Iperstoria
2025, no. 26
ISSN: 2281-4582

DOI: 10.13136/2281-4582/2025.i26.1684
iperstoria.it

Truman Capote's Mid-Century Subversive Celebrity

A Spectacle of Queerness

Alessandro Clericuzio
University of Perugia
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4351-8283
Email: alessandro.clericuzio@unipg.it

Keywords

Gender
Novel
Gore Vidal
Homosexuality
Photography
Southern studies

Abstract

Truman Capote is one of the most controversial American writers of the post-WWII years, gaining more attention and fame for his persona than for his literary output. Though his celebrity has lasted for decades and has grown at each new project, this paper concentrates on the years preceding – and the time of – the publication of his first novel in 1948. Portraying explicitly gender-bending characters, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* has fallen into the category of Southern Grotesque, a style that has sheltered his and other Southern writers' output from the ostracism met by Gore Vidal's contemporary gay-themed novel, *The City and the Pillar*. The paper thus addresses the nexus between sexuality and celebrity at a time when homophobia, in the United States, was at its highest peak. Capote's exploitation of his personal queerness, mirrored in the novel, has granted him fast-track fame, confirming his ability to capitalize on the spectacularization of queer elements.

1. An Early Rise to Fame

Truman Capote's huge success in the late 1940s jars with the limited interest the academic world showed in his work until the early 1990s. Mass media coverage of his persona, instead, started at a very early stage of his career, when he had only published a few short stories, and has since continued with constant, multifarious dedication.

Beginning with the controversial publication of his portrait on the back cover of his 1948 novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* by Random House, and proceeding with his jet-setting reputation, his activities in Hollywood and on Broadway, his reportages as a journalist, and his world-renowned high-society ball at the Plaza Hotel in New York, Truman Capote's public persona has overshadowed his literary output and turned him into a contentious, disturbing figure of American mid-century culture of fame. As such, he has become the subject of dozens of movie and television productions, documentaries, podcasts and museum exhibitions running well into the 21st century, over forty years after his death.

Capote's childhood friendship with Harper Lee, his companionship with Carson McCullers and later with Tennessee Williams place him in a convergence of activities shaping the Southern literary canon of the 1940s. The transformation of his youth comradeship with Gore Vidal into a life-long rivalry verging on hatred, while other openly gay artists – especially visual artists, among them Andy Warhol – were fascinated by him, shows how controversial his figure was also for queer contemporaries. His small stature, high-pitched voice and ostentatious effeminacy have made him an international icon of gender transgression, easily appropriated by the show-business in such films as Robert Moore's *Murder By Death* (1976, where he had a leading role very similar to his real self), Bennett Miller's *Capote* (2005), Douglas McGrath's *Infamous* (2006), documentaries as *With Love from Truman* (1966), *Truman Capote, the Tiny Terror* (1997), *The Capote Tapes* (2019), television shows as *Tru* (1992, season 11 of *American Playhouse*, from a 1989 Jay Presson Allen play of the same title) and most recently the second season of Netflix *Feud*, entirely dedicated to him and to his "swan" friends, namely New York's high society ladies. Titled *Capote vs. the Swans* (2024), it is an eight-episode series based on Laurence Leamer's book *Capote's Women: A True Story of Love, Betrayal, and a Swan Song for an Era*, published three years earlier.

Add to these reconstructions the innumerable adaptations of his works on stage and on film, and the visual potency of Capote's icon is clearly identifiable. Far from being a postmortem realization on the part of the showbiz, it is the key to understanding the nexus between sexuality and celebrity that is at the core of his career trajectory and that distinguishes him from other contemporary writers of gay-themed fiction, in particular Gore Vidal.

The controversial picture on the jacket of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* "caused a great stir" in the world of American media (Morris 2002, 234): it portrayed Capote reclining on a sofa, staring at the viewer with a languid expression and in a traditionally feminine position. It was considered outrageous by most commentators of the time, and recent scholarship has compared the pose to the subject of Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia* (Fig. 1, 2), both for the writer's symmetrically mirroring the woman's position, and for Capote's hand on his genitals, so much so that the young man's portrait can be read in contemporary times as an unabashed signal of prostitution (Solomon 2017, 46). Though this was not easily construed or rationalized by 1940s buyers (and not necessarily readers) of the book, there is no doubt that the author was objectifying himself, offering the reproduction of his body to the public gaze as an object of scrutiny. His hairdo, clothes, pose, and direct eye contact provoked contempt in some, attraction in others, and probably both in those who perceived a subversive confusion of gender coding. This black-and-white, cellulose, literary seduction was not incidental, as reported by Capote's biographer, Gerald Clarke.

Fig. 1: Truman Capote in the controversial Harold Halma's picture published on the jacket of his 1948 novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*.

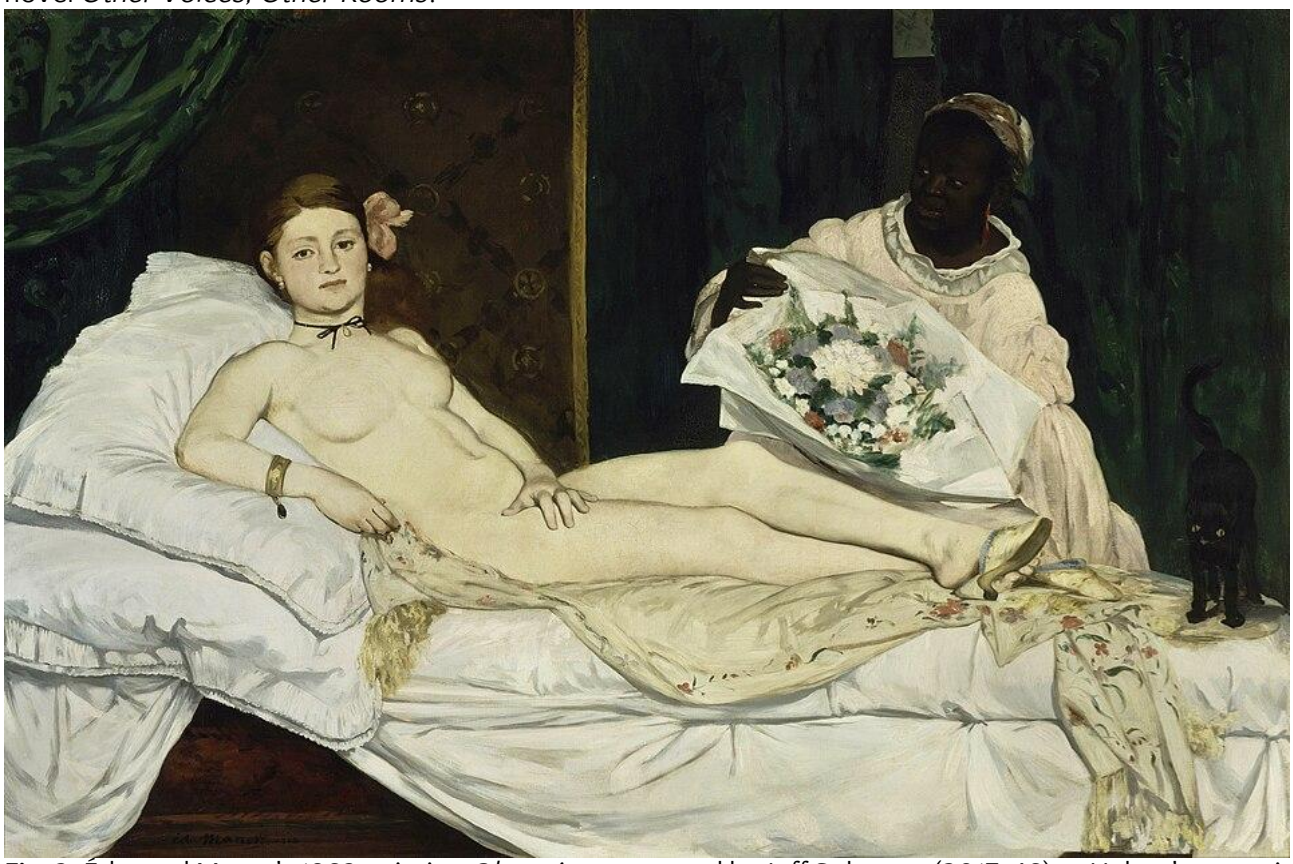

Fig. 2: Édouard Manet's 1863 painting *Olympia*, compared by Jeff Solomon (2017, 46) to Halma's portrait of Capote, in terms of feminine pose and hyper-sexualized, prostitution-related message.

When the picture was taken in 1947 by Truman's friend Harold Halma, Newton Arvin, the novelist's lover at the time, professed jealousy over that seductive look, hoping that the pose had been spurred by the thought of their mutual love and by no one or nothing else. "Truman may well have been thinking of Notwen Nivra when he stared into Harold Halma's Leica in January 1947. But he had something else on his mind –publicity" (Clarke 1988, 154-155).[1]

A lucky combination of events and intuitions has brought that picture to bookstores all over the United States on the jacket of the novel: it was offered by Capote himself to the publishing house that was about to print the book, where the final decision was made by Bob Linscott, at the time a senior editor with Random House. Truman had been introduced to Linscott by Marion Ives, a literary agent solicited by Carson McCullers, who had met Capote in New York. Linscott and Bennett Cerf, his boss in the publishing company, were particularly charmed by the young writer – who would later be remembered as an "enchanter" (Haskell 1988, 1) – so much so that they signed him to a contract for what would become *Other Voices, Other Rooms* as early as 1945, when he only had a couple of short stories to his record.

Where this charm stemmed from and how confident Truman Capote was about it can be traced back to the few years preceding Harold Halma's photograph, since its roots were already grounded in the communicating power of photography, at the time the most widespread means of public representation and of visual dissemination.

1.1 The Member of the Colony

Truman Capote's fast-track celebrity is strictly connected to his unconventional, non-normative exhibition of gender expression. Such exhibition took the shape of photographic portraits at a time when American readers were eager for a glimpse of the new generation of post-war writers. Glossy and general-interest magazines specialized in photojournalism devoted several pages to young and rising authors. *LIFE* was one such magazine. In a 1946 issue, it featured a photo spread documenting the activities of a group of artists from Yaddo. Among them was twenty-two-year-old Truman Capote.

Yaddo is an artists' and writers' colony near Saratoga Springs, set in the bucolic countryside of upstate New York, founded in 1900 by philanthropists Spencer and Katrina Trusk – where the first artists in residence arrived in the mid-1920s. The connection that brought Capote to the prestigious colony – where, in spite of his scanty accomplishment, he would get the chance of standing out as one of the promising new literary voices – is, once again, all but casual. In his late teens in New York, he was already seeking out the celebrated, not only in the field of literature. Harper Lee, his childhood friend in Alabama before adolescence, was an accidentally

[1] Notwen Nivra was Arvin's name spelled backwards, the couple's term of endearment.

literary association that would develop in later years, as she did not devote her energies to literature before the 1950s. On the other hand, Eugene O'Neill's daughter Oona, iconic heiress Gloria Vanderbilt, the empress of fashion Diana Vreeland (with whom Truman hung around in the war years) as well as Carol Marcus, later to become William Saroyan's wife, were signs of the young man's ambition. Reconstructing this trajectory can shed light on Capote's admission to such a selective establishment as Yaddo.

His conquest of the territory of American letters started from the lowest position of copyboy at *The New Yorker*, some time between late 1942 and early 1943, where he was looked down on by almost everybody as a weird teenager with the looks of a twelve-year-old. Still, he was so convinced that his future career was meant to take the shape of a writer that he kept submitting his stories to whoever agreed to read them. Though his improvised readers among employees of *The New Yorker* might have shown signs of appreciation, when Capote's stories finally reached the fiction department of the magazine they were rejected without appeal. Fired a few months later by the company because of a never clarified misunderstanding with poet Robert Frost (Clarke 1988, 71-76), Truman directed his plans elsewhere and simply walked into the offices of the magazine *Mademoiselle*, his short stories in his hands. It was the spring of 1945, and he was confronted by the fiction editor's secretary, Rita Smith, who read and appreciated his writing.

Rita Smith was a Southerner herself and Truman's stories resonated with her, not only because he wrote about that region of the United States, but also because of a certain affinity with Smith's sister's writing. In fact, Rita was Carson McCullers' younger sister, and *Harper's Bazaar*, a magazine owned by the same company that owned *Mademoiselle*, had recently published Carson's novella *Reflections in a Golden Eye* under the guidance of George Davis, Rita's boss on the editorial board at *Mademoiselle*. Rita introduced Truman to her sister, who at the time was working at *The Member of the Wedding*. Having written several versions of the novel, Carson decided to ask Capote's opinion on certain passages. Enticed by his wit and talent, she considered him her protégé and managed to have him recommended to Linscott and Cerf at Random House (Carr 1975, 260-261). The latter's first perception of the young writer was unmistakably marked by Capote's unwavering self-esteem and ability at self-promotion. The Random House executive wrote in his memories that on Truman's first day at Random House, the aspiring novelist was "bright and happy and absolutely self-assured" and that at that time it was "ludicrously simple to get publicity for Truman" (Cerf 1977, 223, 224).

With Cerf's contract in his hands – signed in October 1945 for his first novel that would become *Other Voices, Other Rooms* – Truman felt confident that what others saw as "his delusions of grandeur" (Clarke 1989, 94) were indeed plans to be fulfilled soon. In January of the following year, he wrote a letter to the director of Yaddo, Margaret Ames, introducing

himself as "twenty-one, from the South, now living in New York" and with the prospective publication of his first novel. The notes attached to this letter when it was archived in the New York Public Library were by Ames herself, suggesting serious consideration of the applicant, and by two other unidentified commentators, one of which jotted down "Great talent here" (qtd in Clarke 2004, 13).

One of them was very likely Malcom Cowley, whose positive evaluation of Capote is in the registers of the admission committee (McGee 2008, 16, n. 17). Another supporter might have been Harvard Professor Howard Doughty, already a guest in residence when Truman was admitted and soon to become his lover while staying at the arts colony. "The child really has an uncanny talent – almost frightening," he wrote to Newton Arvin, referring to Capote (qtd in Werth 2001, 101). A respected literary critic and one of the trustees at Yaddo, Newton Arvin's advice was sought after by Ames regarding prospective guests. Later caught in a moral crusade leading to his indictment for harboring gay pornographic materials, Arvin – at the time a professor at Smith college – would soon become Capote's successive lover during the latter's term at the colony.[2] It is from there and at that time that Truman's notoriety in the shape of studied black-and-white pictures commences.

1.2 Snapshots from LIFE

In July 1946, few weeks after Capote started residence at Yaddo, *LIFE* magazine published a photo-essay by Lisa Larsen, documenting the artists' activities in the colony. Two shots portray Truman, in one of which he sits alone at a writing desk, the other in the company of Margaret Young, at the time the author of two collections of poetry and a few short stories published in *The Kenyon Review, Mademoiselle* and *The Harper's Bazaar*. Other pictures show Arvin Newton making his own bed in his room and reading by a window, two other guests strolling in the garden, and the gravestones of Katrina, founder of Yaddo, and her two husbands.

Truman Capote's portrait with Margaret Young is significant as one more calculated step towards the gender-bending visibility he was planning to exploit and choose as his signature style (Fig. 3). Young and Capote cunningly switch codes in this photograph: she has no makeup, wears her hair in a blunt bob, no socks, and tomboyish pants and t-shirt, while he again defies traditional male adulthood in terms of codified apparel. His white socks and black leather

[2] According to Solomon, "[t]hough Doughty was much more conventionally attractive, Capote very quickly preferred Arvin, the better scholar" (2017, 1), which could be a sign that Capote's ambition showed in terms of sexual relations, too. Further details of the Arvin-Capote love story are reported by Werth (2001, 102-117), who chronicles Arvin's victimization during the "pink scare" (a.k.a. the "lavender scare"), the persecution of homosexuals at the time of the Cold War. The "pornographic" material that led to the 1960 scandal and consequently Arvin's dramatic expulsion from Yaddo and forced early retirement from Smith, were typical 1950s beefcake magazines.

loafers, which in the 1940s was typical attire for private and religious schoolgirl uniforms, veer Truman's gender towards the female. "[U]nder the time's rigorous policing of male movement," remarks Solomon, his pose "would have evoked the ballerina and her iconic femininity" (2017, 30).

Fig. 3: Gender-switching between Margaret Young's tomboyish clothes and Truman Capote's ballerina-like pose and foot attire. The two writers are portrayed at Yaddo by Lisa Larsen, 1946. ©Lisa Larsen.

Fig. 4: One last destabilizing gender statement before the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* turns Capote from the ballerina type to the urbane dandy. ©Jerry Cook

The second picture of Capote featured in *LIFE* the following year was apparently less provocative. It was a full-body shot of the writer sitting at a ritzy tête-à-tête in a somewhat garishly decorated room, by photographer Jerry Cook (Fig. 4). The caption read: "Esoteric, New Orleans-born Truman Capote, 22, writes haunting short stories. His novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, will be out this fall" (Chamberlain 1947, 75). Of all the writers presented in the article,[3] Capote's predominance in size (full-page except for the title and a few lines of the article) and position (the opening page) is indicative of a specific promotional intention, the reasons and the agencies of which are not easily determined. Bennett Cerf himself, who had agreed to publish the forthcoming novel, would later declare in his memories that he had had no role in the decisions made by the magazine and that he was positively surprised by them, assuming that

[3] The others were Jean Stafford, Thomas Heggen, Calder Willingham, Elizabeth Fenwick, Peggy Bennett, Gore Vidal. Except for Vidal, none of them has really overcome the test of time in terms of literary celebrity.

"Truman had managed to promote that full-page picture for himself" (1977, 224-225). What was more surprising was the fact that he was the only author featured in the article not to have published, by that time, a whole book, his short stories having appeared only in magazines.

This second picture in *LIFE* might well be less ambiguous in terms of gender, but to a discerning eye it tells – and surely has told – a lot. Familiar with the subject of Capote's forthcoming novel (the coming of age of a "girlish" thirteen-year-old boy), the photographer could not offer its visual representation like he did with the other writers' work in the same article. But Capote's homosexuality was by then increasingly evident, as signaled by the highly loaded, though at the time still ambiguous, adjective "esoteric" included in the caption:

> The photo caption's descriptor "esoteric" thus conveys Capote's otherness to those who understand its code: homosexuality as told through the fussy dandy. […] *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, whose title itself participates in a dance of indirection around homosexuality ("other" how?), cannot be indicated so easily. […] If [the photographer] wants to indicate the novel's homosexuality, all he can show is Capote himself, who holds the unspeakable within his own body. Capote is his own iconography. (Solomon 2017, 36-37)

This interpretation allows for a rethinking of Capote's positioning in mid-century American literary culture not as an inadvertently lowbrow product of mass market, but as a master of the celebrity machine, aware, very early on, of the power of physical representation and reproduction as a higher and more powerful tool for success than the writing itself or the writing alone. Indeed, he appears to have deliberately chosen to monitor and use his impact on others and his ability to sabotage society's gender and sexuality standards at a crucial time when homophobia was at its highest, between the notorious Oscar Wilde trial in England and the civil rights movements of the 1960s in the US. Indeed, presenting Capote as a mid-twentieth-century Wildean dandy, the portrait by Jerry Cook published in *LIFE* was a cunningly devised gender statement meant to destabilize readers. Though it did not show Capote in his more provocative, effeminate looks, it nevertheless was as queer as the previous shots exactly in that it boasted the malleability of gender.

The question arises, at this point, of the role his literary production had in the process of his iconization. Though significant, such role was overshadowed, at least until he was alive, by his preponderant persona, and by his ability to profit from his narrative and personal queerness when other authors were hampered by it.

2. A Room of a Gay's Own

Shifting from Yaddo to a private room, in the James Cook photograph (Fig. 4) Truman seems to have chosen his own real room (Solomon 2017, 225 n. 21) as a setting from where to address his

potential audience, with a defiant gaze meant to establish direct eye-contact and, if taken on, a challenge, an invitation to that peculiar kind of room. The trope of the room is not accidental. Resonating with Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own*, the private dimension endowed by domestic space is both in Capote's jacket picture and the second *LIFE* photograph. More significantly, it is in the title and in the plot of his first novel that the eponymous rooms are frequently mentioned as the locus of alternative sexuality.

The novel opens in the Southern location of Paradise Chapel, a way station to reach Noon City, and finally Skully's Landing, a remote Mississippi site where the young protagonist, Joel Knox, is headed in order to join his father. At the Landing, thirteen-year-old Joel enters a gothic world of freaks, wild nature and decaying architecture, inhabited by his mysteriously hidden father, the man's second wife Amy and her cousin Randolph. In the secluded rooms of the mansion is his bedridden, paralyzed father and, as seen from Joel's perspective, "a queer lady" (Capote 1976, 71), which will later be revealed as Randolph in drag.

The recurring trope first gains a meaning related to sexuality when Joel reminisces about a game he used to play with his friends in New Orleans, significantly named Blackmail, consisting of peering into strangers' houses. During one such activities, he'd had "the most puzzling of all [his sights], two grown men standing in an ugly little room kissing each other" (Capote 1976, 69). The room is little, ugly and spied upon illegally, giving the first space allowed to same-sex relationships a somber, illicit aura. In Chapter Four, during a confrontation between Joel and Randolph in the presence of Amy, the two adults get so disturbing for Joel that he retreats to "the far-away room" (Capote 1976, 88), an imaginary, safe space shared by his New Orleans fantastic and loving friends.

The novel's ending follows the boy-loses-his-innocence pattern: Randolph, as the strange lady, from the privacy of her room where (s)he can be her true self,

> beckoned to him [Joel], shining and silver, and he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where, as though he'd forgotten something, he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind. (Capote, 1976, 235)

By choosing this trope – that would later be used in other American gay-themed novels[4] – instead of a visual rendition of same-sex intercourse, and by leaving the transgressive figure "inside" the privacy of domestic space, Capote managed to smuggle homosexual content into

[4] The best known are James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and Edmund White's *And the Beautiful Room is Empty* (1988). Still attached to sexual identity, the trope evolved in "places" and "homes" in David Leavitt's short-story collection *A Place I've Never Been* (1990). In André Aciman's *Call Me By Your Name* (2007) Elio's and Oliver's connecting rooms are constantly mentioned as places exceeding their simply spatial meaning and role.

mid-century America and not only be left unscathed but also gain huge popularity. 1948 was a pivotal year for homosexual literature and culture in the United States. Besides Capote's novel, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* and Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* were published, all of them extremely groundbreaking, in different ways, for the understanding and the advancement of the gay cause. If Kinsey's report on the high frequency of homosexual and bisexual behavior among American men was somewhat sheltered from public outrage by its scientific aim and structure, Vidal's novel, depicting two all-American boys having sex (a sportsman and a future military), marked a long blackout in his career so much so that for a few of the following years he was forced to publish under a pseudonym (Vidal 1991, iii).

Capote's notoriety, instead, increased[5] despite homophobic reviews of his first novel, which have been thoroughly parsed by critics (Richards 2005, 18-20; Mitchell-Peters 2000, 113-114; Pugh 1998, 153). This ability to stand out and defy public disdain was fueled by his parallel operations of visibility and spectacularization, which attracted readers and observers rejoicing in their own voyeuristic subjectivity that allowed them to negotiate their fantasies with the distance offered by a famous "object," the objectified otherness Capote embodied. Such negotiations are at the core of the fame machine (Braudy 1986, 380) and were constantly exploited by Capote throughout his career. At the very beginning of his profession, though, this was also possible because, as Solomon has suggested, Capote's writing and his persona were "broadly queer" as opposed to "specifically gay."[6]

2.1 Southern Grotesque / Southern Queer

The reason why this "broadly queer" novel has amplified instead of diminishing its author's celebrity could lie in the specifically Southern nuances its queerness adopted. The term *queer* was common use in the 1940s to identify same-sex orientation, but it could also be less sexually connoted. It is significant that in the other 1948 groundbreaking gay-themed novel, Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*, the word clearly indicates its protagonist Jim's homosexuality. When he refuses to have intercourse with a woman, another guy tells her "Let the queer go, don't mind him, I'll take care of you" (Vidal 1948, 70). Shortly after, when he meets a gay Hollywood star, someone suggests he should go live with him. Not knowing his sexual orientation, the third person says to Jim, "I know you're not queer but this is an exception. It's something people dream about" (Vidal 1948, 85). Later in the story, when Jim shares a barracks with some soldiers, he hears one of them talk about "a queer" (not "a queer man": not an adjective but a

[5] This is no doubt one of the reasons for the life-long feud between Vidal and Capote (Davidson 2006).
[6] The critic distinguishes "broadly queer" as behaviors counter to the dominant order, and "specifically gay" as unmistakable signs of homosexual identity (2017, 12). Capote's mastery of these nuances has made him a "glamorous terrorist against gender security" (2017, 42).

sexually explicit noun) who had approached him sexually (Vidal 1948, 161). And near the end of the novel, when Jim manages to again lie in bed with his adolescence crush Bob, the latter shouts "You're a queer, […] you're a damned queer. Go on and get your ass out of here" (Vidal 1948, 263).

Southern queerness appeared to be much more mitigated, generalized and less threatening to the patriarchal status quo, especially because it could pass as part of the gothic/grotesque tradition of the region.[7] Even though modern readings of Capote's novel rightly alert us to the mistake of considering sexual and gender differences as grotesque (Free 2008, 429; Pugh 1998, 666), the writer cunningly used the word in order to achieve a certain degree of ambiguity without explicitly addressing the subject of same-sex relationships. After all, "Capote only partially discloses the sexualities of his characters" (Mitchell-Peters 2000, 122), as in the case of butch-girl Idabel and her liaison with the dwarf Wisteria.

A similar usage of the adjective "queer" was adopted by Carson McCullers only two years before the publication of *Other Voices*. In her 1946 novel *The Member of the Wedding*, tomboy protagonist Frankie often feels queer or finds the world around her quite queer.[8] The Southern locale allows for all kinds of distortions from the norm, but McCullers, besides dispensing Frankie with the constraints of her gender (name, haircut, toys, clothes, acquaintances), does plant the seed of a more sexualized meaning of the word. When she sits at the dinner table and talks about love with her African American maid Berenice, the latter comments: "I have heard of many a queer thing […] I have knew mens to fall in love with girls so ugly that you wonder if their eyes is straight. […] I have knew boys to take into their heads to fall in love with other boys" (McCullers 1946, 75-76). Then she goes on to talk about a boy who has supposedly become a girl, but the story hangs in the limbo of possible tall tales, as Frankie does not believe Berenice. Richards (2005) warns against the collation of gender (or sex) inversion and homosexuality from a modern perspective. Still, the indeterminacy of what Solomon has defined as "broadly queer" helped both McCullers and Capote bypass the hostility of mainstream heteronormativity. Besides the ending of the novel, in which, seeing cousin Randolph dressed as a woman, Joel

[7] The debate about Southern Gothic and its post-WWII nuance of Southern Grotesque is too wide to tap here, since it involved several writers and intellectuals of the time and of the following decades, including Fiedler (1960), Malin (1962), Kayser (1963), O'Connor (1969), Harpham (1987), Gross (1989). Specifically applying these categories to Capote, Mitchell-Peters maintains that in *Other Voices* the novelist "introduces a series of gothic types, themes and settings, only to dissolve Joel's spooky, late-night arrival to re-present the gothic into a daytime carnival of Campy aesthetics" (2000, 112). The critic thus suggests that Capote's use of the grotesque can help highlight and de-code the text's queer signs (2000, 117).

[8] In a fascinating carousel of fictional and real people, Idabel was portrayed after Harper Lee, while Dill, in Lee's 1960 masterpiece *To Kill a Mockingbird*, was inspired by Truman. His unusual, childish aspect appears to have informed also Frankie's little cross-dressing cousin in McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*. The young actor playing John Henry in the 1952 Fred Zinnermann film of the same title is by all means a replica of Truman Capote.

finds his own dimension, it is at the very beginning of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* that the young protagonist defies patriarchal expectations. Joel's queerness lies in his "offensively" delicate features, not much different from the author's features that caused outrage from the jacket photo.

Waiting for a lift from Paradise Chapel to Noon City, Joel sits at Sydney Katz's café, where Katz summons Radclif, a "big balding six-footer with a rough, manly face," to give a ride to the boy. The following scene is a perfect example of the contrast between two different gender canons, so consciously visual as to set the tone for the whole novel.

> Radclif eyed the boy over the rim of his beer, not caring much for the looks of him. He had his notions of what a "real" boy should look like, and this kid somehow offended them. He was too pretty, too delicate and fair-skinned; each of his features was shaped with a sensitive accuracy, and a girlish tenderness softened his eyes. (Capote 1976, 10-11)

Like possibly most American readers in 1948, Radclif gets curious about this unconventional boy, asking him a lot of questions, at the same time feeling the urge to spank him. "He took a deep swallow of beer, let forth a mighty belch, and grinned. 'Yessir, if I was your Pa I'd take down your britches and muss you up a bit'" (Capote 1976, 15). In the possible coincidence between Joel's figure and the writer's persona lies the key to understanding the mixture of attraction and repulsion nurturing Capote's celebrity with a velocity and consistency rarely equaled.

3. Fame – Against the Grain

If *The Member of the Wedding* can be read today as a "lesbian coming of age novel" (Free 2008, 437) in which Frankie falls in love with girls, and Capote's novel as "a groundbreaking treatment of adolescent gay identity" (Pugh 1998, 664), it is true, as Richards maintains, that same-sex desire has a pivotal role in constituting the mid-twentieth-century southern social and literary matrix as understood by writers of that era and region (2005, 103). One should not run the risk, though, of endorsing Leslie Fiedler's derogatory categorizations expressed in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, in which, Richards notes, US literature of post-WWII was roughly divided into Jewish straight and Southern homosexual (2005, 27).[9]

It does not mean, either, that the South was more open to alternative sexualities. It surely means that its traditional "otherness," in terms of history, society as well as of literary style,

[9] Contrasting former criticism that mirrored the popularly imagined South as a land where homosexuality was thriving and quarantined, Richards (2005) offers a deep reconfiguration of texts and contexts in the two and half decades his study spans. He is also the first to have suggested a comparison between Monet's *Olympia* and Capote's jacket photograph.

has provided a safe haven for the expression and experimentation of fictional queerness to the point of giving one of its authors a long-lasting, global level of celebrity so massive as to defuse the taboo subject of same-sex relationships and partially overshadow his literary achievements.

This shows how, by using the right amount of indeterminacy needed to tap the subject of homosexuality without vitiating a career as it happened to Gore Vidal, Capote managed to sneak his subversive gender and sexuality-related content in his early fiction. At the same time, his persona was so controversial that it took the lion's share in the public arena, reactions ranging from James Michener's adoration – who maintained that America absolutely "needed" a writer like Capote since he was "outrageously against the grain" (1985, 2) to the contempt of Gore Vidal, who lamented that mainstream critics only accepted and appreciated gay writers if they were "freak[s] like Capote, who has the mind of a Texas housewife" (qtd in Solomon 2017, 41).

Apparently neutral, Leslie Fiedler was indeed quite judgmental and as "super-slick" as the readership he addressed when he wrote that

> Truman Capote, who from the beginning possessed considerable skill as a writer (it is impossible to imagine him writing anything as inept as Faulkner's *Mosquitos*), has come more and more to play a part in print and out: to act for the benefit of his own limited world the elegant, sad androgyne – half reigning beauty and half freak. […] At the present moment, the queen has been replaced even in the super-slicks by the beatnik. (1960, 451)

Rather than commenting on his literary production, most contemporary writers referred to Capote's status as a celebrity. Carson McCullers died at the age of fifty, but during her lifetime she resented that Truman's notoriety had supplanted her own (Werth 2001, 112). Gore Vidal, on the other hand, never forgave Capote for the same affront and waged a life-long battle against him.

Besides a strong competitiveness in terms of literary fame, effeminacy and virility were the opposites in the fighting arena that stoked the Vidal-Capote feud for decades, with the first preoccupied with a normative, non-transgressive image of the homosexual and the latter cunningly using his gender-bending image to his advantage. Fellow Southern novelist Calder Willingham,[10] complaining with Vidal about Capote's behavior, wrote in a letter: "he tries too hard to be charming, busy all the time in the job of getting ahead. […] Also, he uses his

[10] Born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1922, Willingham's first novel *End as a Man* became a *cause célèbre* in 1947 when The Society for the Suppression of Vice accused it of obscenity for its explicit treatment of sex in a military academy, including violent intercourses between men. The novel was not set in the South, but scandal and success went hand in hand, until Willingham's star faded in the literary world and he devoted himself to screenwriting. Incidentally, Willingham was one of the writers featured in the 1947 *LIFE* magazine spread opening with Capote's full-page photograph.

homosexuality in this, he uses it as comedy and plays the role of the effeminate buffoon, thus making people laugh at him. It gets attention" (qtd in Kaplan 1999, 276).

If the reciprocal offenses Capote and Vidal exchanged during their lifetime show "the difficulty of fighting internalized as well as external homophobia" (Solomon 2017, 41), Andy Warhol, who was evidently immune to either, was a huge Capote fan long before becoming himself a queer icon. It was apparently exactly the jacket photo of Capote's first novel that ignited Warhol's "obsession" with him, when he was still in art school (Grobel 1985, 187; Solomon 2017, 50). He wrote Capote fan letters, sent him watercolors, stalked his building and made him part of his creative process, his first gallery exhibition in 1952 being "15 Drawings Based on the Writings of Truman Capote."[11]

There is no doubt that repulsion and attraction for Capote's persona and for his first novel worked concurrently toward the definitive establishment of the man's celebrity, that reached higher levels of domestic and global dissemination with every new project, be it a real-crime novel or a high-society masked ball with the world's jet-set. The key to understanding the fast-track lane on which Capote's fame has started lies in the spectacularization of his persona, that has aroused curiosity and controversial feelings of outrage and admiration, the same curiosity that the novel has been the object of.

If Joel's aspect has led even a high-brow, expert intellectual as Harold Bloom to define him "a Capote-like protagonist" (2003, 2), the tendency to identify the character with the public persona and the author with the novel must have been deep-rooted in the gender-related assumptions of the early readership of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. Far from creating a perceptive confusion, this spectacularization of queerness was wisely exploited by Capote, who very early on managed to capitalize on his sexual and gender ambivalence. Instead of exposing it as a vulnerable trait, he offered it as a site where his public could make up for their sense of personal and social fragmentation, a phenomenon strictly connected to the creation and/or perception of a celebrity (Braudy 1985, 381).

Bionote

Alessandro Clericuzio teaches American Literature at the University of Perugia. His recent publications have appeared in the Brazilian journal *Dramaturgia em foco* (2024; 2023); *Annali di ca' Foscari* (2023); *Ácoma* (2021). His main interests lie in the fields of Transculturalism, Queer Studies, as well as in the history of Film, Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies.

[11] In 2022 Broadway director Rob Roth has written and staged *Warholcapote*, a dialogue between the two artists based on several hours of actual taped conversations.

Works cited

Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *Truman Capote*. Broomal: Chelsea House, 2003. 1-2.

Braudy, Leo. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Capote, Truman. *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. 1948. New York: Signet, 1976.

Carr, Virginia S. *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers*. New York: Doubleday, 1975.

Cerf, Bennett. *At Random: The Reminiscences of Bennett Cerf*. New York: Random House, 1977.

Chamberlain, John R. "Young U.S. Writers." *LIFE*, 2 June 1947: 75-82.

Clarke, Gerald. *Capote: A Biography*. London: Sphere, 1989.

---, edited by. *Too Brief a Treat: The Letters of Truman Capote*. New York: Random House, 2004.

Davidson, Guy. "'Just a Couple of Fags': Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, and Celebrity Feud." *Celebrity Studies* 7.3 (2016): 293-308.

Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. New York: Criterion, 1960.

Free, Melissa. "Relegation and Rebellion: The Queer, the Grotesque and the Silent in the Fiction of Carson McCullers." *Studies in the Novel* 40 (2008): 426-446.

Grobel, Lawrence. *Conversations with Capote*. New York: Signet, 1985.

Gross, Louis. *Redefining the American Gothic*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989.

Harpham, George. *On the Grotesque*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987.

Haskell, Molly. "Unmourned Losses, Unsettled Claims." *The New York Times* 12 June 1988: 1. https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/home/capote-biography.html. Last visited 13/05/2025.

Kaplan, Fred. *Gore Vidal: A Biography*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.

Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963.

McCullers, Carson. *The Member of the Wedding*. 1946. New York: Bantam, 1950.

McGee, Micki. "Creative Power: Yaddo and the Making of American Culture." *Yaddo: Making American Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. 1-18.

Michener, James. "Foreword." *Conversations with Capote*. Edited by Lawrence Grobel. New York: Signet, 1985. 1-12.

Mitchell-Peters, Brian. "Camping the Gothic: Que(e)ring Sexuality in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*." *Journal of Homosexuality* 39 (2000): 107-138.

Morris E. Bernard. "Truman Capote." *Great American Writers*. Edited by R. Baird Shuman. New York: Marshall Cavendish, 2002. 233-254.

O'Connor. Flannery. "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, 1969: 36-50.

Pugh, William W. T. "Boundless Hearts in a Nightmare World. Queer Sentimentalism and Southern Gothicism in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 51.4 (1998): 663-682.

Richards, Gary. *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

Roth, Rob. *Warholcapote: A Non-fiction Invention*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2022.

Solomon, Jeff. *So Famous and So Gay: The Fabulous Potency of Truman Capote and Gertrude Stein*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Vidal, Gore. *The City and the Pillar*. London: John Lehman, 1948.

---. "Introduction." Edgar Box (pseud. Gore Vidal). *Death in the Fifth Position*. New York: The Armchair Detective Library, 1991. i-v.

Werth, Barry. *The Scarlet Professor. Newton Arvin: A Literary Life Shattered by Scandal*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.