In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song:

A generic reconception

by

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INTRODUCTION

In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song invite exam-
ination in that they represent polar versions of the non-
fiction novel, an intriguing genre whose boundaries have
yet to be adequately defined. Previous attempts to formu-
late a theory of the genre of the nonfiction novel by Tom
Wolfe, John Hollowell, and John Hellmann have yielded use-
ful contributions to a theoretical conception of the genre,
but they fall short because the three studies neglect crit-
ical dimensions of genre theory. Additionally, the three
theoretical conceptions exhibit difficulty in accounting
for the factual content of novelistic works. The follow-
ing thesis is an attempt to redefine the nonfiction novel
in order to arrive at a renewed conception of In Cold Blood
and The Executioner's Song. The first section examines the
theoretical formulations of the nonfiction novel offered
by Wolfe, Hollowell, and Hellmann. A section on the genre
theory of E. D. Hirsch and Mikhail Bakhtin suggests a means
of arriving at a new conception of the nonfiction novel and
leads to a succeeding section in which the nonfiction novel
is redefined. The final section examines In Cold Blood
and The Executioner's Song in light of the approach derived
from Hirsch and Bakhtin.

PREVIOUS GENERIC CONCEPTIONS OF THE NONFICTION NOVEL

In recent years, Tom Wolfe, John Hollowell, and John Hellmann have offered generic conceptions of the nonfiction novel. A characteristic common to the three theoretical formulations is that they fail to fully account for the nature of "factual" information in novelistic accounts.

The Theory of Tom Wolfe

Of the studies on the nonfiction novel conducted by Wolfe, Hollowell, and Hellmann, Wolfe's is probably the most entertaining, but also the most incomplete. Published in 1973, Wolfe's The New Journalism defines the nonfiction novel (then termed new journalism) as a composite of techniques or "devices" which the author claims the early new journalists borrowed from the realistic novel. He lists four devices which he sees as definitive elements of new journalism (31-32): "scene by scene construction" of a story; a recording of dialogue in full detail; the use of various, focal characters' third person point of view; and a recording of all the "symbolic" details that constitute the characters' "status life." Wolfe concludes:

> The result is a form that is not merely like a novel. It consumes devices that happen to have originated with the novel and mixes them with every other device known to prose. And all the

> while, quite beyond the matters of technique, it
> enjoys an advantage so obvious, so built-in, one
> almost forgets what a power it has: the simple
> fact that the reader knows all this actually
> happened. (34)

Wolfe's final crucial ingredient of "this actually happened"

invites scrutiny. Wolfe's theory relies on the journalistic

belief in "objective" reporting of events, but the dilemma,

of course, lies in recovering the irretrievable. For every

event that takes place, there are as many accounts of that

event as there are people who tell them. In In Cold Blood

Capote is, in fact, giving his version of what "actually

happened" in the Clutter murders; subsequently, the story

becomes a subjective shaping of "facts" created by Capote's

vision--in effect, an individual "fiction." Likewise,

Mailer's vision of the events leading to Gary Gilmore's exe-

cution is a subjective one, a personalized fiction. The

dividing line between fact and fiction is an imprecise one

at best, and the nature of the nonfiction novel requires

that this epistemological issue be addressed. Wolfe, however,

fails to account for the author's individual vision which

fictionalizes the reconstructed events.

Additionally, Wolfe's four devices become problematic

when they are applied to specific works. Although In Cold

Blood exhibits all of these devices, The Executioner's Song

only rarely records dialogue in full detail, a factor that

suggests Wolfe's elements are ineffectual as distinguishing

features of the genre. Furthermore, his list appears to
be arbitrary and subjective. Other devices are as common
in nonfiction novels as Wolfe's four choices of techniques.
For example, Wolfe could have just as easily described the
genre as including a full physical and psychological por-
trait of each primary character, as does The Executioner's
Song, or the device of nonchronological.presentation of
events, as does In Cold Blood. Wolfe's arbitrary devices
and his incomplete appraisal of "factual" reporting suggest
that the genre requires additional examination.

The Theory of John Hollowell

Similar problems are evident in Hollowell's analysis
of the nonfiction novel in his 1977 study Fact and Fiction.
Essentially, Hollowell adds little to Wolfe's earlier assess-
ment of the nonfiction novel; however, he appears to recog-
nize the inherent problems in "reporting" what "actually
happened." For example, he describes the writer of a non-
fiction novel as a "guide" (15) rather than an objective
reporter. Hollowell points out that critics have disputed
Capote's claim to "objectivity" in reporting "facts" in In
Cold Blood, and he initially appears to agree with their
criticism.

> Narratives abstracted and reduced from the chaotic
> flow of experience itself acquire a structure and
> a meaning from the necessary choices the writer

> must make . . . . Capote's heightening of dialogue
> and his selection of significant moments to depict
> suggest that every detail, every fact, is fraught
> with meaning. (73-74)

Yet Hollowell retreats from this stance when he insists that

Capote is "merely" saying "all this happened, these facts

exist," and later that Capote "resists the temptation to

impose meaning" (74,79). Both of these observations sug-

gest that Hollowell agrees with Wolfe's theory of the jour-

nalistic reporting of events.

Hollowell leans heavily on Wolfe's devices in his exam-

ination of the genre, but further restricts the ontological.

status by prescribing four areas of subject matter and pro-

viding five additional "assumptions and techniques" shared

by the works. The subject matter of the nonfiction novel is

a reflection of the turbulence of the '60s and '70s, says

Hollowell, and can be divided into four categories (40):

celebrities and personalities; deviant cultural patterns;

violent crimes; and social and political reporting. While

Hollowell's assessment of the material for current nonfiction

novels may be accurate, this approach is a type of analysis

which yields few insights about the nature of the form.

Although Capote and Mailer's novels both focus on violent

crimes, the two works could address entirely different types

of subject matter and still be termed nonfiction novels.

Categories of subject matter tell us little about the nature

of a form.

The techniques and assumptions Hollowell sees manifested in the works of the genre are also bound to the social climate of the '60s and '70s (15-16): the writer is a witness to "moral dilemmas" in current society; the writer becomes "his own protagonist, frequently a guide through a region of contemporary hell;" the form utilizes techniques from the novel, the confession, the autobiography, and the journalistic report; the form has a "mood of impending apocalypse;" and the form is an "appropriate" alternative to realistic fiction. Hollowell's perceptions are not necessarily wrong, they are merely unsatisfactory in adequately describing how the nonfiction novel fits into a concept of generic form. A theory of genre based on techniques and social influences must be continually adjusted as the techniques and influences adjust, and subsequently, no generic "whole" emerges.

Aside from his views of sociological influences and occasional observations about the difficulty of "objectively" reporting facts, Hollowell's analysis is based primarily on Wolfe's earlier composite of techniques. With these elements as his basis, however, Hollowell acknowledges, "In the end, attempts to place a work like In Cold Blood definitely in a generic category appear doomed" (83). What Hollowell has actually encountered is the collapse of his own system.

The Theory of John Hellmann

Hellmann finds the task of defining the nonfiction novel not nearly so insurmountable in his analysis of the form. In <u>Fables</u> <u>of</u> <u>Fact</u>, Hellmann provides more acute insights than either Wolfe or Hollowell. Hellmann employs genre theory from Northrop Frye as his basis for analysis of the nonfiction novel in order to account for the apparent conflict between fact (what "actually happened") and fiction.

> The major division in types of writing, as Frye has pointed out, is between the literary and the descriptive or assertive. If we accept Frye's definition of fiction as literary prose, then our division is properly between the fictional and the assertive. This reformulation of the issues eliminates the unfortunate illusory separation of fictional and factual writing--illusory because it seems to separate aesthetic form and purpose from a certain subject matter: fact. (21)

Hellmann explains that by "assertive" writing, Frye is referring to a work that points outward "to represent things external to it, and it is valued in terms of the accuracy with which it does represent them" (22). In literary prose (fiction) the final direction is inward toward the verbal world. Hellmann sees the ultimate direction of the nonfiction novel as inward; thus, he contends, it is primarily a work of fiction.

The difference between this genre and other fictional works, says Hellmann, lies in the "author/reader contract." He describes the contract as an implicit agreement in which

the author is "promising the reader that he is dealing in
pure fact" (11). Hellmann's perception of the contract
flaws his otherwise perceptive theory of the genre. The con-
cept of the contract suggests that authors such as Mailer
and Capote must make an implicit "promise" to the reader
that they will adhere to factual observations in their works.
Such a promise is unlikely in nonfiction novels in that the
author's imposition of a subjective narrative structure
colors and distorts events beyond the realm of "facts."
Despite his contention that the author of the nonfiction nov-
el is held to this journalistic contract, Hellmann recognizes
the inherent problems in presenting what "actually happened:"

> Admirers of conventional journalism have portrayed
> the conflict with new journalism as one of objec-
> tivity versus subjectivity and fact versus fiction.
> However, it is actually a conflict of a disguised
> perspective versus an admitted one, and a corporate
> fiction versus a personal one. In either case,
> journalism is necessarily an extension of all human
> perception and communication in its fictional (that
> is, shaping) quality. Because it is a product of
> the human mind and language journalism can never
> passively mirror the whole of reality, but must
> instead actively select, transform, and interpret
> it. (4)

In this passage, Hellmann acknowledges the fictionalizing
quality of human perception and points out that any reporter
of events transforms those events; both of these observa-
tions appear to undermine his theory of the journalistic con-
tract in which the author has promised to "deal in pure fact."
However, Hellmann's recognition here of the author in the

capacity of an interpreter provides a key contribution in coming to a better understanding of the nature of the nonfiction novel. The interpretive role the author assumes in the nonfiction novel forms the basis for the relationship between the author and reader; that relationship underlies the generic nature of the nonfiction novel. A more precise understanding of the generic relationship between the reader and author of the nonfiction novel can be gained through theory derived from E. D. Hirsch and Mikhail Bakhtin.

GENRE THEORY

An application of genre theory to a reformulation of
the nonfiction novel provides a foundation for approaching
the genre with a focused view of what constitutes a generic
"whole." E. D. Hirsch and Mikhail Bakhtin account for the
generic whole in their theories of the generic author/reader
relationship.

The Theory of E. D. Hirsch and Mikhail Bakhtin

Hirsch and Bakhtin approach the theoretical analysis
of genre with similar concerns. Their approaches provide
the basis for a more complete theory of the nonfiction novel
in that they can account for the aspects missed by Wolfe and
Hollowell and further elucidate what Hellmann began but
failed to complete with his use of Frye and of the journal-
istic contract. Hirsch and Bakhtin recognize the futility
of attempting to define a genre by its elements; instead,
they focus on the dynamic nature of genre which constructs
a relationship between author and reader.

Both theorists recognize the potent and organizing in-
fluence of context in communications. They see context as
a complex aspect which includes not only extraverbal dimen-
sions such as setting, situation, and cultural attitudes,
but also vocabulary, semantics, and language conventions in
general. Underlying and forming the basis for communications
(of which context is a structuring feature) is the author's

intention and the reader's attempt to interpret and under-

stand that intention; these two aspects combine to facilitate

communications. Bakhtin explains how generic form is a key

factor affecting the complex roles of speaker (author) and

listener (reader).

> In each utterance--from single-word, everyday
> rejoinders to large, complex works of science or
> literature--we embrace, understand, and sense the
> speaker's speech plan or speech will, which deter-
> mines the entire utterance, its length and bound-
> aries. We imagine to ourselves what the speaker
> wishes to say . . . . This plan determines both
> the choice of the subject itself (under certain
> conditions of speech communication, in necessary
> connection with preceding utterances), as well
> as its boundaries and its semantic exhaustiveness.
> It also determines, of course, the generic form
> in which the utterance will be constructed . . . .
> The speaker's speech will is manifested primarily
> in the choice of a particular speech genre.
> (77-78)

Bakhtin describes genres as flexible forms which serve as ve-

hicles for various functions based on the speaker's intention

("speech plan"). The speaker's speech plan, which is founded

on and formulated toward the active response of the listener,

determines the "form" needed. Listeners, says Bakhtin,

"quickly grasp the speaker's speech plan, his speech will.

And from the very beginning of his words they sense the de-

veloping whole of the utterance" (78). Thus, genres, accord-

ing to Bakhtin, are heuristic devices for the listener and

structuring devices for the speaker. In everyday speech

and in more complex communications, says Bakhtin, "We learn

to cast our speech in generic forms and when hearing others'

speech we guess its genre from the very first words . . ."
(79). Bakhtin's theory suggests that speakers (authors)
begin with a generic intention--a speech will--and listeners
(readers) attempt to discern that intention from the "very
first words." The author and reader establish a relationship
based on their respective approaches to the generic whole.

Hirsch agrees that for communication to occur, speakers
and listeners must have shared generic expectations. Like
Bakhtin, Hirsch believes that a genre for the speaker is
constitutive and for the listener it is interpretive, and the
two must perceive a generic "whole" in order for meaning
to be conveyed.

> Even when the meaning which the speaker wishes
> to convey is unusual (and some aspects of his
> conveyed meaning will almost always be unique)
> he knows that in order to convey his meaning he
> must take into account his interpreter's probable
> understanding. If his interpreter's system of
> expectations and associations is to correspond to
> his own, he must adopt usages which will fulfill
> not only his own expectations but also those of
> his interpreter.
> . . . Obviously those expectations must belong
> to a type of meaning rather than merely to a
> unique meaning . . . . (80)

Hirsch terms these types of meanings "intrinsic genres"
which he defines as a "sense of the whole by means of which
an interpreter can correctly understand any part of its deter-
minancy" (86). For Hirsch then, like Bakhtin, the intrinsic
genre serves as a heuristic for the reader who is attempting
to both discover and interpret the author's intention.

The intrinsic genre, Hirsch contends, is structured and determined through the author's purpose. It is important to recognize that the author's "purpose" as conceived by Hirsch, and the author's "speech plan" as conceived by Bakhtin, are not interchangeable terms in that Bakhtin's conception encompasses more aspects. Hirsch suggests that the author's purpose forms the author's "meaning" and, furthermore, that readers are able to recover the author's specific intended meaning. Bakhtin makes no such claim. He proposes only that the speech plan controls the author's choice of material and that readers "grasp" the plan and subsequently "sense the developing whole of the utterance." Nonetheless, Hirsch and Bakhtin's generic concerns are similar: according to each of these theorists, genre is formulated through the author's intention and serves as a heuristic for the reader who is attempting to discover that intention. For both Hirsch and Bakhtin a reductive formal account of genre serves little purpose and offers little understanding into generic nature and function. Rather, the nature of a genre is better understood through the relationship it generates between the sender and the receiver of ideas.

A NEW GENERIC CONCEPTION OF THE NONFICTION NOVEL

A generic conception of the nonfiction novel can be offered based on the author/reader relationship that evolves in response to the author's role as an interpreter.

A Definition of the Nonfiction Novel

When Hirsch and Bakhtin's understanding of the dynamic quality of genre is applied to the nonfiction novel, we see the genre in a new light. The nonfiction novel must first be understood in terms of the relationship it structures between the author and reader before it can be defined. To describe the nonfiction novel as a work "based on fact" is inadequate because the description tells us little about the relationship between the author and reader and it poses additional epistemological problems. The generic relationship cannot be understood as a "journalistic contract" between author and reader because the author cannot be held to an agreement he or she may be unable or unwilling to fulfill. Rather, the generic relationship between the reader and the author of the nonfiction novel is founded on the author's role as an interpreter. This formulation of the relationship diminishes epistemological problems and leads to a more precise definition of the genre.

Previous definitions of the nonfiction novel have been based on the view that the genre consists of fact-based works, but a recognition of the author as an interpreter, as opposed

to a reporter, suggests these definitions are incomplete.
Rather than a reconstruction of what "actually happened,"
the nonfiction novel can better be defined as an interpre-
tive vehicle for <u>something</u> that has happened. The best that
can be said of this event--this something that has happened--
is that "verifiable evidence" supports its existence. Veri-
fiable evidence should not be mistaken for "facts," as Wolfe,
Hollowell, and Hellmann have done in their studies, but
should be recognized for what it is: recorded individual
views of an event. "Facts" is misleading because it suggests
a "truth" or "reality" and results in a faulty generic
conception. Verifiable evidence, on the other hand, is mere-
ly a document in which participants or witnesses record
their perception of an event: the evidence can consist of
anything from court documents, to police records, to similar
first person accounts. (Officials--police, judges, and so
forth--cannot provide "facts" about an event; they merely
record their views in official documents.) Readers accept
the concept that verifiable evidence exists to support
Capote's interpretation of the Clutter murders and Mailer's
interpretation of the events leading to Gary Gilmore's exe-
cution. Nonetheless, these novels are not factual represen-
tations of the events, nor even works "based on facts," but
interpretive vehicles which incorporate verifiable evidence.
Every nonfiction novel should first be understood in its

capacity as an interpretive vehicle for a recent or exist-
ing event (for which verifiable evidence is available) in
order for its elements to be examined productively.

The type of event the author chooses to interpret has
little effect on the nature of the form. Whether that "some-
thing that has happened" involves celebrities, crimes, or
any other topic is irrelevant: the author's choice of which
experience to address serves as one form of the interpreta-
tion. The author is in essence saying: this experience is
more worthy of interpretation than others. Like the author,
the reader perceives the genre as an interpretive vehicle
for a current event. The reader approaches the nonfiction
novel seeking an interpretation of the author's choice of
an experience and anticipating an incorporation of verifiable
evidence to support the existence of that experience. Both
author and reader share the same generic whole and their
generic relationship is established.

The Author/Reader Relationship of the Nonfiction Novel

The manner in which authors of nonfiction novels pre-
sent their interpretations suggests that the author's inten-
tion (whether it be Bakhtin's all encompassing "speech plan"
or Hirsch's more narrow "purpose") in the nonfiction novel
is not only to interpret, but also to persuade the reader
to accept the author's particular interpretation of something
that has happened. All levels of discourse are inherently

persuasive--speakers wish listeners to believe their utter-
ances--but the authors of nonfiction novels make a unique use
of persuasive techniques in order to present their accounts
as perceptive interpretations. Capote's techniques suggest
that he set out to convince his readers to accept his vision
of the events leading to the Clutter murders. In the Gilmore
case, Mailer appears to have begun with the same intention:
to persuade his readers to accept his account of the Gary
Gilmore execution. All authors of nonfiction novels employ
techniques which point to their generic intention of attempt-
ing to persuade their readers to accept--to essentially agree
with--their interpretation of a particular event.

The elements that Wolfe presents as fictive techniques
of realism, then, can also be seen as a means of achieving
the author's intention. The scene by scene construction,
the dialogue (often created rather than "reported"), the
intense third person point of view, and the incorporation
of "status" details, all serve as devices to persuade the
reader that the author has access to intimate details of the
occurrence and, subsequently, can decipher the experience
better than anyone else.

Undoubtedly, authors are generally successful in their
persuasive efforts, and the reader leaves a work persuaded
to agree with the author's interpretation. In other words,
the reader will accept the author's version of "something

that has happened" as a perceptive view of what "actually
happened." Hellmann appears to recognize this dimension of
the genre when he points out that even though the final di-
rection of the nonfiction novel is inward (a constructed
verbal world) the reader perceives it to be outward (an ac-
curate recording of events). This phenomenon, however,
merely suggests that an author has provided a persuasive
interpretation. If another author were to write an interpre-
tation of the Clutter murders more convincing than Capote's
In Cold Blood, readers could conceivably reject Capote's
version and accept the new author's account. The reader's
ability to accept and reject different novelistic accounts
of the same event is additional evidence that the reader
recognizes the interpretive nature of the nonfiction novel.
The reader is acutely aware that some interpretations are
more convincing. than others.

The relationship between the author and reader of the
nonfiction novel is a generic one founded on the interpretive
role of the author. The author recognizes his or her purpose
is to persuade the reader to accept the author's interpreta-
tion, and the reader senses the author's speech plan and
responds appropriately. The relationship is based on generic
conceptions: the constituent parts (devices or elements
that best serve the interpretation) are understood through
the whole (the interpretation). Not all interpretations of

existing or current cultural experiences (supported by ver-
ifiable evidence) are nonfiction novels, but all nonfiction
novels are, by their nature, interpretations of those exper-
iences. The nonfiction novel is delineated from other inter-
pretive forms by current literary conventions which hold
that a novel is a longer narrative work.

This formulation of the nonfiction novel suggests that
the nonfiction novel differs little from the historical
novel. The difference resides primarily in how the author
wants the reader to respond to the interpretation. Writers
of historical novels present their works as interpretations
of experiences that they see as sufficiently removed in
time to place the events in the category of history. Their
readers thus see the interpretation as a means of understand-
ing past phenomena. Authors of nonfiction novels see the
events they choose to interpret as events which have not yet
temporally passed the ambiguous line which would make them
histories. They present their accounts as interpretations
of current events in our culture, and readers subsequently
respond to the interpretations as a means of understanding
contemporary rather than past phenomena. The two genres--
historical novels and nonfiction novels--serve different
functions, then, in relation to the respective authors'
views of the events as historical or current.

In <u>Cold</u> <u>Blood</u> and <u>The</u> <u>Executioner's</u> <u>Song</u> share a
generic bond in that they are both interpretive vehicles
for current events for which verifiable evidence exists,
and they are both longer narrative works. The interpre-
tive nature of the two novels establishes the author/reader
relationship. The two works, however, exhibit a strikingly
different approach to their generic author/reader relation-
ship. The preceding generic reconception of the nonfiction
novel provides the basis for examining these divergent
approaches and leads to a renewed conception of <u>In</u> <u>Cold</u>
<u>Blood</u> and <u>The</u> <u>Executioner's</u> <u>Song</u>.

IN COLD BLOOD AND THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG RECONCEIVED

Capote and Mailer's contrasting approaches to the author/reader relationship in In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song are revealed in reader cue devices they implement and in devices they incorporate as a result of their respective views of the role of the interpreter. An examination of how these devices affect the author/reader relationship serves as a foundation for arriving at a reconception of the two works.

Contrasting Approaches to Generic Reader Cues

One of the primary differences between In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song is the manner in which Capote and Mailer establish their relationship with readers. As they read nonfiction novels, readers anticipate generic cues which function to cultivate the generic relationship. For example, one cue would be the nonfiction label; another is the author's conventional personal note to the reader affirming that the work is based on verifiable evidence. A work can retain its generic form as a nonfiction novel without these specific kinds of cues, but the incorporation of them strengthens the author/reader relationship. The contrasting strategies Mailer and Capote adopt in the implementation of generic reader cues reveal their diverse approaches to establishing the author/reader relationship.

In Cold Blood carries the nonfiction novel's traditional "nonfiction" classification. That the work is not nonfiction--indeed, as earlier established, cannot be non-fiction--is a moot point. The nonfiction label serves not as an accurate description, but as a semantic cue to the reader that the work contains verifiable evidence. The label also serves to enhance the author's persuasive powers in that it suggests to the reader that the author believes the interpretation is perceptive. The nonfiction label attached to In Cold Blood functions as an early semantic cue to the readers that the work contains verifiable evidence and that Capote is presenting his work as an astute interpretation worthy of their acceptance.

In an unusual maneuver, Mailer secured a fiction classification for The Executioner's Song. The innovative author appears to recognize the fictive nature of interpretation and his fiction classification is an acknowledgment of that recognition. In attaching the fiction label, Mailer intentionally flaws his generic relationship with his readers. The reader is confronted with a work that purports to be an interpretive vehicle for "something that has happened" (other cues suggest that the work contains verifiable evidence), yet the work bears an inappropriate reader cue. Mailer's apparent strategy in the fiction classification was to nudge the reader into recognizing what has been

ascertained in the above generic definition of the non-

fiction novel: the realization that all reconstructions

of events are individual interpretive "fictions." Mailer

exchanges the persuasive edge the nonfiction label provides

for a reflexive reader cue that points to the nature of the

genre.

The significance of the fiction classification of The

Executioner's Song and its impact on the author/reader

relationship is recognized by Hellmann.

> This presentation of the book as essentially
> fiction despite its factual content is . . .
> consistent with Mailer's previous theoretical
> comments . . . . Calling the reader's attention
> to the inevitably transforming role of his fic-
> tion-making consciousness, he reminds the reader
> that his work, despite its factual content, is
> in the ultimate epistemological and ontological
> sense an artifice, an aesthetic shape that neces-
> sarily achieves mimesis of the external world
> through the constructing act of a shaping con-
> sciousness. (57)

Hellmann regards the fiction label as an accurate descrip-

tion of the form and thus an appropriate reader cue. He

fails to recognize, however, that in exchange for a more

accurate description, Mailer sacrifices a traditional

generic reader cue; subsequently, he sacrifices one means

of cultivating the author/reader relationship inherent in

the nonfiction novel.

Hellmann sees Mailer's attempt to acknowledge the fic-

tionalizing quality of human perception as a means of avoiding

"positivist assumptions" exhibited by such works as <u>In</u> <u>Cold</u> <u>Blood</u> (59). He is not alone in his appraisal of the technique. Phyllis Frus McCord in "The Ideology of Form: The Nonfiction Novel," points to Mailer's fiction classification of <u>The</u> <u>Executioner's</u> <u>Song</u> as one reason Mailer's work compares favorably to <u>In</u> <u>Cold</u> <u>Blood</u>.

> Capote is expressing the positivist belief that there is a world which can be reproduced in language, that facts have inherent meaning, and that language is a neutral instrument for recording them, and thus he denies the ideology of language and of the form of <u>In</u> <u>Cold</u> <u>Blood</u> (70).

McCord's objections are based on her belief that Capote and his readers see his account as a factual one; however, the preceding formulation of the genre suggests that both authors and readers of the nonfiction novel recognize it as an interpretive vehicle. Readers comprehend that <u>In</u> <u>Cold</u> <u>Blood</u> is Capote's "world," not a world where "facts have inherent meaning." The reader's ability to accept and reject different novelistic accounts of the same event suggests that readers perceive that some interpretations are "better" than others, but recognize that none are "accurate" factual accounts. McCord's criticism partially stems from Capote's subtitle of the book as a "true account." This description of <u>In</u> <u>Cold</u> <u>Blood</u> certainly exhibits the positivist assumptions to which McCord objects, but it fails to detract from the generic form of the work. Capote's "true account"

subtitle of his work is compatible with his semantic non-
fiction label cue: they are devices he utilizes to persuade
his reader that his interpretation contains verifiable evi-
dence and is superior to any other interpretation which ad-
dresses the Clutter case.

Both Capote and Mailer appear to recognize that clas-
sification labels serve as reader cues. Each, however,
chooses to cue his reader in a different manner. Mailer
sacrifices the persuasive advantage the nonfiction label
provides in exchange for an acknowledgment of the interpre-
tive, and thus fictive, nature of the form. Capote seeks
to cultivate a generic relationship in which he functions
as an advocate of his interpretation.

Another generic reader cue that contributes to the
author/reader relationship in the nonfiction novel is the
author's personal note to the reader. The note can take
the form of a foreword or an afterword, or it can be incor-
porated into the "Acknowledgments" section. Capote cues
his reader about the nature of his work in his "Acknowledg-
ments" section which precedes the text of the novel.

> All the material in this book not derived from
> my own observation is either taken from official
> records or is the result of interviews with the
> persons directly concerned, more often than not
> numerous interviews conducted over a considerable
> period of time (Acknowledgments).

Here, Capote sets the "generic stage" with an affirmation

of incorporated verifiable evidence and he acknowledges his

participation as an observer. Mailer addresses his reader

in the "Afterword" and, like Capote, he acknowledges the

incorporation of verifiable evidence. Mailer initially ap-

pears to be more overtly persuasive than Capote in his

personal note:

> This book does its best to be a factual account
> of the activities of Gary Gilmore and the men
> and women associated with him in the period from
> April 9, 1976, when he was released from the
> United States Penitentiary at Marion, Illinois,
> until his execution a little more than nine months
> later in Utah State Prison (1020).

Earlier it was asserted that The Executioner's Song is an

attempt to persuade the reader that Mailer's account of the

Gary Gilmore case is the best interpretation available, one

with which the reader could agree. At this point in his

"Afterword," he appears to be providing his reader with the

appropriate cue to accomplish that goal. Yet, after assuring

the reader that the novel does its "best to be a factual ac-

count," Mailer qualifies his assertion by noting that "this

does not mean that it has come a great deal closer to the

truth than the recollections of the witnesses" (1020).

Mailer's purpose in this "post script" appears to match his

purpose in attaching the fiction label: he seeks to empha-

size the nature of the genre. The qualification in the "Af-

terword" suggests to the reader that this work is only one of

several possible interpretations--a powerful admission that

could detract from the persuasiveness of Mailer's interpretation. Nonetheless, the initial message in the reader cue serves as a persuasive device and cultivates the generic relationship which underlies the nonfiction novel.

Unquestionably, Mailer's one thousand page account of the Gilmore execution is an attempt to provide a comprehensive and persuasive interpretation of that event. Although his reader cues are purposely mixed signals to the reader, his generic author/reader relationship is firmly established in that both Mailer and the reader recognize his work as an interpretive vehicle which incorporates verifiable evidence.

The conflicting attitudes apparent in Mailer and Capote's implementation of reader cues are also evident in the two authors' contrasting approaches to the role of the interpreter in the nonfiction novel. Capote sees his role as an informed interpreter capable of providing a selective interpretation based on his extensive knowledge about the "something that has happened."

The Role of the Interpreter in In Cold Blood

Capote approaches the role of the interpreter in In Cold Blood with a confident (some would say egotistical) attitude. His underlying assumption appears to be that, due to his "saturation" (Wolfe's term, 52) in the Clutter case, he has a superior understanding of the intricate

relationship between events. He sees the role of the inter-
preter as one who is responsible for making "connections"
(McCord's term, 73) for the reader. Capote clearly imposes
his own subjective cause and effect sequence--an ordering
of connections--on the Clutter case to construct an inter-
pretation which he anticipates the reader will accept as
perceptive due to his access to the experience.

Capote's interpretation presupposes three fundamental
premises: (1) Perry Smith, one of the two individuals
convicted of the Clutter murders, is a person of sensitive
qualities who is to be viewed sympathetically; (2) Richard
Hickok, the other individual convicted of murder, is to
be viewed less sympathetically than Smith; and (3) the
Clutters are moral pillars of the Kansas community of Hol-
comb who become victims of a crime due to a series of cir-
cumstances. These three premises form the foundation for
Capote's interpretation, and every detail, every scene of
In Cold Blood contribute to that view of the event.
Hollowell, although maintaining that In Cold Blood is
"factual," recognizes that Capote's account presents "only
one version of the facts" (74). Hollowell points out that
Capote confirmed his selective approach when Capote asserted
in an interview:

> I had to make up my mind, and move towards one
> view, always. You can say that the reportage is
> incomplete. But then it has to be. It's a

>question of selection, you wouldn't get anywhere
>if it wasn't for that . . . . I make my comment
>by what I choose to tell and how I choose to
>tell it. (74)

Capote's "one view" description confirms his recognition
of the interpretive nature of the genre. Capote apprehends
his generic purpose is to persuade the reader to accept his
interpretation (his singular view), and he proceeds unswerv-
ingly towards that goal.

The primary premise, the sympathetic portrayal of
Smith, is woven throughout the fabric of the novel. The
reader is presented with verifiable evidence (Smith's brief
written autobiographic account, his sister's letters, and
his father's biographic account of Smith in the form of a
letter to the parole board) attesting to the hardships of
Smith's childhood. Through these documents and Capote's
narration, the reader is informed that Smith comes from a
rodeo family with no roots. The mother is portrayed as
a negligent, alcoholic parent who separates from Smith's
father, a treasure-hunting prospector. After selecting and
interpreting these aspects of Smith's background, Capote
makes the "connection" for the reader: Smith's background
is directly linked to his participation in the murders.
Capote overtly provides the reader with the connection when
he constructs a conversation between Smith and a friend
after Smith's arrest for the murders. Smith is attempting

to explain what appear to be inexplicable murders.

> 'I was sore at Dick. The tough brass boy. But
> it wasn't Dick. Or the fear of being identified.
> I was willing to take that gamble. And it wasn't
> because of anything the Clutters did. They never
> hurt me. Like other people. Like people have
> all my life. Maybe it's just that the Clutters
> were the ones who had to pay for it.' (326)

Through this conversation, Capote interprets the events for
the reader. Capote is clearly suggesting that Smith's back-
ground is the true culprit. The guilt is laid upon social
factors rather than on Smith.

Capote as the interpreter in In Cold Blood, although
controlling the reader's perception of Smith's character,
never surfaces in the role of a narrator. In several scenes
Smith reminisces about his background, but the reader can
only surmise where Smith's recollections take place and to
whom he is relating them. The implication is that Smith is
looking back on his life after his conviction and relating
his experiences to the narrator of In Cold Blood. The nar-
rator's presence, however, is never overtly acknowledged in
the recollections. The following scene illustrates the man-
ner in which Capote encourages the reader to sympathize
with Smith while avoiding acknowledging his role as the
narrator/interpreter. The scene focuses on an argument be-
tween Smith and his father and begins with omniscient nar-
ration, then switches to Smith's first-person account of

the argument.

> By the time Perry arrived at the site of the
> proposed hunting lodge, his father, working alone,
> had finished the hardest chores--had cleared the
> ground, logged the necessary timber, cracked and
> crated wagonloads of native rock. 'But he didn't
> commence to build till I got there. We did every
> damn piece of it ourselves. With once in a while
> an Indian helper. Dad was like a maniac.' (157)

Smith proceeds to explain that the lodge he and his father

built eventually failed, and he suggests his father turned

his disappointment into anger directed toward Smith. Their

tensions erupt into a physical confrontation.

> My hands got hold of his throat. My hands--but
> I couldn't control them. They wanted to choke
> him to death. Dad though, he's slippery, a smart
> wrestler. He tore loose and ran to get his gun.
> Came back pointing it at me. He said, 'Look at
> me, Perry. I'm the last thing living you're
> ever gonna see.'

The recollection, presented without any evidence of the

listening narrator, not only evokes sympathy for Smith, but

does it in such a manner that readers are not consciously

aware that the narrator is serving as a mediator. The

absence of an overt narrator serves to persuade readers that

they have direct access to the details of the occurrence,

details which are being selected and constructed by Capote.

McCord views this technique as an unethical presentation

of events in In Cold Blood.

> In Capote's novel, interpretation and facts are
> asserted as 'the truth about the world' and the
> power of the illusionary technique is not qualified

> by the presence of a dramatized narrator or
> other qualifier of the text's supposed trans-
> parency . . . (76).

William Wiegand, however, sees such techniques as assets.

Wiegand suggests that with his techniques, Capote is

establishing a "meaning" for the Clutter murders.

> The real strength of the Capote book is achieved
> by the way he exploits a whole battery of novel-
> istic techniques which enforce the structure and
> hence the meaning of the Clutter case (247).

Wiegand's assessment might have been more accurate had he

qualified his assertion by noting that Capote's techniques

enforce "his meaning" of the Clutter case. Nonetheless,

Wiegand's point is well-taken. Capote's techniques, although

exhibiting the positivist assumptions that Hellmann and

McCord find distasteful, serve to support the interpretation

he wishes to persuade the reader to accept.

Capote's sympathetic portrayal of Smith is further

encouraged by additional evidence Capote selectively incor-

porates. It is Smith's recorded confession, not Hickok's,

that the reader is given. In the confession, Smith describes

how he attempted to disuade Hickok from going through with

the plans to murder the family, how he tried to make the

victims more "comfortable," and how he protected young Nancy

Clutter from Hickok's rape intentions. With this confession,

the reader sees Smith through Capote's eyes and is induced

to agree with Capote's interpretation of Smith as a murderer

with compassionate and sensitive qualities.

Smith's confession is accompanied by the arresting
officer's thoughts which serve to add to the groundwork
Capote has provided. Dewey, the arresting officer, comes
to his own conclusion after hearing Smith's account of the
murders.

> The crime was a psychological accident, vir-
> tually an impersonal act; the victims might as
> well have been killed by lightning. Except for
> one thing: they had experienced prolonged ter-
> ror, they had suffered. And Dewey could not
> forget their sufferings. Nonetheless, he found
> it possible to look at the man beside him with-
> out anger--with, rather, a measure of sympathy--
> for Perry Smith's life had been no bed of roses
> but pitiful, an ugly and long progress toward
> one mirage and then another. (277)

Dewey's conclusion serves to form the crux of Capote's in-
terpretation of Smith: the convicted killer deserves no
mercy, but certainly sympathy. That Capote's interpretation
of Smith is not a factual account, but an interpretive select
one is apparent. McCord appears appalled at Capote's pre-
sentation of Smith, and she terms both Smith and Hickok
"repulsive, illiterate, antisocial criminals" (73). McCord
is no more "factually accurate" than Capote. She merely
interprets the events (from a second-hand distance) in a
different manner than Capote even though her conflicting
interpretation is based on the verifiable evidence that
Capote presents. The genre lends itself to speculative
interpretation--to deny that aspect of the nonfiction novel
is to deny the nature of the genre.

Although McCord, Wiegand, and Hellmann describe
Capote's interpretation of Hickok as equally sympathetic
to his interpretation of Smith, a close reading of the
novel reveals that Capote presents Hickok as a far less
appealing character. A pivotal scene serves to illustrate
Capote's harsher treatment of Hickok. In the scene,
Smith confides to Hickok that "'I think there must be
something wrong with us. To do what we did'" (127).
Hickok's callous reply of "'Deal me out, baby. I'm a nor-
mal'" (128) is followed by a description of their departure
from the Mexican hilltop where they had briefly stopped:

> The car was moving. A hundred feet ahead, a
> dog trotted along the side of the road. Dick
> (Hickok) swerved toward it. It was an old half-
> dead mongrel, brittle boned and mangy, and the
> impact, as it met the car was little more than
> what a bird might make. But Dick was satisfied.
> 'Boy!' he said--and it was what he always said
> after running down a dog, which was something
> he did whenever the opportunity arose. 'Boy!
> We sure splattered him!' (133)

The reader is left with no doubt about who is the petty,
conscience-lacking killer of the two--and who is the less
"normal" of the pair.

In addition to scenes like this, Capote selectively
omits elements of Hickok's life and his participation in
the Clutter case. Hickok's biographical background is far
less extensive than Smith's. A neighbor's view that Hickok
comes from "plain, honest people" (192) suggests to the reader

that Hickok's background is less to blame for the crime
than is Hickok. Glaringly absent is Hickok's recorded con-
fession to the crime, an absence that suggests to the reader
that Smith's confession, presented in full detail, is the
more "accurate" of the two. Capote's harsh treatment of
Hickok serves to underscore his generous treatment of Smith.
He attempts to persuade the reader to see Smith as a "vic-
tim" of Hickok as well as of his own past.

The final premise that underlies Capote's interpreta-
tion of the Clutter murders is his portrayal of the Clutter
family. Capote's view of the Clutters is noted by Hollowell:

> . . . the Clutter family is shown to typify all
> of the traditional American values. Herbert
> Clutter is a man whose prosperity is built upon
> hard work, endurance, and faith in God. He is
> a pillar of the community, a local booster, and
> a successful farmer--a man who has played hard
> by the rules and won. (80)

Hollowell describes this portrayal as illustrative of
Capote's "relentless care to present only facts" while
he achieves a "mythic significance" (79). Although this
portrayal of the Clutters may incorporate verifiable evi-
dence, it hardly qualifies as a factual presentation of their
life. Their status as the typical midwestern family is
Capote's interpretation of their place in his chain of
events. He enhances the moral and idyllic nature of their
life by attributing an Edenic quality to their ranch:

> . . . as Mr. Clutter often remarked, 'an inch
> more of rain and this country would be para-
> dise--Eden on earth.' The little collection of
> fruit-bearers growing by the river was his at-
> tempt to contrive, rain or no, a patch of the
> paradise, the green, apple-scented Eden, he en-
> visioned. (23)

Capote thus sets the scene for the two interlopers to enter

his view of the Clutter "Eden."

From his premises, Capote constructs his vision of the

Clutter case: Smith, the victim of his past and of Hickok,

is led to slaughter brutally, yet dispassionately, the vir-

tuous Clutters who were victims of fate. Despite Capote's

subtitle of the novel as a "true account" and his claim

to the "factual accuracy" (McCord 71) of the book, Capote,

as Hollowell has pointed out, was well aware that his vision

of the Clutter case was only "one view."

Capote's claim of factual accuracy has been a point

of debate among critics. For example, Robert Siegle describes

the judgment of those who find the novel "historically ac-

curate" a bit "too indulgent" (438). A new conception of

the nonfiction novel, however, suggests that critics who

debate these unanswerable epistemological questions are de-

bating a futile issue. Facts cannot be retrieved; interpre-

tations based on verifiable evidence, however, can be of-

fered. Capote's claim of factual accuracy is understandably

met with skepticism, but the claim becomes more acceptable

when it is recognized as an affirmation of verifiable

evidence. An attitude common among current critics is that
Capote's work is a subjective view presented as a factual
account. The previously offered conception of the generic
nature of the nonfiction novel, however, suggests that both
author and reader recognize In Cold Blood as an interpre-
tive work. Those who criticize the positivism and egotism
evident in In Cold Blood underestimate the sophistication
of readers who recognize, as did Capote, that his interpre-
tation is just "one view" he moved toward always. Implicit
in Capote's singular vision of events is his perception
of the interpreter/maker whose role is to make choices and
connections for the reader. In contrast, Mailer sees the
role of the interpreter as one who diffuses and fragments
events.

The Role of the Interpreter in The Executioner's Song

Mailer's view of the role of the interpreter in The
Executioner's Song is revealed in the premise that controls
his interpretation of the Gary Gilmore execution. Mailer
seeks to filter the events through as many "consciousnesses"
as possible. The reader is left with no clear cut interpre-
tation of Gilmore as either a victim or villian, only a
detached recording of numerous impressions about events
which lead to Gilmore's execution, impressions that are pre-
sented as the views of a host of witnesses and participants.
The narrator in The Executioner's Song is apparent as a

type of stenographer-recorder who presents the individual
views but who appears to make no comment on them. The re-
cording of various impressions is a technique which serves
the same reflexive purpose as Mailer's fiction classifica-
tion cue and his qualification in the "Afterword" in that
the technique points to the nature of the genre. The device
suggests that each view of an event is a subjective view,
an interpretive act. Mailer presents these numerous views
in such a way that the focus is on the viewer rather than
on what is being viewed.

Mailer's reflexive technique is reinforced by the two
sections of the book labeled "Western Voices" and "Eastern
Voices" respectively. Individuals who figure prominently
in "Western Voices" include Brenda Nicol, Nicole Baker, and
to a lesser degree, Gilmore himself. Several additional
individuals occupy the center stage as the viewing conscious-
ness throughout the first section, but much of the story is
told through the eyes of these three primary characters.

"Western Voices" covers events which begin with
Gilmore's release from prison and culminate with Gilmore's
conviction of murder and his death penalty sentence. The
events proceed chronologically, but appear fragmented due
to the variety of so many individual points of view and re-
mote due to the second-hand nature of the filtering con-
sciousnesses. We see Gilmore's release from prison through

Brenda's view; the emphasis, however, is on Brenda rather than Gilmore.

> The prison sure cut his hair short. It would,
> Brenda judged, be heavy handsome brown hair
> when it grew out, but for now it stuck up hick
> style in the back. He kept pushing it down.
>   No matter, she liked his looks. In the half-
> light that came into the car as they drove
> through Salt Lake on the Interstate, the city
> sleeping on both sides of them, she decided
> that Gary was everything she expected in that
> department. A long, fine nose, good chin, thin
> well-shaped lips. He had character about his
> face. (25)

Brenda's sensual appraisal of Gilmore suggests that she is attracted to her cousin. The attraction is implied but never explicitly noted by an intervening narrator or overtly acknowledged by Brenda. The burden is on the reader to make the connection. Furthermore, the reader's vision of Gilmore is channeled through Brenda's view and the reader is left with a distinct impression of Brenda and a remote sense of Gilmore. The Executioner's Song is ostensibly the story of Gilmore; however, as the events unfold, readers recognize this to be a story about individual interpretations of Gilmore and his actions.

The reader is witness to Gilmore's first meeting with Nicole, Gilmore's girlfriend, through Nicole's eyes. Mailer slowly leads the reader to see Nicole as a fragile and bewildered young girl who is simultaneously naive and sexually promiscuous. The narrator never describes Nicole

as such; readers gradually come to this understanding of
her character through Nicole's views of Gilmore and the
events surrounding his execution. Their first meeting takes
place at a mutual friend's house. Nicole arrives scantily
clad.

> Nicole made a pretense of ignoring the new
> fellow, but there was something about him.
> When their eyes met, he looked at·her and said,
> 'I know you.' Nicole didn't say anything in
> reply. For a split second, something flashed
> in her mind but then she thought, No, I've
> never met him before, I know that. Maybe I
> know him from another time. (83)

With scenes such as this, Mailer keeps Gilmore indistinct
and in the background while Nicole slowly materializes into
a central figure with distinct characteristics. Our image
of Gilmore is colored by Nicole's vision; thus, in order
to understand Gilmore, we must first understand Nicole and
her own particular subjective view of him.

Because fewer scenes filter through Gilmore, he remains
a secondary character. The same detached narrative voice
which provides other individual views is also present in
Gilmore's scenes. Gilmore's view is just one of many,
Mailer implies, even though he is the central focus of the
novel. The reader sees the first murder through Gilmore's
eyes without comment by the narrator.

> Gilmore brought the Automatic to Jensen's
> head. 'This one is for me,' he said and fired.

> 'This one is for Nicole,' he said, and fired
> again.
>   He stood up. There was a lot of blood. It
> spread across the floor at a surprising rate.
> Some of it got onto the bottom of his pant.
>   He walked out of the rest rooms with bills
> in his pocket, and the coin changer in his hand,
> walked out of this real clean gas station. (227)

As shocking as the scene is, it is presented almost clini-

cally as though the narrator were transcribing an emotion-

less account from Gilmore. The narrator offers no explana-

tion of why "This one is for Nicole," and the question of

Gilmore's motives remains unresolved for the reader.

The lack of narrator comment in The Executioner's Song,

according to McCord, is one way of avoiding the positivist

assumptions evident in In Cold Blood:

> The important difference between (the style
> of narration in The Executioner's Song) and
> the solemn historic narration of In Cold Blood
> is that there are many more possible interpre-
> tations for each 'event' or sequence, and be-
> cause the narrator of The Executioner's Song
> has not assimilated the individual narrations
> but allows us to attribute them to a particular
> consciousness, the narrative is not hierarchi-
> ally ordered or closed off or 'given' to us
> in inevitable form (75).

McCord's observation that a hierarchy of connected events

is not "given" to readers in The Executioner's Song brings

into question how such an interpretation affects readers.

The ordered and narrowly constructed interpretation of In

Cold Blood is recognized by the reader as very obviously

Capote's. The manner in which the events are presented in
The Executioner's Song suggests that Mailer is not interpret-
ing an experience, but instead presenting a vast array of
views about a series of events that lead to a man's execu-
tion. The lack of narrator comment and the apparent attempt
to avoid subjective speculation suggest to the reader that
Mailer's interpretation is less ideosyncratic than Capote's--
is perhaps less interpretive and more objective.

Mailer's techniques persuade Hellmann to find The
Executioner's Song more factually "accurate" than In Cold
Blood. He explains.

> . . . Capote has admitted selecting his materials
> according to whether they agreed with his own
> interpretation. (Mailer orders contradictory
> views in a narrative of more massive detail.)
> The result is that, however factual In Cold Blood
> may be, Capote appears to have stretched the
> material in ways disturbingly close to the ap-
> proximating illusions associated with realistic
> fiction, while continuing to claim a journalistic
> contract. Mailer's book, in contrast, appears
> to adhere more strictly to journalistic standards
> of accuracy, while it more frankly admits to the
> complex role of inevitably fictionalizing con-
> sciousness. (65)

Hellmann's description of journalistic "accuracy" corresponds
closely to the earlier offered definition of "verifiable
evidence." Hellmann's remarks, then, suggest that he be-
lieves Mailer's work doesn't stray far from verifiable evi-
dence. In fact, Mailer appears to be well aware of his role
as an interpreter and of his need to manipulate verifiable

evidence and to construct a subjective view of the Gilmore
case. Shelley Fisher Fishkin in From Fact To Fiction reveals
that, like Capote, Mailer "stretched" verifiable evidence.

> When Mailer appeared as a guest at my seminar
> on 'The Journalist as Novelist' at Yale, stu-
> dents confronted him with several (charges
> of inaccuracy). He refuted them, asserting
> that he had, in fact, been meticulously accurate
> on those points. On the same occasion, however,
> he also confessed to having largely invented
> several other parts of the book ('the stuff on
> Gilmore's mother is probably two-thirds fanciful.
> The stuff on April, the sister of Nicole, is
> probably three-quarters fanciful . . . . I'd
> say it was ninety-five percent fictional, in
> fact, with April . . .'). (208)

Fishkin's comments reveal that Mailer recognizes he is locked
into his role as an interpreter. He arrives at a personal
vision of a character and he constructs that vision for his
readers. Mailer's "fanciful" view of April and Gilmore's
mother is not a violation of Hellmann's journalistic con-
tract--although the character constructions attest to the
invalidity of the concept of the contract. Rather, Mailer
apparently composes the material with the same intention
as all authors of nonfiction novels: to convince readers
to accept his view, his interpretation, of the events and
characters. His "fanciful" constructions help him to ac-
complish that purpose. Mailer is the speculative interpret-
er not only in that he "stretches" verifiable evidence, but
also in that he selects and shapes each piece of verifiable
evidence he incorporates into the story.

Although Mailer exhibits the generic intention of attempting to persuade his readers to agree with his interpretation, he could conceivably lose a certain degree of persuasiveness in his sophisticated epistemological approach of presenting contrasting views: the reader may recognize the infinite number of interpretations inherent in the Gilmore case and ultimately be reluctant to agree with any of them regardless of the verifiable evidence.

In "Eastern Voices," readers are introduced to the source of the verifiable evidence and to the unidentified but clearly implied narrator of the novel. Both appear in the persona of Larry Schiller. Schiller is the dominate consciousness throughout the second section of the book which begins with the media's attention to Gilmore's refusal to appeal his death penalty and culimates with Gilmore's execution and Schiller's subsequent activities.

A blend of photographer, writer, and producer, Schiller arrives on the scene after Gilmore publicly announces he does not wish to appeal his sentence. Schiller establishes a rapport with Gilmore and subsequently acquires rights to the story from Gilmore, Nicole, and other close relatives and friends of Gilmore. Schiller's acquisition of rights and of letters and documents relevant to the event and his intensive interviews with the participants clearly identify him as the clinical reporter evident in "Western Voices."

In a scene which focuses on Schiller, Mailer explicitly
reminds readers that all events supported by verifiable
evidence exist in different versions (can be interpreted
differently) through different viewpoints. The reminder
comes in a scene in which Schiller is attempting to ascer-
tain the different ways the Gilmore story can be presented
according to the acquisition of rights.

> If for example, he got Gilmore's okay without
> Nicole's, a scenario could be worked up of a
> guy who comes out of prison and struggles with
> his old con habits, but finally kills a man, a
> study of the pains of getting out of jail . . . .
> On the other hand, said Schiller, if they got
> the girl, but couldn't succeed in signing up
> Gilmore, they might do an interesting struggle
> of two sisters both in love with the same crimi-
> nal. They'd have to substitute a fictionalized
> criminal, but could explore the triangle. Or
> they could focus completely on Nicole and turn
> the thing into a study of a young girl who has
> been married a few times, is saddled with chil-
> dren, then falls in love with a criminal. Play
> down the murders, but emphasize the romantic
> difficulties of trying to live with a man that
> society does not trust. (580)

With Schiller's proposed scenarios, Mailer reminds readers
of the nature of the genre. Different approaches to the
verifiable evidence result in different interpretations;
we clearly recognize that each of these scenarios appears
in some form in the novel.

The explicit link so evident in Capote's interpretation
of Smith's background and the Clutter murders is never
present in Mailer's view of Gilmore's background and his

subsequent actions. Possible "connections" between social
factors and their consequences are offered only as specula-
tions from various participants. Barry Farrell, a writer
hired by Schiller to transcribe Gilmore's interviews, pon-
ders the various possible cause and effect sequences of
Gilmore's acts.

> . . . there would be hours when Farrell would
> be seized with depression at how few were the
> answers they had located in the inner works of
> Gary Mark Gilmore, and the size of the questions
> that remained. How could they begin to explain
> things so basic, for example, as the way he had
> led Nicole into suicide? That was clammy. Could
> you call such depths of lover's perfidy a product
> of environment? Might you dare to explain it by
> saying that only an urban cowboy could pass
> through psychological machines that would stamp
> you out that badly? Could you say that you had
> to eat the wrong foods, sleep in the wrong places,
> take the wrong drugs, drive the wrong cars, make
> the wrong turns, do all that for an awful long
> time before you turned into a force who did hor-
> rible things to people who loved you?
> Or did you put the blame on heredity, and say
> Gary Gilmore grew out of the evil seed of mystery
> in things itself? (812)

Farrell's failure to find a definitive reason for Gilmore's
attempt to act as an instrument of Nicole's death (the
inability to find a cause for the effect) suggests the fu-
tility of attempting to impose an ordered cause and effect
sequence on events. Mailer provides speculations about
such possible connections, but refuses to endorse one over
the other. Mailer has described The Executioner's Song
as a "book which doesn't have answers, but poses delicate

questions" (McCord 77). A scene such as this, in which
Farrell fumbles unsuccessfully for answers, creates the
effect Mailer is attempting to achieve with the novel.

Rather than providing an "answer," Mailer, in his role
as an interpreter, assumes the posture of a "noninterpretive"
spectator who provides a "balanced" view of numerous possi-
bilities through the conflicting impressions from the var-
ious participants. A scene in the novel emphasizes the im-
portance of presenting balanced contrasting views in a con-
versation Schiller conducts with media representatives who
are turning their focus on Schiller as a major participant
in the Gilmore case. Schiller is enraged that the media
are portraying him as a hustler and entrepreneur.

> 'We got to lay out a few ground rules. If you
> want to say that I hustled interviews from Lenny
> Bruce's widow, then I also want you to write about
> Minamata which is a book I'm proud of. If you
> want a picture of Marilyn Monroe, then also put
> in a picture from the story I published on mer-
> cury poisoning.' He said, 'If you're going to
> slant the story one way, balance it the other,'
> and he banged it back, and he banged it forth,
> and could feel his blood flowing through his veins
> again, instead of all that shit. (979)

Just as Dewey, the arresting officer of Smith, supplies
the crux of Capote's interpretation of the Clutter murders,
Schiller provides the foundation of Mailer's comprehensive
interpretation: "If you're going to slant the story one
way, balance it the other." Mailer appears to implement

this maxim in The Executioner's Song; however, as earlier
evidence suggests, the balanced view is merely an appear-
ance. Mailer has selectively incorporated verifiable evi-
dence and constructed a narrative that is purely Mailer's
view. His "constructions" of each individual--Nicole is
a naive instrument of Gilmore; Brenda is a helpful cousin
who is subconsciously attracted to Gilmore--combine to
create a view of the events that may not be a unified,
singular vision, but is certainly a speculative, personal
one. Mailer's role as an interpreter is as firmly estab-
as Capote's. It is only his approach to that role that
differs significantly.

Polar Versions of the Nonfiction Novel

The contrasting approaches to the role of the inter-
preter in The Executioner's Song and In Cold Blood provide
a useful basis for comprehending the polar qualities of
these two novels. Capote sees his role as one who controls
and defines the event; Mailer sees his role as one who con-
trols and defines various interpretations of the event.
Their contrasting approaches are revealed in the devices
they employ: Mailer incorporates a barrage of reflexive
devices to draw the reader's attention to the interpretive
nature of the form; Capote employs techniques which deflect
the reader's attention from the form and focus it onto his
interpretation. Mailer's devices disguise his subjective

views in that The Executioner's Song appears to be a mul-
tiplicity of views, but, in fact, is Mailer's personal
vision. Capote's devices reveal his subjective views in
that In Cold Blood is more obviously a singular vision.
The two novels remain polar versions of the genre because
the two authors exhibit opposing views of their interpre-
tive roles through their contrasting devices.

The different approaches to the role of the interpret-
er in The Executioner's Song and In Cold Blood appear
striking, but, when examined, they serve to reinforce the
generic bond between the two works. A reconception of the
two novels suggests that the polarity of the two works is
revealed in the devices the two authors incorporate into
the genre in order to approach the interpretive role dif-
ferently. Hirsch and Bakhtin have pointed out that devices
tell us little about the nature of a work; instead, the
author/reader relationship defines and formulates the genre.
Readers of In Cold Blood and The Executioner's Song can
understand the material in the two works only in relation
to their view of the genre of the nonfiction novel, a view
that sees the nonfiction novel as an interpretive vehicle
which incorporates verifiable evidence. Mailer and Capote
also recognize that the nonfiction novel is an interpre-
tive vehicle and they construct their respective works

accordingly, incorporating any device or element that best serves their view of the role of the interpreter. Each author also foregrounds his intention to persuade readers to accept his interpretation as a perceptive understanding of the event he has selected to interpret. A generic reconception of the two novels recognizes the relationship that evolves as a result of the two authors' interpretive--and persuasive--"speech plan" and their readers' ability to "sense" that plan.

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