TELLING THE TRUTH:
CREATIVE NONFICTION IN CAPOTE’S *IN COLD BLOOD*
& MAILER’S *THE EXECUTIONER’S SONG*

by

James R. Capp

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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s thesis advisor, Dr. Laura Barrett, and has been approved by the members of her/his supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of The Honors College and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

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ABSTRACT

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In the American creative nonfiction genre, the line between fact and fiction is ever-blurring. Two novels which strive for realness and are thematically related in their focus on a cause célèbre and the death penalty, Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood and Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song, offer clues that might help approach the question of what makes a specific work fall under the category of creative nonfiction. I analyze the creative techniques that the authors use in their novels, and I consider details from the texts about the activeness and reliability of the narrators in the two books, as well as consequent political implications. Additionally, I ground my examination of these novels in a discussion of the progress from the early novel’s drive for realism to twentieth-century literary journalism.
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I. Introduction

Before I started this project, I had long been interested in the possibility that the categorization of a book as fiction or as nonfiction might develop from the language that a writer uses. Nonfiction, a term literally meaning non-invented story, typically documents events that actually happened, while fiction traditionally offers its writers the chance to create art in the form of theoretical realities or completely fantastic worlds. A genre in the middle of these two is creative nonfiction, which bends these generalized boundaries because a nonfiction narrative documents true events but it has the artistic goals of fiction.

Throughout my project, I attempt to define creative nonfiction by analyzing two prominent works within the genre. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, first published as a serial in 1965 and then in novel form in 1966, covers the fatal crime of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Norman Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song*, published in 1979, tells the story of Gary Gilmore, beginning shortly before the murders Gilmore committed in 1976 and ending at his execution by firing squad the next year. A thorough analysis of these books will enable readers to identify how they fit into the creative nonfiction genre.

My essay explores genre categorization by considering why these works are designated as creative nonfiction and, conversely, in what ways they are works of fiction. Because Capote, in particular, claims that his novel is entirely true, I examine possible inventions in his story that might distance the book from reality. Unlike Capote, Mailer argues that nonfiction is impossible, as all narratives are perceptions of reality trapped in the storyteller’s mind. Both books hope to make statements with their creative techniques, so I study such devices as the symbolism that the authors implement in their
stories and the romanticization of important characters by emphasizing details about these individuals. Both authors’ artistic goals become apparent through their use of these devices, as critics such as David Guest note both Capote and Mailer’s power as narrators. Later in this essay, I also draw from Lee Gutkind to further outline the creative techniques that creative nonfiction writers use to accomplish their goals.

To begin my analysis, I offer a background of writing about reality in English literature to better understand the origin and culmination of the genre. Understanding the environment in which the genre developed will, I hope, result in a better grasp of the genre as a whole. Ian Watt plays an essential role in his identification of the significance of realism in the novel’s birth, and Hayden White stresses that readers remain skeptical of even the most well-intentioned nonfiction writers. I consider their opinions’ effects on the definition of creative nonfiction, and then I move on to an analysis of *In Cold Blood* to view Capote’s self-proclaimed innovations in the genre. Nearly twenty years later, Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* makes no claims to innovate, though Mailer creates a believable representation of a perverse American culture. Both of these novels use creative nonfiction to make ethical arguments against the death penalty, exhibiting the persuasive power of the genre’s artistic quality.
II. Background of Creative Nonfiction

Description & history of “realism” in the novel

The “nonfiction novel,” as Capote calls a novel that relies on historical fact, might simply be a logical movement in the development of the novel as a medium. With true characters and storylines, nonfiction novels are, like journalism, simply one of prose’s decisive attempts at realism. In his description of the rise of the novel, Ian Watt claims that the key identifier of a novel is realism as it “differentiates the work of the early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fiction” (Watt 10). Realism, here simply referred to as an aspect of a piece that reflects reality, is even more so the defining feature of the nonfiction novel than it is of the novel in general, so critics draw parallels between the early novel of the eighteenth-century and the nonfiction novels of Capote and Mailer. A new type of literature arises in each period, and realism is vital for both.

Other critics seem to agree with Watt’s determination of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries as the birth date of the novel form, specifically because of the period’s emphasis on the real. Northrop Frye classifies the novel’s predecessor, the romance, as “[leaning] heavily on miraculous violations of natural law for their interest as stories” (Frye 34). Garrett Stewart, in his analysis of death in British fiction, argues that a novel must, unlike the romance, “be informed by mortal boundaries” (Stewart 6). Characters must have natural limitations in a novel, and the story must not rely on violations of natural law. Stewart emphasizes this point as he focuses on the shift from fantastic-styled deaths in early British fiction. This fantasy evolved into the kind of feasible deaths and murders eventually found in Capote or Mailer’s works. A desire for realism spurs the rise of the novel, and even more realism spawns the nonfiction novel.
The entire premise behind Watt’s argument that, since the eighteenth century, there has been a need for the novel suggests that the development of the novel is a cognitive process. Watt points out that even the word “novel” is an appropriate name for the medium, as it is “the logical literary vehicle of a culture which…has set an unprecedented value on originality, on the novel” (Watt 13). People sought that which Watt calls “new accounts,” and nonfiction novels tell these new—novel—accounts as truthfully as possible, thus implementing even further realism. Nonfiction novels respond to the need for realism in novels, attempting to create long, detailed descriptions of events and people. Unfortunately, the perfect depiction of reality is not entirely possible for authors, which leads to some of the problematic aspects of creative nonfiction. Which pieces of reality does an author depict and from what viewpoint does an author depict them? Watt argues this subjectivity is:

   essentially an epistemological problem, and it therefore seems likely that the nature of the novel’s realism, whether in the early eighteenth century or later, can best be clarified by the help of those professionally concerned with the analysis of concepts, the philosophers. (11)

In *Historical Text as Literary Artifact*, Hayden White takes on the role of Watt’s philosopher, claiming that authors truly cannot tell a “nonfiction” story without offering biased details. He identifies Romantic poetry and realistic prose as genres which critics commonly contrast one with the other, and he believes the “difference between poetry and prose is too narrow” (White 95). He explains that this contrast is unjustified, as both genres can describe “significant relationships conceived to exist in the world by anyone wishing to represent those relationships in language” (White 96). Unfortunately for
nonfiction storytellers, then, White makes the reasonable argument that readers should always remain skeptical of even the most historically-based accounts. Stories based on fact are then “verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found” (White 82).

In light of White’s label of fact-based narratives as fiction, Ian Watt’s position that realism was an integral part of the rise of the conventional fiction novel becomes problematic. How could one identify realism—description that reflects reality—as the catalyst of the genre if the reality presented in a story is “invented”? One could respond that of course subjectivity exists at the scale that White implies, and his incredulousness is not to be disregarded. Even Watt argues that the way a novel presents a life—its point of view—is where true realism lies (Watt 11). Watt asserts that “realism” is “used primarily as the antonym of idealism,” but the subjectivity and idealism of the person who “finds” and presents facts is essential to replicating reality (Watt 10). The key to realism, then, is a humanizing perspective. A story without an opinion—which White argues is impossible—would be as unrealistic as it is unnatural.

Thus, the nonfiction novel is the epitome of realism; creative nonfiction experiments with telling the truth through its narrative voices. Within the genre, stories sound trustworthy, and the fact that the events themselves are not someone’s creation further invites readers to believe that they are “truth.” Some narrators, like those in creative nonfiction, no longer develop fantastic plots like Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Instead, they choose to focus on something that really happened, and especially when creative nonfiction readers are familiar with the true-life basis of the
story, narrators seduce the reader into believing the events chronicled are accurately described.

**Description & history of “literary journalism”**

The nonfiction novel has journalistic tendencies: authors research and document events as reporters would, and readers often trust nonfiction novels as they would trust a newspaper article or at least readers believe that narrators of creative nonfiction will attempt to honestly *report* the happenings of their pieces. According to Michael Robertson, many American writers of both nonfiction and fiction began as journalists, and remnants of their training as reporters often appear in their works. Robertson explains the argument that “the link between journalism and imaginative literature since Whitman’s time is a way of explaining what is American about American literature” because “it is American writers’ training as reporters that produces their characteristic awe of experience” (Robertson 146). The “characteristic awe of experience”—the part of the writing that makes the story interesting—might come from a reporter’s need to make his own writing worth reading. So many successful novelists were once journalists, Robertson argues, because they are already capable of forcing the reader to identify with the author’s interest in the subject.

Indeed, many critics note the journalistic heritage of John Hersey, Ernest Hemingway, and Stephen Crane, among other early nonfiction novelists. Marc Weingarten believes what makes Hersey’s *Hiroshima* an “antecedent” to the genre, “among other things, is the way Hersey assiduously describes his characters’ internal reactions, the thoughts racing through their heads when the ‘noiseless flash’ makes its appearance over Hiroshima” (Weingarten 24). As a war journalist, Hersey could describe
these inner monologues with his “copious notes and interview transcripts” of the victims of the Hiroshima bombing, which he acquired shortly after the incident. His editors, in an effort to make the piece more interesting, had Hersey tell “an exact chronicle of events as they transpired in real time, much like a documentary movie crew tracking six characters without any subsequent edits” (Weingarten 23). Hersey uses this documentary method to evoke the “awe of experience” within his characters’ views of the tragic days after the bombings, as well as his own awe of their stories.

For Hemingway, the nonfiction novel was just another step for authors to take in a process of developing writing, which is an opinion similar to Watt’s theory of the novel. Ronald Weber claims that Hemingway, in his observations on journalism, continually “returned to the same distinction: journalism was fleeting, while writing was permanent” (Weber 22). Even as early as Hemingway’s first attempts at nonfiction novels, writers of the genre avoided labels like “journalism” and “nonfiction.” Hemingway, according to Weber, believed that “fiction had its source in the recollected and observed facts of experience,” that is, fiction starts with journalism and with the author using techniques of a reporter; however, “if the work was to last the material had to be intensified through invention into a new and independent reality” (Weber 22). He creates inner monologues to illustrate his characters’ realities. Hemingway describes a reality that is new to his audience, just as Hersey attempts to do the same with internal reactions and thoughts, ultimately looking to make what Weber calls “lasting records” of these realities (Weber 22).

Before both Hersey and Hemingway was the journalist-turned-novelist Stephen Crane, who Ernest Leisy notes is one of the earliest developers of “historical romance.”
Crane’s advances to the genre are prominent as he “abandoned the structural trappings of historical fiction” when he “shifted emphasis from ‘the pomp and circumstance of glorious war’ to the ordeal of the common soldier as he faces his first battle” in *The Red Badge of Courage* (Leisy 17). Hemingway and Hersey then follow suit, focusing on the individual rather than the event, which becomes the hallmark of the creative nonfiction genre. Without those individual perceptions, there can be no “awe of experience.” Crane, like the two aforementioned authors, began his career as a journalist, and so the journalist’s attempt to recreate the subject’s reality becomes a natural part of his writing. Nonfiction, in order to have creative elements, summons the “personal,” and journalists like Crane appear best suited to do so.

Probably the most influential form of literary journalism is New Journalism, which David Eason defines as a genre that “emerged in magazines and in books to give shape to many of the cultural changes while revitalizing reporting as a form of storytelling” by the end of the 1960’s (Eason 191). A direct response to the counterculture of this time period, New Journalism epitomizes how literary journalism draws from personal perspectives. In order to recognize “society as a tableau of interesting races, age groups, subcultures, and social classes,” New Journalists wrote with a “detachment of the self from various conventional sources of identification” (191). Eason’s italicization of the keywords—“interesting” and “detachment”—serves to show that New Journalism was essentially a personal commentary on diversity in society. Just as Stephen Crane focuses on the American soldier, these New Journalists focus on key players in the counterculture.
The connection between the rise of the novel and the development of “interesting” nonfiction is clear. Creative nonfiction is rooted in the history of literary journalism. Eason calls this connection an extension of “the principles of realism that have guided journalistic writing since the nineteenth century” (Eason 203). Watt would argue that these principles had been influencing factors a century earlier. Regardless, realism has impacted literature, and it will continue to do so.
III. Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* as Creative Nonfiction

Capote claims his novel is “nonfiction”

In my attempt to identify novel-length case studies of the creative nonfiction genre, I could not ignore the 1965 work *In Cold Blood*. The author, Truman Capote, calls his work the first of its kind: a “true account of a multiple murder and its consequences” that is not only factual but also interesting to read. This novel, supposedly combining the awesome power of truth with the techniques of fiction writing, is an attempt at creating a super-genre that would accomplish more than either fiction or nonfiction could accomplish independently. I offer an analysis of the techniques that Capote uses to create the nonfiction novel in order to better understand the nonfiction novel itself. With this analysis, I hope to show how the author manipulates the story of a true murder into a sometimes haunting piece that intrigues the reader. The back-story of Holcomb and the crimes happened but somehow it reads like a novel. In order to accomplish this goal, the author’s truthfulness is at times problematic, but he never blatantly fictionalizes entire scenes. I look at how Capote often uses simple journalistic techniques in his dialogue; however, his selection of description, his choice of detail, and his use of symbols, in addition to his omniscient narrator’s perspective, are sometimes typical of more traditional fiction. Capote’s novel emerges as a work with deep connections to reality, but his claim to produce an entirely “true account” is worthy of skepticism.

Late in his life, Norman Mailer told an interviewer that he felt “there's no such thing as nonfiction” (*Academy of Achievement* 8). “Everything is fiction,” he said, “because in the moment someone tries to relate an experience of what happened to them, it's gone.” In contrast, Capote labeled his four-part serialized novel the “nonfiction
novel,” suggesting that he believes that nonfiction is achievable. George Plimpton, in a New York Times interview, praised the author for his success when he calls In Cold Blood “remarkable for its objectivity--nowhere, despite his involvement, does the author intrude” (Plimpton). Capote responds in the interview that he achieves this supposed objectivity through an “ability to transcribe verbatim long conversations, and to do so without taking notes or using tape-recordings.” The word “verbatim” is essential to the author’s claim of nonfiction. Supposedly, even the longest quotations in the text are exactly as his interviewees pronounced them.

In the interview, Capote calls the novel his “child” because he truly doesn’t “believe anything like [In Cold Blood] exists in the history of journalism” (Plimpton). Responding to this assertion, Plimpton is quick to point out that the idea behind the nonfiction novel is similar to Oscar Lewis’ book Children of Sanchez and John Hersey’s Hiroshima. Years later, Marc Weingarten calls Hiroshima the “model” for In Cold Blood (Weingarten 33). Not surrendering to these accusations, Capote counters that Hersey’s novel is a “documentary novel--a popular and interesting but impure genre, which allows all the latitude of the fiction writer, but usually contains neither the persuasiveness of fact nor the poetic attitude fiction is capable of reaching.” Both Hiroshima and In Cold Blood contain tragic events, but Capote exclaimed to Plimpton that, as opposed to the inartistic Hersey novel, his nonfiction novel genre is unique in how “the author lets his imagination run riot over the facts!” This proclamation should provoke readers to question how trustworthy the book is. The author maintains that, despite the fictional techniques used (rather because of them), his novel is good journalism.
Is nonfiction better than fiction?

Despite his suggestion that *In Cold Blood* reads like a novel, Paul Levine argues that book’s “credentials” as a new genre “are somewhat dubious” (Levin 135). The proposal that this particular novel is a “new species” seems ludicrous to Levine because, as I’ve suggested throughout earlier sections, realism and true-life stories have existed in novels for centuries. From Dickens through Hemingway, Levine states, “The notion of using actual occurrences in a work of fiction is hardly revolutionary.”

Still, *In Cold Blood* is a work of boasting. Truman Capote intends to break trends and improve genres. Indeed, in an interview with Patti Hill that M. Thomas Inge includes in *Truman Capote: Conversations*, Capote explains that “in reporting one is occupied with literalness and surfaces, with implication without comment-one can’t achieve immediate depths the way one may in fiction” (Hill 25). Traditional fiction, then, can be a simpler genre because one can choose to describe any thinkable object or event, when in the flat prose of reporting, a writer must choose the correct objects to describe “with implication” but “without comment.” In order to “prove that [he] could apply [his] style to the realities of journalism,” Capote reproduces reality through beautiful language and clear, descriptive imagery (Hill 25).

Instead of creating a fantastic story from scratch, Capote believes a true event would be the best choice for a topic. Because reporting is more challenging with its limited selection of true events to write about, one might mistakenly assume that Capote attempts to write a nonfiction novel *solely* for the boasting rights and the challenge. Though his topics are from the finite pool of actual events, critics like Levine consider the topics available to be just as persuasive as anything a fiction writer could create.
Levine explains in his review of *In Cold Blood*: “Given the outrageous nature of contemporary reality, it was perhaps inevitable that the artistic quest for an appropriate mode would lead to the writing of a ‘nonfiction novel’” (Levine 135). Real stories in novels can resonate in a reader by implementing a “this could happen to you” strategy. Capote can evoke strong emotions within his stories that perhaps even fiction cannot evoke when his true-life murder story possesses an “outrageous nature”—in which innocent individuals are brutally killed for no reason. The fact that the Clutter murders actually happened haunts his readers.

The counterargument to the claim that the author’s choice to make a novel out of facts leads to an even more impressive story is that choosing to tell a “true account” bores the reader with a lack of creativity. Robert Kuehn, in his 1966 diatribe on the state of the novel, “The Novel Now: Some Anxieties and Prescriptions,” disagrees with Levine’s suggestion that reality is outrageous. To Kuehn, an imagination-fueled romantic work would be the epitome of good prose. Capote’s “rejection of the novel form” and his “insistence upon real facts” are hints to the critic that the nonfiction novel is “an attempt to avoid the solipsism of his early fiction or it may be a symptom of imaginative bankruptcy” (Kuehn 127). Considering the “outrageous nature” of reality, “imaginative bankruptcy”—writer’s block—is not the reason behind the author’s choice of topic. The possibility that history contains a bountiful supply of intriguing stories (and infinite perspectives of those stories) is most likely what drives the creative nonfiction writer to choose this particular genre.

Even with Capote’s supposed “rejection of the novel,” *In Cold Blood*’s true account is hidden behind the fictional techniques that the author uses. The book’s topic
of an actual murder might initially move readers because of its brutal reality; the text itself results in a story that sometimes reads like exciting fiction throughout. Even though, as Levine points out, Capote boasts “consummate reportorial skill,” it is the author’s apparent “novelist's eye for shape and detail” and how he produces an “artistic job of reporting in depth” that leads to his “first-rate” success (135). Capote’s in-depth reporting is not as important as how “the material itself seems to come straight out of the world of contemporary fiction” (Levine 136). Capote can take true-life events and order them and describe them in a way that is as exciting as if he had improvised the entire narrative.

**Falsity in the text?**

Before it was published as a full-length book, *In Cold Blood*’s serialized edition created controversy with its publisher *The New Yorker*. Capote’s language, which I analyze later, and his research methods were foreign to the typically straightforward-journalistic periodical. Marc Weingarten remarks that the novelist wrote “about events that he hadn’t witnessed, dialogue that he received secondhand, interior monologues that required a fair amount of creative license on his part” (Weingarten 33). Capote, however, defends his book against accusations like these. He disclosed to George Plimpton in an interview how “one doesn't spend almost six years on a book, the point of which is factual accuracy, and then give way to minor distortions.” Still, the novel contains information that critics and readers cannot, for the most part, verify. The half of the novel that recounts Dick Hickock and Perry Smith’s journey from the time they journey to the Clutter house to the time of their arrest could be an entirely false account that the two decided on before their capture. Capote’s investigation, such as interviews with
individuals who encountered the murderers in Mexico and Florida, can only verify that
the men were indeed at those places; more events happened than the narrator can ever
describe in the story, and the possibility exists that the descriptions with which Hickock
and Smith provide the author could be falsified. The fact remains that, “for a magazine
that prided itself on ironclad accuracy [like The New Yorker], there was too much
unsubstantiated fact, too much fanciful speculation on Capote’s part” (Weingarten 34).

Errors—“minor distortions”—indeed exist in the novel. In addition to Hickock
and Smith’s unreliability as sources for their activities, Capote did not obtain details
quickly enough. Months elapsed before Smith began to answer the author’s questions,
and “for the first year and a half…[Smith] would come just so close, and then no closer”
to answering questions fully and honestly (Plimpton). Even when Smith grew
comfortable enough with Capote’s interviews, he “was very bad at details…, though he
was good at remembering conversations and moods.” The author is already at fault for
trusting Smith because of this admission of the criminal’s problems with remembering
details, but he is especially culpable for trusting Perry Smith’s word because the criminal
did not divulge this unreliable information until a year and a half after the events had
transpired.

Like Perry Smith, Capote has a talent for creating mood and atmosphere. If an
author only relies on the descriptions of his characters that he obtains through interviews,
he might be able to accurately capture the essence of the people in his book.
Unfortunately for Capote, however, Marc Weingarten cites at least one person who was
intimate with the murdered family who disagreed with the description of the Clutters in
the novel. Capote only briefly mentions this person, Bill Brown, in the text as “the
editor” (of the Garden City Telegram), but he also served as the Sunday school teacher of Kenyon and Nancy Clutter. Brown claims that the recollection of the Clutters’ “atmosphere” “was so off the mark as to be virtually unrecognizable” (Weingarten 34). Apparently a “general sort of mood” is not enough to produce a convincing description.

The deviation from truth is evident in the author’s revisions from serialized New Yorker article to Random House-published novel. Jack De Bellis analyzes the changes and identifies “nearly five-thousand changes, ranging from crucial matters of fact to the placement of a comma” (De Bellis 519-520). For a novelist, revisions are typical and even healthy, but for a nonfiction novelist, these revisions are suspect. Even more, as De Bellis points out, “since many of the things changed in the Random House edition originally appeared in ‘official records’... , it is all the more surprising that they might be subject to revision” (De Bellis 520). Capote rewords court transcripts, police interviews, and other official pieces of evidence in the investigation of the Clutter murders such as letters that Perry Smith receives prior to his arrest. To readers and critics like De Bellis, this proves to be problematic considering that the author is claiming this novel to be entirely true:

[Capote] has made changes in nineteen cases involving direct quotations. Therefore, these changes, some of which are obviously errors, create problems when we attempt to discover the special contribution he made toward a new art form in which every word would be true. (527)

The critic was able to organize his findings into several tables (see Figure 1). Capote made changes to “quoted material”—presumably pieces of dialogue which he acquired through his asserted ability to store long interviewee’s statements verbatim in
his mind. With the information in mind that the author in fact changes this “quoted material” at will, readers can assume that he generalized these quotes. Two hundred and two of these revisions involve changes of wording, where Capote himself attempted to come up with the correct word that a person used or would have used. The critic is of the opinion that, because of these revisions, “Capote failed in his intention to write a ‘nonfiction novel.’” (524). De Bellis suggests that the author did not succeed because he did not recreate his story using only the facts that he found. He sees Capote’s willingness to change quotations as a trait of a fiction writer who creates dialogue rather than recreating it.

De Bellis also believes that the author assumes too much. Specifically, the author transforms Perry Smith’s opinion of Lee Andrews, a meek Kansas college student who infamously and unexpectedly murdered his entire family. The original sentence “Perry couldn’t stand him-yet for a long time he did not admit it” becomes “Perry could have boiled him in oil-yet he never admitted it” (NY: Oct. 16: 162. R: 317-318). This type of revision, which uses an image that Smith probably never specifically stated, causes De Bellis to question the intentions of this line modification: “Does ‘boiled him in oil’ clarify the precise quality of Smith's feeling as he experienced it?” He fairly proposes an answer to his own question. He believes Capote changes these lines in order to “vivify Smith's...
character by showing the close relation in Smith's mind between violence and his intellectual insecurity” (De Bellis 524). The possibility still exists, though, that Perry Smith, at some point during his stay on Death Row, actually told the author he would like to boil Andrews in oil. Capote could have remembered this particular description of anger (or discovered it in one of Smith’s letters) as he revised the *New Yorker* edition. De Bellis ignores this possibility, instead deciding that the “simple substitution of single words often allowed Capote a more vivid characterizing detail” (De Bellis 524). De Bellis suggests that creative license, ideally, should be limited in the nonfiction novel.

Perhaps the most disturbing distortion in the text is a scene that Capote might have entirely fabricated. Biographer Gerald Clarke suggests that “since events had not provided him with a happy [ending] scene, [Capote] was forced to make one up: a chance, springtime encounter” of Kansas Bureau of Investigation Agent Dewey and Susan Kidwell “in the…Garden City cemetery.” Clarke points out that this meeting is a duplicate of the ending of Capote’s novel *The Grass Harp*, when two characters meet at a cemetery (358-9). Because of the similarities to his fictional and because Capote admits to writer’s block while writing his finale, Clarke assumes the author fabricates a happier ending because he could not discover one in his investigation. If this scene was fictionalized as Clarke believes, the novel’s connection to reality is jeopardized.

**Capote’s Dialogue**

Though De Bellis finds Capote’s dialogue problematic because of its apparent malleability, *In Cold Blood*’s spoken language is what brings the work to life. At least some of the dialogue is, as Capote states in his Acknowledgments section, “taken from official records.” For instance, at one point the text provides the reader with Dick
Hickock’s account of a scene before he runs over a dog and, immediately afterwards, Perry Smith’s account of the same scene (108-112). Either of the murderers could have described this scene in the investigation. Smith, at least, tells an officer on tape recorder that his partner “wouldn’t harm the fleas on a dog.” Instead, he would “just run over the dog” (232). In the lines of dialogue in the scene before Hickock hits a dog with his car—in both men’s account—the dialogue is identical. Both sections include Perry Smith saying “I think there must be something wrong with us” (108, 110). Additionally, in both appearances of the scene, Hickock responds, “Deal me out, baby. I’m a normal” (108, 111). Inner-dialogue appears to change the meaning, though the lines remain the same. Readers see Hickock’s building annoyance when his partner talks about the killings and Smith’s knowledge of this annoyance, though Hickock verbally contemplates the killings anyway. This scene exhibits the *creative* side of the nonfiction novel; the author can control the mood of the scene by aesthetically interspersing a character’s insight with dialogue. As long as the exact wording is used in each perspective, it reinforces the novel’s truthfulness.

In addition to dialogue, Capote uses other forms of quotation to make his text appear more authentic. Throughout the novel, the author includes excerpts of letters and reports. One example of a letter that reinforces the reality in the text is Willie-Jay’s analysis of Perry’s sister’s letter. The title alone shows the reader Willie-Jay’s pretentious diction: “Impressions I Garnered from the Letter” (143). This prisoner wishes to educate Smith while at the same time making himself appear educated. One of the reasons Capote includes this letter is to show how Smith himself values education and how he keeps Willie-Jay’s analysis in order to be perceived as educated.
For the same reason, Smith corrects Hickock’s grammar several times in the story. Capote includes these lines so that he can more fully construct Smith’s stubborn, condescending personality. In the book, Hickock proclaims “we’ll blast hair all over them walls” when he schemes to get in their victims’ house by suggesting they pretend to be hunters that need to use the phone. It is highly likely that, whenever Hickock actually muttered this phrase, Smith replied with “those walls” (22). Eventually, the reader comes to accept these grammatical corrections as essential to Smith’s behavior, giving the reader a fuller impression of his persona. Capote’s dialogue reinforces the apparent truthfulness of his story by implementing direct quotes.

Some of Capote’s techniques in executing his dialogue are the same ones a fiction writer might use. One such example is the italicized inflections of the Englishwoman, Mrs. Archibald William Warren-Browne. When the author describes people’s reactions to the Clutter murders in the local hangout of Hartman’s Café, Capote recreates her statement in the mind of the reader: “that hateful prairie wind, one hears the most appalling moans” (115). In order to replicate her voice, the italicized sections represent her accent in the dialogue, which is a technique that a straightforward journalist would not use. Capote’s dialogue becomes more effective as he expresses how this woman actually sounded.

Selection of Description

In addition to describing dialogue, Capote tries to make his story more factual through his descriptions. He focuses a great deal on Perry Smith’s effeminacy, detailing his story with information on how small the legs of “Little Perry” are, how his voice is “gentle,” “prim,” and “soft,” and how delicate his “pert, impish features” are (55, 23,
The writer chooses very explicit, romanticized words to describe this character in the hope of recording his impression of a sensitive “Little Perry.” Indeed, De Bellis is correct in his summation that a “simple substitution of single words often allowed Capote a more vivid characterizing detail.” Capote’s description of Perry Smith’s handwriting as “a script abounding in curly, feminine flourishes” is not exactly objective, but it is vivid. Readers can picture the curls that abound—that flourish, that flood—the expressive writing, but he could have simply claimed the writing was curly. The exact handwriting is incommunicable, but with additional descriptions of Smith as violent (eager to boil fellow inmates in oil), in addition to the descriptors “gentle” and “impish,” Capote shows that this character is not like the simple, brute Dick Hickock. How the author describes his topic is just as important as what he describes.

**Selection of Intimate Detail**

The focus throughout *In Cold Blood* is essential. Even Robert Kuehn, who looks at the book as a failure that “has no vision” admits that “Capote arranges his materials cleverly” (Kuehn 127). The details that the author chooses to display are typically the truth, though this is not always clear. One selection of detail, impressive in its irony, is Capote’s description of Perry Smith reading an article in which another mass murder of a family occurs “at [the family’s] home, on a cattle-raising ranch not far from Tallahassee” (199). The article is startling on several levels: first because the murder mentioned is so similar to the Clutter murders, and second because of Perry Smith’s subtle hint that the two fugitives would later be accused of these murders which they did not commit. When he asks Hickock to remind him where they were at the time of this other crime, Hickock confirms that they were in Tallahassee; however, Capote is connecting the two murders
erroneously because, as Capote himself mentions later on page 258, this set of murders really occurred in Osprey, Florida, which is very far from Tallahassee.

The inaccuracy, as I mentioned, occurs in the scene when Perry first reads about the killings on a Miami beach. Plainly, Capote misinforms the reader that the murder happened in Tallahassee. Even if the author is reporting the scene as Smith remembered it, in which the newspaper supposedly mentions the wrong city, Capote knows this memory is faulty (no newspaper would have made this mistake, as Tallahassee and Tampa are several hours apart). He chooses to present it to his readers anyway. What is more incriminating for the author is that, among his list of revisions that Capote makes, Jack De Bellis tracks the change from Tampa in The New Yorker to Tallahassee in the Random House publishing (De Bellis 523). Capote was initially correct, so more likely than not he is knowingly lying to the reader. This is a novelist’s technique: excite the reader with the possibility of an important detail of the story, which turns out to be a red herring. Unfortunately for the nonfiction aspect of this novel, the detail is false.

Maintaining focus also means a writer can eliminate “certain aspects of an interaction or experience” (Gutkind 66). Though this technique seems deliberately deceptive, an author could in theory reproduce the absolute truth of a few moments in a character’s story, and those moments do not have to be representative of the actual character’s overall personality. Capote, for the most part, upholds this strategy. He informed George Plimpton, “I make my own comment by what I choose to tell and how I choose to tell it.” If he makes choices in his nonfiction novel about which parts of the story to tell, he also chooses which parts not to tell.
In Cold Blood goes as far as blatantly eliminating sections of Perry Smith’s autobiographical statement. David Guest, who views the novel as a partial defense of Smith, notices that “the presence of ellipses in the statement indicates that it has been edited” (Guest 117). Ellipses are present before Smith writes the phrase “This is about all I remember,” concerning his childhood (274). Obviously this is not all he remembers, as Capote had omitted whatever it was that he wrote. Readers then assume that Smith only remembers the incident before the ellipses, which involved a disturbing scene in which, as a child, the criminal aimed a BB gun at his brother’s head. Guest calls this a problem and asks: “what has been omitted?” This omission is particularly suspect to the critic. Did Smith perhaps do something even more disturbing as a child, or did he perhaps have something done to him that would make him appear weaker? Anything is possible.

There is also an ellipsis after the Clutter daughter first sees her eventual murderers and throughout the psychiatric analyses (240, 295-298). Capote’s supposed “novelist’s eye for shape and detail” means that, to the author, omitting particular details leads to a stronger novel.

**Selection of Symbols**

In addition to highlighting and excluding certain details in In Cold Blood, Capote also allows his readers to assign meaning to images within the text, cultivating the facts he finds into an interesting novel that can be interpreted variously. Capote implements his symbolism by reproducing images that readers can easily associate, in multiple ways, with broad topics, such as the death penalty. For instance, Capote traveled to the hotel in Mexico City with the sign in the mirror that reads “your day ends at 2pm” to verify its existence. Dick Hickock described this detail in a post-conviction interview, and it
becomes symbolic in the book (123). This choice of detail is impressive in how it coincides with the book’s overall theme. Of course the killers simply end their day at the hotel by 2pm, but by the end of the novel they see the end of their days. Capote’s decision to return to this broad topic in such a small detail shows his ability to do what Lee Gutkind calls being “completely objective while being very subjective” (Gutkind 66). This event happened, but the author is responsible for bringing it to the reader’s mind.

Some symbolism is more repetitive. In both the beginning and the end of the novel, Capote refers to a sign in Garden City that boasts the “World’s Largest FREE Swimpool” (33, 196). A sign such as this, with the capitalized word “FREE,” characterizes Garden City well. Each time the sign appears, it represents the isolation of the small town and its pride in its swimming pool. Capote could be mocking the town for loving such a kitschy item, when other parts of the world have oceans or large private pools, but—more likely—he is admitting how beautiful the simple town is. In the middle of the country, Garden City possesses a pool like the Ancient Greeks. Additionally, water could symbolize the original purity of the town before it was a violated murder location. Garden City is Paradise to Capote, even though it was actually just a simple town in Kansas. The Paradise symbolism is obvious in the rest of the book, as well. Mr. Clutter is frequently associated with apples. The town’s seeming purity is repeatedly invoked with phrases like “the whitest sunlight descends on the purest skies” (10). Capote builds up these Garden of Eden images to express the inevitable fall of the town. Even the capitalized “FREE” on the sign is ironic because, in the novel, the town is destined to be the place of a great tragedy; the people of Garden City are not free of sin.
The sign for the pool actually existed, as approved by the Garden City Chamber of Commerce, but Capote constructs more meaning for it when he presents it to the reader multiple times.

Similar representations appear throughout the book, like Nancy’s horse Babe. The horse represents the innocent victim, and, any time it appears, it reminds the reader of her unfortunate death. Early in the book, Mr. Helms’ describes “Nancy leading old Babe off to the barn” (41). At the end of the book, when the auctioneers are selling off the murder victims’ possessions, Susan Kidwell wishes she “could give Babe a home, for she loved the old horse and knew how much Nancy had loved her” (271). Even more poetic is how aged the horse appears in the story, emphasizing how untimely the death is as well. Capote chooses an excellent, emotional detail that allows him to be quite subjective despite its truthfulness.

**Point of view**

The perspective of *In Cold Blood* is complicated and, likely because of the nature of the creative nonfiction genre to attempt to appear objective, the reporter-narrator remains unnamed while intermittently slipping into different characters’ minds. David Guest claims that “there are no direct references to Capote in the narrative” (Guest 118). Technically, this is correct; the narrator mentions a single journalist that has close contact with Hickock and Smith, and readers can assume this person is Capote himself. By even referring to himself in third person (and anonymously), Guest claims Capote creates a panopticon, in which “the all-seeing narrator” sits with a “privileged gaze,” “himself unseen, in the observation tower” (Guest 114). Capote claims he refrains from mentioning himself in order to minimize the narrator’s interference with the story. “My
feeling is that for the nonfiction-novel form to be entirely successful, the author should not appear in the work,” he explained in an interview, “and the I-I-I intrudes when it really shouldn’t” (Plimpton).

The author’s ambiguity allows him to provide insight into any part of the story that Capote has researched. The resulting voice is powerful and ominous. For instance, on the night of her murder, Nancy Clutter sets out her clothes for Church the next morning, which is a dress that is “her prettiest, which she herself had made.” Suddenly, the narrator states, “It was the dress in which she was to be buried” (56). The reader is caught off-guard but can never be too surprised in creative nonfiction, as the book is not written as a mystery novel. The statement sounds prophetic to the reader, allowing the narrator to interrupt in a mystic fashion. At another point of the novel, the narrator uses the phrase “on this final day of her life” (30). This statement in particular seems as though the speaker is God-like, decisive, and through this decisiveness the speaker is implicated as having something to do with her death. The voice’s knowledge of the future implies that the narrative voice is an important part of the story. In fact, the speaker does have something to do with the account of the death. Had this novel been fictional, he could have written a story in which she did not die. Though her death is inevitable, the narrative voice is gloating rather than sympathetic in his prophecy. Capote intends to identify the narrator with the unsympathetic voice of God: capable of revealing the future but indifferent. Some of the most disturbing statements from the narrator appear in apathetic parenthetical interruptions, such as “Mr. Helm was ‘in poor health’ (poorer than he knew; he had less than four months to live)” (120). Even though Capote hopes not to intrude with “I-I-I,” when the narrator uses jarring statements like the ones
above, he intrudes even more so. He reminds readers that he has the power to reveal facts, such as the impending death of the Clutters or of Mr. Helms, in whatever order he prefers.

Still, the narrator does remain impressively absent despite Capote’s continual presence in the actual events. While Smith is supposedly “lonely and inappropriate as a seagull in a wheat field” with few visitors while in captivity besides the undersheriff’s wife, Capote himself visited and interviewed Smith, creating his infamous rapport with the criminal. Guest argues the decision to not include the narrator in the story is a “larger renunciation of power that is—paradoxically—best understood as a strategy for masking the exercise of power” (Guest 118). As an unaccountable narrator, Capote’s voice can switch between the thoughts of Hickock and Smith such as in the two scenes that describe the same events (before Hickock runs over a dog). Though the dialogue is identical, the inner dialogue relating to the scenes is different for each character. In the segment describing Hickock, the text reads, “He was annoyed. Annoyed as hell. Why the hell couldn’t Perry shut up?...It was annoying. Especially since they’d agreed, sort of, not to talk about the goddam thing” (108). While Hickock believes he and Smith had previously agreed to not speak of the crime, the lines that describe Smith’s thoughts mention no such agreement. Smith indeed “would just as soon avoid” the conversation, and he understands that it “would displease Dick” (110).

By mentioning both characters’ points of view, Capote depicts Hickock as a man who would rather escape his problems than talk about them and Smith as a guilt-ridden person who cannot avoid his sins, though he would like to do so. When the narrator enters the minds of both killers, he uses his power as the undetectable storyteller, adding
what Capote himself calls “the reality and the atmosphere of a novel” (Inge 120). His insight into the killers’ minds humanizes them, which is why he chooses to give readers inner dialogue at this point of the novel, when they are struggling to understand their crimes, rather than when they “couldn’t stop laughing” when they “hit the highway and drove east” immediately after leaving the Clutters’ house, which Capote does not reveal until two hundred pages after the murder (256). Had Capote dropped his narrator’s voice and entered the minds of the killers in that disgusting moment when they act savagely, readers would know much sooner how the excited killers felt “very high” from the murders (256). Instead, after the pages in which the search for the killers begins, the author immediately skips to Mexico, where they have been contemplating the crime for days and can receive more sympathy from the reader.

The narrator of In Cold Blood at first appears to attempt to achieve objectivity. With a reporter-narrator, the author can present research as a story, not necessarily detailing how the narrator came to know the information he knows. Capote manipulates the information he discovers in his interviews in order to tell a better story. Sometimes, the narrator intrudes with a prophetic voice, flaunting just how much he knows. Other times he uses his powers to enter the minds of Hickock and Smith, but he only does this at times that will tell the story of vicious murderers who have very human perspectives and not when the murderers would appear one-dimensional. All the while, the narrator continues to tell the story from an un-named perspective that is based on the multiple perspectives of people who witnessed parts of the novel.

The narrative voice, along with other techniques that Capote uses to steer the story, give the author the chance to develop an emotional narrative. Capote’s creative
influence on this realistic story is not always as noticeable as the God-like parenthetical interruptions. Only upon further analysis can readers identify his veiled techniques, such as the absent narrator or Capote’s effort to humanize Perry Smith by describing him as both a delicate and dangerous man. Creative nonfiction gives Capote the opportunity to persuade his readers with aesthetics rather than with just facts alone. Readers can envision the creative nonfiction writer as the artist and the nonfiction novel as his art. He attributes symbolic meanings to objects that actually existed, so in the case of Perry Smith, Capote accentuates, in his art, his subject’s human components. Capote could have documented an event with a series of simple photographs, but instead he decided to create poignant photographs from interesting angles.
IV. Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song as Creative Nonfiction

Mailer’s Fleeting Attempts at “the Novel as Fiction”

Truman Capote seemed to be Norman Mailer’s polar opposite. While Capote proclaimed not only to have created a new genre but to have written a book that is “entirely true,” Mailer openly admitted that creative nonfiction is not innovative and even “with the best will in the world to write nonfiction, you're writing fiction” (Academy of Achievement). Even the most researched and well-intentioned narratives will fail as completely truthful historical documents. Still, if a work attempts to recreate reality, and if at the same time it offers creative—inventive—points of view, then it succeeds as creative nonfiction. Throughout this section of my paper, I will analyze Norman Mailer’s The Executioner’s Song, a novel that tells the story of Gary Gilmore’s crimes and execution, in an effort to draw boundaries around the creative nonfiction genre. While literature might not ever actually be able to capture existence in words, authors have indeed attempted to incorporate as much fact as possible into their works. Mailer, a particularly brave author whom The New York Times described on the occasion of his recent death as a “towering writer with a matching ego,” made a career from these attempts.

Some critics believe that Mailer quit writing fiction altogether at some point in his career, which produced well over thirty books of many genres. His earlier works include traditional fiction, such as war novels, as well as experimentations with fictional stories starring historical figures. These experimentations soon became Mailer’s “style,” as he consistently published works that erased genre boundaries. According to Donald Kaufman, Mailer “makes language the handmaiden of History, American-style” (247),
suggesting that Mailer continually published historical accounts in confident new ways. The 1968 publication of *Armies of the Night* marked at least one of these new techniques, half written as a journalistic piece and half written as a novel. It was reminiscent of how Stephen Crane wrote a newspaper article about the sinking of *The Commodore* and subsequently published the short story “The Open Boat,” but Kaufman believes Mailer’s innovation was different from previous experiments in the American canon. Mailer rewrote stories that were documented as “history” and made them interesting to read. The author’s earlier fiction writing, with entirely original stories, began to fade as he wrote an increasing amount of original interpretations of true-life events.

In his essay, Kaufman specifically cites *Why Are We in Vietnam?* as Mailer’s last attempt to do a “novel as fiction.” This particular novel deals with a fictional account of a young man before his trip to fight in the Vietnam War. The war itself, as Kaufman highlights, does not actually enter the book until the very last page when Mailer’s protagonist says “Vietnam, hot damn,” and there Mailer’s attempts at light-hearted fiction end and the harshness of reality begins to take hold of his works. From this point on in Mailer’s career, Kaufman believes, the author wishes to transform the world he sees by exposing his audience to its blunt cruelty.

**Mailer’s “Bizarre Atmosphere”**

Other critics agree with Kaufman’s analysis of Mailer’s attempts, but disagree with what he actually attained. Barbara Foley, who writes about documentary fiction and other works that attempt to tell “the truth,” might claim Kaufman is too eager to dole out praise for Mailer when she cites *The Executioner’s Song* as an example of a novel that desires but fails to be accepted as history. She does not believe that this is possible. Like
Hayden White, E.L. Doctorow, and others, she claims that truth cannot be confined to pen and paper: “history is ultimately unknowable” (331). Though she believes history cannot be entirely reproduced on paper, she also admits that books like *The Executioner’s Song* graft “a range of novelistic techniques into a factional account of some narrow segment of contemporary reality in order to evoke the bizarre atmosphere of our cluttered, alienated culture” (331). This “narrow segment” of reality is what makes a piece creative nonfiction rather than simply fiction.

The difference between fiction and nonfiction, for Norman Mailer, is the individual works’ aspirations, and this particular author’s combination of the two genres is why Barbara Foley points to *The Executioner’s Song* as a novel that can evoke an “atmosphere” of American culture. “Fiction is the attempt to summarize artfully some human experiences that might possibly happen at some time just like this,” Mailer asserts in an interview, “whereas nonfiction is the attempt to include what you consider to be all the necessary elements in a story” (*Academy of Achievement*). Unfortunately, when nonfiction writers attempt to include all the important pieces of a story, they “get bogged down in dull prose” and “they destroy the reality of the story” (*Academy of Achievement*). Combining the two goals, writers can still “summarize artfully some human experiences” that occur while attempting to include “all the necessary elements in a story.” The result is a novel like *The Executioner’s Song*, which “artfully” tells Gary Gilmore’s experiences, including his murder of two clerks, his volatile relationship with his girlfriend Nicole, and his fight for his own execution by firing squad.

Even if Mailer abides by his research in his attempts to tell *all* the “necessary elements” that happened, one could argue that he cannot succeed because he has a limited
perspective. Images of Gary Gilmore’s life in *The Executioner’s Song* will be undoubtedly biased and faulty because Mailer cannot picture the story in any other way than through his own eyes. For instance, when Gary wears a Panama hat, he “wore it with the brim tilted down in front and up in back like the Godfather might wear it” (66). Gary Gilmore might have never heard of Mario Puzo, and he might have had it tilted down in the front like an honest, Cuban cigar aficionado he once saw in a magazine. Mailer writes the character as a hopeful mobster, though it may not reflect Gilmore’s character. While the fact (the glimpse of the main character’s reality through a description of his hat) may be true, the simile is subjective.

**Analysis of Mailer’s Techniques of Fiction in *The Executioner’s Song***

Narrative style offers a writer the most freedom to be creative. Efforts to bring the story to life are what Lee Gutkind calls “the creative part of the creative nonfiction.” Those methods fall into the following categories: “scenes (with dialogue, description, point of view, intimate detail; framing (story structure), and focus—all important aspects of the anatomy of the essay” (Gutkind 69). Following Gutkind’s categories, I plan to analyze dialogue, selection of description, selection of intimate detail, and point of view in *The Executioner’s Song* in order to identify the creative techniques that brand the book as a nonfiction novel rather than a nonfiction book. These creative techniques illustrate Mailer’s bias in his storytelling.

**Mailer’s Dialogue**

Dialogue is important in Mailer’s novel. The simplicity of his language reflects the reality of small-town Provo, Utah. Along with the fact that much of the novel’s dialogue is often quoted from Mailer’s interviews, the simplified English that the
characters speak reflects “reality.” Gutkind marks dialogue as the first of the list of creative nonfiction’s “creative parts” because often it replicates reality as closely as a writer ever could by using quotations from recorded conversations or by recreating what a conversation might have sounded like. Both forms of dialogue, word-for-word quotes and assumed conversation, often give the book the feeling of authenticity.

In one section of his novel, Mailer uses the actual transcript from Gilmore’s initial interrogation. Gutkind believes the author copies and pastes directly from the transcript to “capture reality” because “this is how people communicate in everyday life” (Gutkind 23). The records show that Gilmore’s grammar is simple. He tells the investigators, “I seen a gun laying out there” and how “she don’t get along with her mother” (276). This is Gilmore’s true language style—how he communicates in “everyday life.” Mailer can then imitate Gilmore’s language style throughout the rest of the novel. He writes Gilmore’s voice using 50’s-era cool-jazz slang like “Baby…I really love you all the way and forever” (151). Another time, Gilmore suggest his cellmate “save ‘em” rather than saying “save them” (367, emphasis mine). Later, the narrator describes Gilmore’s speech as “real cool” (390). When Mailer studies Gilmore’s voice through recordings and transcripts, he recognizes that his tone is relaxed and indifferent to grammatical rules, and then he replicates this voice throughout the novel.

Oftentimes, Mailer chooses to make Gilmore’s voice sound more articulate than the aforementioned transcripts depict him to be. The transcript offers several instances of Gilmore’s unsophisticated true-life dialect. The character in the novel, instead, eloquently expresses his non-smoking principle in the line “I don’t believe in supporting any habit you have to pay for” (356). Gilmore also articulates well his opinion of
cellmate, stating “I believe you are a good convict” (359). Though these lines offer perhaps an unrealistic picture of the actual Gilmore, Mailer understands that as a creative nonfiction writer, he can substitute what he would assume the character would say for direct quotations. When creating dialogue, Mailer has the opportunity to portray Gilmore as more eloquent, perhaps in an effort to paint a sympathetic picture of the protagonist.

Throughout the novel, the author manipulates other characters’ speech to sound like stereotypes. His generalization of certain character’s speech suggests he editorializes through dialogue, which is a benefit of writing a nonfiction piece in the form of the novel. For example, “Geelmore, Geebs, I tired of your chit,” a Hispanic prison guard says (391). Mailer makes the guard sound like a bad joke. The statement “I tired” is infantile English. Readers attach an identity of an underpaid, uneducated minority because they have no other way of entirely understanding who this character is.

This type of dialogue elicits an argument from Amy Lang in *The Syntax of Class*. Within a book about language in fiction, Lang acknowledges that “the mutually defining character of the interlocked vocabularies of race, class, and gender is obscured in fiction as social identities come to appear self-evident” (Lang 7). Authors do highlight differences in different classes’ languages to create social identities, Lang says, but critics should recognize classes are “more polymorphous and more perverse than we once imagined them, and the language of class less stable” (Lang 7). So when Mailer generates the Hispanic guard’s language as he does, he is perhaps culpable of what Lang calls “achieving particular ideological ends” (Lang 7). Gutkind explains the reasoning behind using stereotyped language such as “Geelmore” instead of “Gilmore” when he
says authors use dialogue to educe “reader reaction through humor…or tragedy” (Gutkind 23).

While Mailer does alter various voices within *The Executioner’s Song*, he somewhat conceals this altering through his dialogue tags. At some points the description of dialogue becomes droning because he repeats “said” and “asked” so many times. These tags emphasize the book’s connection to nonfiction because they read like a newspaper article. Early in the novel, Mailer establishes this pattern of dialogue tags. On page 47 of the book, the author uses “said” or “asked” in nine straight lines of dialogue. “Said Vern,” “said Gary,” “said Vern,” the first part of the conversation reads. “Asked Brenda,” “said Gary,” “said Brenda,” and so on, Mailer relates. He appears to remove himself from the writing because the dialogue tags are so straightforward, even lacking descriptors. Mailer chooses what the characters say, though, and Gutkind’s argument attests that, “as in fiction writing, dialogue enhances action and characterization” (Gutkind 23).

**Mailer’s Selection of Description**

Probably the most effective of Mailer’s creative tools is his description, as the author’s exposition of his scenes is what often allows history to come alive. For example, *The Executioner’s Song*’s description of the flourishing relationship Gary Gilmore has with the character of Nicole supports Barbara Foley’s claim that an atmosphere of American culture penetrates the story. In the early parts of the two characters’ relationship, the narrator offers a concrete description of how Gilmore and his girlfriend “would sit around and drink beer in the evening” but another sentence in the same section exhibits more introspective exposition. Two paragraphs after the beer-
Mailer personifies the sky: “the twilight came down slowly” (86). This trope better develops the atmosphere of the scene for the author. Readers are not surprised when the lovers feel as “if you were taking one breath and then another from a cluster of roses” (Mailer 86). This metaphor can offer readers a clearer understanding of scene; his readers can search their minds for a time when they themselves smelled roses, and then they can apply this feeling to the event that they are reading about. Eventually, Mailer compares the atmosphere of their relationship to something pharmaceutical with the simile “the air was good as marijuana then” (87). He stretches to find the correct phrasing to describe their particular story, finally commenting that it was full of ecstasy, though his comparison of it to “marijuana” implies a multitude of hidden meanings in the characters’ relationship. Because these two characters actually existed in our universe, a reader can easily accept that these two, who spend time together sitting around and drinking beer, have a relationship that exceeds plain description. If you were to remove each from the other’s presence, they then would no longer feel that particular high.

Earlier in the passage, Mailer flatly claims that “there was hardly time enough together,” leaving behind concrete descriptions and figurative language to instead state something that “was” (87). Though the exact love of these two cannot be described in mere words, Mailer is able to inform his readers that the time these two characters spend together is cathartic through frank language like “there was hardly time” and figurative language like “good as marijuana.”

Additionally, a nonfiction novelist can make the true story he tells more interesting and even more political by describing his setting through a particular lens. In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Franco Moretti details how authors utilize either linear or circular
systems of geography in their works, with Mailer using the latter. He quotes a comment John Barrell makes in his book *The Idea of Landscape*, citing how a landscape “could be said to have a different geography according to who was looking at it” (Moretti 38).

From within, a landscape appears circular, with the character looking out at his setting. An outside perspective, typically someone travelling through the foreign landscape, would see the setting as it approached his or her eyes—and that person would describe the setting in a linear, beginning-to-start fashion. Mailer is peculiar in how he implements his system of geography. Gilmore, an outsider, could have been described in a novel that started outside of Utah, in his birthplace in Texas, and the story could have continued to his death in Utah. Moretti would identify the Provo, Utah perspective as “mentalité,” which he explains as the “omnipresent, half-submerged culture of daily routines—position of the fields, local paths.” Provo is a circular, routine-driven setting. Characters literally walk in circles, performing their daily tasks. Typically, an author would write a character creating conflict from within. Gilmore, though, would represent “ideology,” which is “the world-view of a different social actor (a visitor)” (Moretti 42). He is an outsider. Typically, for an outsider, the description of setting would come as the outsider comes in contact with it.

Because Mailer focuses the entire story in the one state, he might be commenting on the small-town mentality and how it would not understand the open-minded “ideology” of Gilmore. The author continually describes a humble setting, with Provo as the center of the story. For example, Spanish Fork, where Gilmore’s girlfriend Nicole lives, is described as “very small, about ten miles from Provo” (72). Gilmore’s initial place of employment in the story, his Uncle Vern’s shoe shop, is “in the center of Provo.”
On the way from his cousin’s house in Orem to the shop in Provo there are “shopping malls and quick-eat palaces, used-car dealers, chain clothing stores and gas stops, appliance stores and highway signs and fruit stands” (18). In addition to the banks and other businesses Mailer mentions, the entire town seems packed into “the six miles from Orem to Provo.” When Gilmore needs a lawyer to go to City Court, “it was no problem” because “there was hardly a lawyer in Provo who didn’t have offices within a block or two of the Court” (282). Whereas the setting could have been described as Gilmore saw it, Mailer decides to step back from the outsider’s linear perspective and offer a circular landscape of the small town of Provo. The effect of this is that, instead of telling a story through the eyes of an outsider as he comes into town, Mailer shows his readers a story of a small town that could not function with the newcomer. The resulting story, of an unaccepted stranger, comments more on the problems of the inhospitable town than on the culpability of the outsider. Eventually, this leads to the argument against the death penalty, as Gary Gilmore becomes a criminal destined to disrupt the town.

Mailer’s Selection of Intimate Detail

In *The Executioner's Song*, Mailer recreates what would become the first murder to be punished by capital punishment since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976. He describes how the first victim, a gas attendant named Max Jensen, had cleaned the floor of the gas station on which Gilmore instructed him to lay. According to Mailer’s narrator, “Jensen must have cleaned it in the last fifteen minutes” (223). The detail of the clean floor contrasts with the post-murder floor, which was covered in blood that “spread across the floor at a surprising rate” (224). The fact that Jensen had cleaned the floor only fifteen minutes before his blood would cover it is quite ironic, and Mailer
could have easily left out the description of just how recently Jensen had cleaned the floors. Instead, he describes the two contrasting images as a fiction writer would, and he focuses on the symbols that were already naturally occurring in his story to make the story even better. In Donald Kaufman’s words, Mailer is “spicing the essay with the techniques of fiction” (Kaufman 256).

A particularly important scene in the novel lends the work its title: the execution. *The Executioner’s Song*, often referred to as Mailer’s “1000-page” novel, tells a story from the point that Gilmore enters Utah until his death by capital punishment. Nine complete months pass in the novel, Mailer often detailing entire days and weeks. The execution itself is granted two pages, from the point that Gilmore receives his last rites until his body is moved. Throughout the second half of the novel, Larry Schiller, a journalist-turned-producer who desires to study people “in depth” but cannot escape “a terrible reputation” as “the journalist who dealt with death,” focuses his attention on selling Gilmore’s story, to which he obtains exclusive rights (597). Readers might assume that because he spends so much time scheming to make money off the story, he would pay a great deal of attention to the execution itself so that he could retell the gory details of the execution. Surprisingly, though, his testimony in the execution scene lacks details. The scene transitions from visual detail in which Gilmore raises his hand into the air as he is being shot by the firing squad—and in which blood “started to flow through his black shirt and came out onto the white pants”—to an auditory experience in which “the lights went down, and Schiller listened to the blood drip” (986). Mailer writes that Schiller “was not certain he could hear it drip, but he felt it” (986). The sound and feeling of dripping blood are what Gutkind calls the “memorable small or unusual details
that readers would not necessarily know or even imagine” (Gutkind 47). Readers might not necessarily expect the sound or feeling of blood in an execution scene. The unexpected gruesome details have political implications: capital punishment is unusually bloody and cruel, and it should not be legal.

Mailer’s Point of View

Despite his best efforts to reproduce reality, Mailer continually narrates from a biased perspective. Mark Edmundson believes that the narrative voice in much of the novel is the author’s own masculine “romantic self-creation.” Mailer truly views his protagonist as a self-confident man. He writes him as über-masculine and reckless. When Gilmore is re-introduced to his cousin Brenda in the beginning of the novel, the narrator immediately compares him to a bear (12). His strength is incredible to his cousin. Even her husband “had never gripped Brenda that hard” (12). At one point in the novel Mailer is so blunt that he states Gilmore is “always so manly” (235). The narrator in the book believes Gilmore to be a masculine, confident force, and so Mailer “attempts to write his book from a state akin to the one he attributes to Gilmore, one that acknowledges the awareness of death as the necessary condition for every just perception” (Edmundson 443). Again, upon Gilmore’s first scene, the narrator states, “Material things were obviously no big transaction to him” (12). To the author, the main character seems more like a Buddhist monk than a murderer. Mailer tells the story from Gilmore’s perspective, which he assumes to be ever-exhibiting an “awareness of death,” which is an awareness above most individuals. Mailer is not forgetting that Gilmore is powerless, sentenced to death. Instead, his narrator’s point of view reflects what he believes to be the defining atmosphere of the killer: confidence.
Mailer’s narrative voice emphasizes Gilmore’s self-assurance to prepare his readers for the climax in which the condemned killer demands to be executed. During a hearing to reschedule Gilmore’s execution date, the narrator states, “Damned if [Gilmore] didn’t use his turn to say that nobody here had guts enough to let him die” (744). This sentence outlines the problem with the death penalty: if the condemned man is so self-possessed that he embraces death, is it really a punishment? The narrator’s phrases “damned if” and “guts enough” exhibit the prisoner’s decision to not take death seriously. The voice sounds like the commentator of a wrestling match, which echoes the concern that Gilmore does not see his execution as a punishment but a privilege that he can win. Mailer constructs an image of a bold fighter throughout the novel, and death is simply Gilmore’s last bar fight. The prisoner can use his own lack of a fear of death to do what David Guest calls “romanticizing the hardened convict” (Guest 168). Once the author establishes Gilmore as a “hardman,” he can make a mockery of the justice system, which operates on the assumption that a condemned man should not want to die. Because Gilmore does not fear death but desires it, the convict can “participate in the work of the police” and expedite his own execution (Guest 168). Mailer uses what Edmundson calls Gilmore’s “awareness of death”—his unflinching nonchalance—to argue that the death penalty is ineffective.

Because Gilmore’s boastful presence in The Executioner’s Song is Mailer’s own perspective, the author attempts to support his own, inevitably-biased viewpoints with others’ viewpoints. Mailer himself believes that “in the moment someone tries to relate an experience of what happened to them, it's gone” (Academy of Achievement). He might then agree with E. L. Doctorow’s claim that “once a [historical fact] has been suffered it
maintains itself in the mind of witness or victim, and if it is to reach anyone else it is transmitted in words or on film and becomes an image, which with other images, constitutes a judgment” (Doctorow 24). Point of view, regardless of intention, constitutes a judgment. In an effort to tell as many sides of the story as possible, Mailer writes with multiple perspectives, adding the opinions of those he interviewed to his narrator’s opinions. Edmundson claims “Mailer tells Gilmore’s story by way of indirect discourse, from over a hundred of the persons involved” (436). So while the author’s own belief that Gilmore is “so manly” might not seem reliable, he can support his argument by adding other voices that believe his killer is extremely masculine. One witness who agrees with Mailer is Gilmore’s cousin Brenda. The narrator reveals through inner dialogue that she “feel[s] feminine” because of Gilmore’s tallness (11). By including Brenda’s feminized voice alongside the narrator’s own statements, Mailer can show readers that he is not the only voice in the story that recognizes Gilmore’s masculinity, and the story becomes more credible.

With the narration of one scene in the voice of several characters, *The Executioner’s Song* combats claims of a limited perspective and events in the novel become clearer to readers. At one point Mailer tries to illustrate how Gilmore’s girlfriend Nicole’s “kids were sitting on the edge of the ditch between the sidewalk and the street” with “their feet in the water” (Mailer 180). This simple description can never tell readers the details that would emerge had this scene actually happened in the readers’ lives. Readers are unfamiliar with how far the children are from their mother because they have never been to Nicole’s house. Mailer describes the scene with Nicole as his main focus, and initially the children seem close under their mother’s surveillance, but judging by the
concerns of neighbors and a police officer later in the chapter, the children have wandered quite far (180). These additional perspectives help the reader to visualize the setting. Barbara Foley is absolutely correct: “what really happened” can never really exist within a text; however, by including multiple perspectives, Mailer can offer a sense of “what really happened.”

These multiple perspectives can sound omniscient when revealing extra information like the inner feelings and knowledge of even the most insignificant characters, but unlike an omniscient narrator of fiction, the narrative voice in *The Executioner’s Song* is limited to telling only what Mailer discovered in his investigation. For this reason, the author does not offer his readers insight into the mind of Gilmore’s first victim, Max Jensen, at the time of the murder, as neither the killer nor the author could not possibly know anything other than that “he was trying to smile” (223). The narrator appears limited, only seeing from an outsider’s perspective and never knowing what goes through Jensen’s mind at the time of his death. However, if Mailer did discover the thoughts of individuals in the story through interviews, then he could use each character’s inner-thoughts at will. The multiple points of view allow the author to present the reader with many varying judgments, but he can group them to create a theme in his writing. For instance, the focus of Gary Gilmore’s execution is on the reactions of the witnesses (Schiller, the priest, the warden, Gilmore’s uncle, and a few other central figures in the story). When the warden asks for his last words, Gilmore “looked up at the ceiling and hesitated, then said, ‘Let’s do it’” (984). Mailer understands all the witnesses as interpreting this statement differently, but they all admit he seems unafraid. One of the observers, Gilmore’s Uncle Vern, labels the statement as “the most pronounced amount
of courage” with “no quaver, no throatiness, right down the line” (984). Gilmore’s attorney Ron Stanger assumes Gilmore “wanted to say something good and dignified and clever” (984). Larry Schiller proclaims the prisoner was “with presence, and what you could call a certain authority.” All of these detailed opinions, written in Mailer’s words, leave the impression of Gilmore as in-control, dying of his own choice rather than by execution for murder by the state of Utah. The narration is limited to what Mailer knows, but he can still craft his nonfiction novel into a political statement. The author chooses to add various characters’ opinions that support the idea that Gilmore embraces death. Execution by firing squad is not punishment to the condemned man. If it is not a punishment but instead a choice, then the death penalty becomes unnecessary in Mailer’s book.
V. Conclusion

A writer can stimulate readers through symbolism and suggestion, oftentimes resulting in a more thorough understanding of those emotions than a more straightforward description might. Creative nonfiction is no exception to the rule. Authors can pick out details like Max Jensen’s immaculate floor and show readers that individuals like Gary Gilmore cannot function in such a sterile environment. They can manipulate Garden City into the Garden of Eden and imply that seemingly ideal towns are destined to be ruined by humanity’s sin. Capote, Mailer, and others who write in the genre hope to reach their readers through their art rather than plain journalism.

Many critics develop reasons why nonfiction novelists choose to tether their works to facts when they can be equally artistic with fiction. Reality is interesting enough that, when revealed in the right way and with the right attention to detail, nonfiction stories can be as heart-wrenching as they are brutally realistic; the shock of real life is why these authors believe in “the literary supremacy of creative nonfiction over the novel” (Weingarten 9). True murder stories inherently ask readers to empathize because readers and characters are both human. The victims in *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner’s Song* are all innocent. Dick Hickock and Perry Smith had never met the unsuspecting Clutters; Max Jensen and Gilmore’s second victim, Ben Bushnell, never offended their killer in any way. These books allow readers to identify with victims and at times even with the murderers. Capote’s novel speaks about the hardship of being a human. Mailer’s novel highlights Gilmore’s inevitable execution, impressing the reader with his acceptance of death. Had he never existed in reality, he might not affect readers in such a powerful way.
If the genre is so powerful, then why are the most notable books of creative nonfiction decades old? *The Executioner’s Song* and *In Cold Blood* were both immediately commercial successes. Marc Weingarten believes that creative nonfiction is actually succeeding, even through today. He believes that “the art of narrative storytelling is alive and well; it’s just more diffuse now, spread out across books, magazines, and the Web” (Weingarten 293). Contemporary media allow for any capable person to write of his or her experiences in a manner that is aesthetically moving.

With more access to the genre, readers are struggling more and more to tell if a work is creative nonfiction or fiction. E. L. Doctorow’s response is that there is no “fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction” because “there is only narrative” (Doctorow 26). Mailer and Capote both tell true stories in their novels, readers become involved in the stories, and they cannot know if what they read is accurate. All readers can ever know is that an author’s attempt to make a nonfiction piece aesthetically persuasive means that he or she intends to somehow affect the reader.

Writers attempt to affect readers for different reasons, just as they persuade through a variety of techniques. Truman Capote yearns to create an entirely new genre, which is impossible, and to make a statement against the death penalty at the same time. He often uses beautiful language to tell his story, eventually hoping to convince his readers that Perry Smith’s character is too human to sentence to death. Norman Mailer does not intend to create a new genre. Instead he hopes to persuade readers that the death penalty is unnecessary because it grants the wishes of suicidal individuals like Gary Gilmore. In the conclusion of his book *Sentenced to Death*, David Guest notes that these two books, in addition to the fictions of Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright, create
myths of natural-born killers who are rejected from society and face “a sentencing process that is at best disturbingly arbitrary, and at worst ripe for the influence of racial and class bias” (Guest 169). The myths that these nonfiction novels create, romanticized depictions of a sweet, violent, complicated Perry Smith and a ready-for-death, manly Gary Gilmore, are the same as myths of fiction writers like Dreiser and Wright. Though Capote and Mailer might use techniques reminiscent of journalistic writing, and though the stories that they tell actually happened, creative nonfiction’s artistic ambitions are similar to fiction’s ambitions. This makes defining the creative nonfiction genre quite difficult. Upon a close analysis of a nonfiction novel, though, readers will be able to identify the genre as true-life people and situations that the author translates into the universal art of narrative.
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