walls Are Cold", Capote starts a literary trip that will lead him (and us) to southern landscapes, colourful corners of peculiar places in the world and to the bittersweet days of childhood. This literary trip will be defined as being full of images and symbols, with nice descriptions and difficult (and even wicked) characters, together with a specialised use of the lexicon, a great sense to create opposite atmospheres, a remarkable way to build children characters and, most importantly, an enchanting way to charm audiences by telling stories. This trip starts now with these three stories linked by short narratives, fast actions, limited time and well-developed characters that have established Truman Capote as one of the most relevant American short story writers of the twentieth century.

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