Demolishing Generic Borderlines in Truman Capote’s *Handcarved Coffins*: A ‘Missionary Role’ of Generic Assimilation

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Abstract

A short novel amongst Music for Chameleons, Truman Capote’s *Handcarved Coffins*: A nonfiction Account of an American Crime appears to be categorized as a literary work of nonfiction, accorded the form of literary reportage. This article, however, tends to divert such a classification towards unveiling the adoption of different generic forms and styles that Capote incorporates in his work.

The study of Capote’s strategy of adapting and merging generic codes in Handcarved coffins, is based on his prevalent use of intertextuality on the level of format and content, and the adoption of fictional techniques like symbolism and symbolic characterization in a supposedly reporting-based factual account.

It is thus, through demolishing generic classifications and through the implied symbolic representation in the story that Capote’s missionary role of generic assimilation renders him a ‘Savior’ of literary writing by establishing a ‘true art’ where an amalgamation of styles voices the author’s implied criticism to the symbolically deciphered prevailing facets of his community.

Keywords: demolishing, adaptation, adoption, assimilation, merging, art.
Introduction

With the subtitle “a Nonfiction Account of an American crime”, Handcarved Coffins appears to be classified as nonfiction writing where capote proclaims a faithful and objective reportage of facts. Therefore, this paper aims at studying the extent to which this piece of writing abides by the codes of nonfiction writing through unveiling, in its first part, the amalgamation and adaptation of a variety of literary codes and formats, and the prevalence of intertextuality in the story. The study of the blend of fiction and facts is then, the focus of the second part of this article mainly through the study of symbolism and symbolic characterization in order to trace the adaptation of literary genres and themes in Handcarved Coffins; and to decipher the intentional assimilative adoption of a new literary art that breaks traditional generic boundaries.

I. Adaptation of generic codes and format

Based on an American crime, like its subtitle evokes, Handcarved Coffins is classified by many critics as a work of nonfiction writing just like Capote’s thirteen-year older work of new journalism In Cold Blood which Capote classifies as “a full-scale narrative” and “a "nonfiction novel” and to which many critics accredit the title of a precursory work of new journalism (Plimpton 49). However, its precursor Handcarved Coffins is shaped as “a nonfiction short novel” as Capote asserts in his preface Music for Chameleons (xviii).

In fact, this short story opens with a date stating “March, 1975” as its first line (67). Then, in a non-grammatical and verbless statement, the writer elucidates the setting as “A town in a small Western state” without specifying a precise location, violating by that one of the codes of reportage. However, the anonymity of the setting does not entail that Handcarved Coffins is mainly fictional, but it can rather be adhered to the fact that the reported case remained legally unsolved.

Furthermore, Handcarved Coffins seems to integrate what Tom Wolfe introduces in his 1973 anthology The New Journalism, as the main devices new journalists borrowed from literary fiction. It therefore, interpolates full dialogues stated as conversational speech that extend over pages, scene-by-scene construction of the narrative that revolves around the events of the eight announced crimes and, status details as records of ostensible details about characters and their surroundings including Capote himself. However, the third person point of view, as a another criterion of journalistic writing, is substituted by first person narration in the short novel under study, as Capote chooses to “set [himself] center stage…” and thus breaks the authorial detachment imposed by Wolfe’s manifesto of the genre (xviii).

In fact, the breaches of the codes of new journalism seem to implement an adoption of other literary forms in the work both by means of explicit and implicit references through intertextuality and generic textual format.

1. Intertextuality

Originally coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s in her “Word, Dialogue and Novel” the term “intertextuality” indicates the interrelatedness of literary texts with those that precede them so as to denote that “a literary text is not an isolated phenomenon but is made up of a mosaic of quotations and that any text is the ‘absorption and transformation of another’” (Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory 424).
In Capote’s *Handcarved Coffins*, a clear interplay of texts lends itself to the study of intertextuality. This is in fact spotted by a description of detective Jake’s Motel room and his selection of books belonging, in Capote’s words, to “intelligent men”, who are writers of different origins and different literary eras like: Dickens, Melville, Trollope and Mark Twain. Besides, not only does Capote allude to titles of writers but he also quotes Mark Twain about the evil nature of man that parallels the cruelty of the reported American series of crimes in the story.

Intertextuality, is also inferred to through the technique of allusion as “…an implicit reference…to another work of literature or art, to a person or an event”; for Capote implicitly alludes to the genre of autobiography through Mark Twain’s quoted passage without explicitly stating it (Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theories 27). Hence, based on the readers’ prior knowledge of the genre, the interrelatedness of literary texts is revealed through the matching of the meaning of the quote and that of Capote’s reporting-based novel, probably to insinuate the fact that difference of genres does not deny the similitude in content within art.

Furthermore, instances of intertextuality and allusion in *Handcarved Coffins* can be revealed through Capote’s reference to a funny characteristic of Jane Austin’s literature praises for Eric Ambler’s thriller writing *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, defensive attitude towards Graham Green and his love and admiration for both Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler (94,105).

The function of employing the formerly stated intertexts and allusions is not restricted to the level of meaning but it rather ascends to that of the genre as well. Actually, these referenced writers and texts, are allusions respectively to the genres of autobiography, fiction, thriller, and detective novels; indicating the literary genres from which the unconventional features in *Handcarved Coffins*, originate. Thus, non-arbitrarily selected references and allusions to literary works of different genres, render Capote’s in *Handcarved Coffins* a literary ground of generic assortment that adds layers of depth to its meaning, for “an allusion may enrich the work by association … and give it depth” (The Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory 27).

Another intertextual reference in the short novel is drawn by Capote during his first meeting with the suspect Quinn whose hands remind him of the Russian composer Rachmaninoff. In fact, Capote’s allusions to public figures, mainly artists, interpolate his preoccupation with art and maybe his perception of writing as musical composition where notes are rummaged to form an artistic piece, just like a narrative plot. Intertextuality in *Handcarved Coffins* is, thus, multilayered through a multiplicity of textual references.

Hence, not only does Capote employ intertextuality to credit a factual dimension to his work, but he also seems to shape his text through artistic and literary references, relying on the adaptation of different features of literary genres. This adaptation reflects Capote’s intention of exposing reporting as an artistic task and a favorable ground for generic amalgamation.

2. Merging formats

To put emphasis on the defining function of intertextuality on the levels of the form and content in literary texts, Norman Fairclough distinguishes two shades of the notion as being “manifest intertextuality” and “constitutive intertextuality,” with the former referring to intertextual elements such as presupposition, negation, parody, irony, etc. and the latter to the interrelationship of discursive features in a text, such as structure, form, or genre (117).
Therefore, according to Norman Fairclough, “manifest intertextuality” is to be associated with the content of the text, and “constitutive intertextuality” is rather concerned with its form. The double dimension of the notion of intertextuality then, highlights the literary text as being set to inherit its form and structure in relation to other texts and it can be either in terms of content through poetic devices, or on the level of structure and genre through generic norms. Accordingly, it’s through constitutive intertextuality that the adaptability of a variety of generic forms is to be studied in Capote’s Handcarved Coffins.

It is in reference to the distinctive textual display of this short novel that the adaptability of textual formats is grounded in this paper. In fact, each adopted intertextual format seems to be manifested through a distinctive layout in the text.

A predominating aspect in Handcarved Coffins, the use blank lines seems to signal the shift in reporting scenes as a predetermining feature of new journalism—the scene-by-scene construction. Accordingly, each scene is dominated by extensive dialogue revealing characters and plot.

Throughout the dialogue, however, instances of intrusive narration or commentary, are marked by parenthetical statements and paragraphs indented from the text. These parenthetical statements may also reveal the stream of consciousness technique that prevail in the genre of new journalism, and according to which Capote flings ideas, and emotions coded by heavy punctuation, in order to involve readers into the text. Nevertheless, when the dialogue between characters reaches an end in a reported scene, both descriptive and narrative passages in Handcarved Coffins, extend over pages without being incorporated within parentheses.

Furthermore, parenthetical statements that describe characters reactions, physical and emotional behavior are placed within the dialogue with no indentation. Such instances resemble stage directions within a play, which direct the reader’s own understanding of the described scenes of probably reproduced or reported facts. Thus, another literary form that prevails in Handcarved Coffins is that of the play.

Another literary subgenre that Capote adopts in his work is travel writing manifested throughout the passage in which he reports his three-week long trip to Europe, as he recalls instances of his journey to Switzerland, Italy, Athens and Istanbul, and finally back to New York.

Marked through the incorporation of an italicized paragraph that presents a letter from detective Jake to Capote, the format and style of the epistolary novel is implied through the integration of letters into the narrative. Italics are thus mostly a mark of intertextual references incorporated in the book to allude to the epistolary novels and their quality of dialogically presenting letters; which further emphasizes the allocation of a polyphonic aspect in Capote’s nonfiction short novel.

And, towards the end of the story, events are mostly coded through the style and format of writing journals, according to which each event is signaled through a full date and through the use of colloquial language, displaying non-grammatical sentences lacking the subject “I”.

Hence, techniques of new journalism, parenthetical style recalling stage directions, autobiographical retrospection, elements of fiction writing, and fully-dated journal entries- all co-exist in Capote’s work as a literary arena of generic adaptation elucidated through format and intertextuality.

Intertextuality is therefore used by Capote as a pivotal medium that alludes to the connection between literary texts at both the level of content and form. This notion also
unravels the blend of what is artistic and what is seemingly acknowledged to be nonfictional in *Handcarved Coffins*, which not only question Capote’s proclamation of faithfulness to truth through the subtitle, but also blurs the distinction between the factual and the imaginary.

II. **Fusing fictional tools into “nonfiction”**

Commenting on the double-faceted quality of literary journalism, critic Thomas Connery describes it as a genre that has reveals a factuality of journalism but “informs at a level common to fiction” (8). Thus, despite its factual dimension partly intensified through partial faithfulness to codes of new journalism, the prevalent use of intertextuality and the relatedness with formerly existent literary texts, *Handcarved Coffins* seems to display a fictional style through occurrences of different stylistic devices mainly symbolism. Such a fictional device seems to extend to the level of characterization as a principal component of both literary reporting and fiction writing, and thus adds a deeper level of meaning to the presumably inscribed facts through carrying implied authorial intentions to be deciphered.

1. **Symbolism and symbolic characterization**

While the first character introduced is Capote’s work is detective Jake Pepper, not till the second page is a hint to the reporter-narrator’s voice inscribed through the personal pronoun “we” to refer both to Jack and the narrating voice. The narrator later anonymously presents himself through the first person pronoun “I” that is eventually unveiled through the initials of Truman Capote’s name “TC”, as he engages in a dialogue with the protagonist.

Therefore, Capote’s adoption of the first person point of view, as the first notable violation of Tom Wolfe’s manifesto of new journalism is not only to engage himself in the events as a character-narrator-reporter, but also to be in interrelatedness with other characters.

In fact Capote’s involvement in the reported facts is further explained when he states in the preface for *Music for Chameleons* that, “From a technical point, the greatest difficulty I’d had in writing *In Cold Blood* was leaving myself completely out of it” (xviii). Detachment, in this short novel however, is sighted by Capote as a partially preserved by the choice of the abbreviating his name in dialogues in contrast to other characters- an instance that carries suspense effect but that also partially veils the speaking voice’s identity.

Actually, using the first person point of view might be for the sake of adding a fictional feature to the text through according distinctive dispositions of characters through allowing each to have his or her own voice in the narrative while the teller-reporter is voiced distinctively through the utterance of the speaking “I”. The use of autodiegetic narration infers the flaw of third-person pronoun reportage, for being a favorable terrain for the manipulation of the characters’ consciousness and thus distortions of their opinions. However despite voicing the characters and preventing himself from interfering in character’s consciousness by being involved in the reportage, Capote’s reportage in *Handcarved Coffins* is still criticized for involving fictional and symbolic dimensions.

Accordingly, Critic Peter Gillman, in his article “The Truth about Truman Capote,” explains that the writer attributed fictional names to characters in *Handcarved Coffins*. Besides, Critic John Hersey adds that characters in the short novel are “unseeable” as real ones, because Capote changed their identities and replaced them with imaginary ones (70). However, Capote denounced such a claim and clarified that “he had to omit a few identifying things”, while no there is no proof that reveals the factuality of the characters and the serial murders that are set in an anonymous setting in *Handcarved Coffins* (qtd. in Hersey 70).
Presented as detective who has been living in a motel room in the same town for five years, Jake Pepper is questioned to be a fictive figure as no biographical studies reveal the factual face of this character as the detective of the serial murders. Whereas, critic and journalist Peter Gillman, in his article “The Truth about Truman Capote,” explains that the character of Jake holds clear resemblances to the Kansas Bureau of Investigation detective Alvin Dewey, who had handled a much similar murder case in Ensign. Gillman therefore, states that Capote elaborated on the Ensign case “blending fact and fiction under the cloak of anonymity” (Gillman). Thus, it is through the blending of facts and fiction into narration and techniques of characterization that Capote manages to perfuse a symbolic dimension into his work.

Partly fictional, then, the character of Jake seems to be pictured under the spot of a relentless tenacity as he refuses to give up on a case that he had worked on for years, to eventually remain unsolved, without defying his sense of certainty about his intuition. Therefore, Jake might appear as symbolic reflection of capote’s strong belief in his own ability to adapt fictional writing into reportage, denying by that their antagonist natures.

In addition, according to Critic David Frankel, “quickness of pen and extraordinary imagination,” in Handcarved Coffins is also marked in scenes like Capote’s first meeting with Quinn’s wife, Juanita (Frankel). The latter, for Frankel, is probably an imaginary character that is depicted in her house, as a drunkard watching television with muted sound. In fact, Juanita’s preference of making up scenarios during her regular muted-television-watching game alludes to Capote’s own perception of the function of literature as a form of artistic reporting that makes the reader experience literal imagination while the text’s intentions are almost silenced. Then, just like “imagining keeps [her] awake” the task of reading awakens the readers’ imagination to decipher what is symbolically coded. Juanita as a character is highlighted by Capote as a hint to his belief in the adaptation of facts and imagination as none is superior to the other even in nonfiction writing.

Another central character in the story is Robert Hawley Quinn who is a cattle rancher suspected by both detective Jake and Capote of being behind the enigmatic sequential killing of the town’s committee members after having denied him water rights over the Blue River. While the story ends without proving his guilt, the white rancher Quinn remains the major suspect who terrifies his victims by mailing them similar boxes in the shape of coffins carved by hands and wrapped by brown paper over which the name and address of the victim in anonymously written in black ink. Each coffin contained the victim’s contextualized photograph as a code that alarms their soon death.

When Capote first encountered Quinn in his ranch to play a chess game, both Quinn’s physical appearance and character reminded him of Reverend Joe Bobby Snow who baptized him in Alabama River. Quinn is sketched by Capote as giant in height, with “simianlike arms,” “long,” “capable,” with “aristocratic” fingers, and having grey eyes that were “alert, suspicious, intelligent, merry with malice, [and] complacently superior.” (109-110). His “belt buckle; …was decorated with two crossed tomahawks made of gold and red enamel.” (110). His house was a castle, and one of its rooms was immense like “a cathedral stuffed with Spanish furniture,” and decorated with a baroque mirror, an entire wall of “blocks of irregularly cut granite,” and a fireplace that can fit “a roast of a brace of oxen” (110-111).

Accordingly, Quinn is presented as a character that insinuates a religious figure ‘owning’ a cathedral, obviously under the Roman Catholic Church alluded to through the baroque mirrors that are fundamental to the Baroque style promoted by Catholic popes and missionaries. Besides, his grey eyes and “simianlike” hands clearly recall Reverend Snow’s
physical appearance that reminds Capote of his childhood memory of baptism. Another religious allusion displayed through this character is that of the oxen which are referred to in the bible as a symbol of profit and power as the Authorized King James Version of The Holy Bible states, “Where no oxen are, the crib is clean; But much increase is by the strength of the ox”. (Proverbs 14:4).

Besides, Tomahawks, as described in Quinn’s belt buckle, are culturally referred to as light weapons used by Native American people as a sign of warfare. In fact, such an image recalls the history of aboriginals of the New England, who had to defend themselves from the corrupted invasion they were subjected to after the advent of Christian pilgrims—the Puritans—to their land. Moreover, the red color of enamel of which the tomahawks are made is a reference to the color of blood; and thus the image of raised crossed tomahawks that symbolizes a declaration of war as the tradition of Red Indians implies. And since the tomahawks on the character’s belt buckle is made of enamel which is “protective or decorative coating baked” on gold, Quinn’s accessory seems to be reflective of both his heritage, his social status and his belief in bloodshed (the Free Dictionary). As a result, Capote’s intentional use of both religious and implied historic registers to describe Quinn’s house, his golden belt, and his “aristocratic” fingers, is mainly for the sake of picturing him as an incarnation of the relatedness of American history, religion, power, and wealth.

In addition, Quinn’s association with religious metaphors is extended by describing his eyes as “dedicated to the religious task of rescuing his king” during the chess game with Capote (116). The act of rescuing the king is maybe another symbolic allusion to the assembled religious superiority and political power embodied in the character of Quinn whom Capote sarcastically infers to as a “messiah with a task” while detective Jake was recalling the murders Quinn had presumably committed (141).

Furthermore, the image of Quinn as he jumped in the Blue River, “laughed,” “scowled,” “… raised his own hand” and said “God’s work. His will” pictures him as a tyrannous Pope giving a call to arms in a sermon and claiming to have power and authority in God’s will. It is however, an image that Capote seems to denounce as he describes the Blue River where Quinn was standing as starting to “weave like a dark ribbon” between Quinn’s fingers, as if to suggest that God’s will and his blueprint for his creation is only darkened by such oppressive figures who vindicate bloodshed by claiming it to be God’s will.

Consequently, embodying religious, cultural and social power in the character of the suspect of the serial murders is clearly a statement of criticism to the history of corrupt clergymen as members of the privileged classes whose pomp is a source of neither religious glory nor spiritual salvation; but rather a cause of principally social and religious assault. Thus, Capote’s pejorative perception of religious matters in his work is indeed a communication of his implied criticism to his community and to the Christian religious history in general.

However, capote’s preoccupation with the issue of religion as reflected through the character of the murderer Quinn is alluded to since the very first page when he described the setting as a town that “supports twelve churches,” and as he recalls his childhood memory of Baptism.

During his visit to the suspect Robert Quinn, a childhood memory of Capote was ignited by the sight of this rancher. Capote recalls his memory of forced baptism, when at the age of five, he was immersed in “a sluggish muddy river that repelled [him], for it was full of water moccasins and whiskered catfish” (Capote 116).
In fact, the fatal characteristic in Capote’s description of Alabama River, as full of water moccasins and catfish, allocates the setting a fictional dimension, and thus denies Capote’s designation of the scene as a mere faithfulness to a childhood memory in retrospect. Such a description in fact, turns a cherished religious practice into a shocking event that is maybe set as a literary image baring authorial intentions within its layers of meaning.

Hence, neither the catfish nor the water moccasin is arbitrarily inscribed by capote. In *The Holy Bible* eating catfish is forbidden as it should be “an abomination unto” Christians, because a catfish has no “fins and scales” (Leviticus.11. 9-12). However, the author recalls “[he] was fond of captured catfish, fried and dripping with ketchup,...” and that they had “a cook who served them often” (116). This cook happens to be Lucy Joy, the woman who took Capote to Reverend Snow’s sermon. Accordingly, eating Catfish, on the one hand, seems to deny the effect of shock he had during his baptism; and on the other hand, it affirms it by bringing to surface capote’s counter-biblical practices as a reaction to that memory.

Relating his first religious memory with shock, is further intensified through his description of Reverend Snow, who was a white man whose “audience was segregated” and who had a “dominant-voice” and “simian arms [that] reached for [him]” and made the narrator feel “vomit in [his] throat” (118). Surprisingly, it is the image of the Reverend that caused the narrator to experience disgust during his shocking Christening, while the religiously forbidden catfish that the Bible condemns as an abomination appears to be of enjoyment to him. Yet both abomination and shock for the narrator seem to be intensified as a grown-up, while recalling this memory and as he draws on the image of the cook Lucy Joy.

The latter, like all blacks, “seemed to live from Sunday to Sunday” while singing in the “choir of some pineywoods church” (116-117). Unlike her name suggests, Lucy Joy, whom Capote describes as the least “joyous” woman he had ever met, seems to mirror the state of a whole black race discriminated against in Capote’s southern community, and deprived of being accredited appropriate prayer zones, demolishing by that, their rights to equally enjoy religious salvation and spiritual fulfillment (Capote 116).

But “... Lucy had figured it out that the only way she would be welcome was if she brought along a little white boy to be baptized” in order to attend Reverend Snow’s sermons, Capote adds (117). Thus, the fact that Lucy is “hefty black,” is a determinant of the state of a whole victimized race enduring racial discrimination by whites during the 1930s in the American South, coinciding with the same period when the author-narrator-reporter’s memory took place—at the age of five.

Besides, the very last name of Reverend Joe Snow is an emphasis on his representative aspect of white man’s burden of ruling over other races to civilize them. It is thus, such a tyrannous claim of duty that Capote denounces and pictures as culturally and religiously meaningless through Cook Lucy’s act of serving fish, and as evil and shocking through the figure of Reverend Snow (117).

Hence, Capote’s implied symbolic representation of the paradoxical nature of his community where craving for religion and claiming religiousness are opposed by irreligious beliefs in the supremacy of whites over blacks, implies Capote’s proclamation of being fed paradoxical cultural and religious morals to which he counteract, as delineated through recalling his enjoyable habit of eating catfish.

Thus, through his childhood memory of baptism, which seems to underlie fictional dimensions, Capote seems to belittle the religiousness of the event to maybe praise, instead, its figurative connotation that summons up the first baptism of Jesus, symbolizing his divine
acquisition of a prophetic religious mission. Hence, the memory of baptism seems to denote Capote’s acquisition of a mission, the value of which is not religious but rather artistic.

Just like his pictured baptism in the story, Capote’s first experiences with writing started when he was eight; and were “out of the blue” as he states in the preface of *Music for Chameleons* (xi). A Christ-like artistic figure, Capote alludes to his artistic mission through his career as a novelist, playwright, screenwriter, nonfiction writer, and actor; which he describes as “creative destiny” (xiii). The act of baptism is thus the symbol of Capote’s immersion into his own destiny of being an artist and most precisely a writer.

The idea of Capote’s prophetic mission of writing is further evidenced as he states that “… one day [he] started writing, not knowing that [he] had chained [him]self for life to a noble but merciless master” (xi). His master is symbolically his sacred gift of being a writer that he calls “the whip God gave [him].” It is this artistic whip that Capote uses to tame his literary and artistic knowledge in order to set what he defines as a new writing style (xviii).

Furthermore, Capote’s allusion to his artistic missionary role in *Handcarved Coffins* in particular, makes this short novel an endorsement of his decision to break the old normative generic classifications, as he affirms in his preface for *Music for Chameleons* that: “… [He] eventually developed a style,” and that “[He] had a framework into which [he] could assimilate everything [he] knew about writing” (xviii). Therefore, it is in the short novel under study that Capote simulates his artistic mission of jointing the separate borderlines of generic codes by assimilating them in one piece of writing. Capote’s purpose is thus, “to successfully combine within a single form… all he knows about every other form of writing” without being restricted to the norms of a definite literary genre, resulting in “insufficiently illuminated” writing (xvii). The missionary role that Capote accredits himself through assimilating genres is therefore, that of an artistic ‘Savior’ of literary writing from predetermined artistic divisions, through adapting styles in a literary text and orchestrating them into an artistic unity and wholeness.

Finally, the very title of the short novel seems to bare an equally symbolic significance that further enhances Capote’s artistic missionary role of generic assimilation, for the description of the symbol of death in the story as “Handcarved Coffins” and the choice of such phrase for the title are not randomly set.

In fact at a first glance, such a title can be read as an allusive hint to gothic fiction and thus consolidates this short novel as an arena of generic assimilation. However, the fact that these coffins, which are sent to victims to alarm them about their soon death, are carved by hand, determines Capote’s emphasis on the artistic value accredited to the image of these coffins, despite being a sign of death. Thus, if the title is to be symbolically deciphered, it would be read as “artistic death”, respectively referring to the artistry of carving by hand, and to coffins as symbols of multiple corpses implying the idea of death.

Hence, as Capote tends to denounce the traditional generic boundaries that separate genres, the title can be an allusive reference to the artistic death of generic literary borderlines that presets the separate normative generic classifications in terms of form and meaning.

Thus, the fact that such a death of generic limitations is accredited the feature of being artistic entails that it is art that announces their death, and consequently Capote’s tool to demolish generic borderlines, is the artistic amalgamation of literary codes that are assorted in *Handcarved Coffins* in order to establish the image of literature as a unified art that breaks free from the chains of generic classifications.

Generic assimilation is thus, Capote’s artistic mission to create an invasion of generic territories in order to write what he names in his preface to *Music for Chameleons*, “true art”
(xi). It is, then his realization of the fact he had never written “true art” that is “subtle but savage” that ignited his missionary role in *Handcarved Coffins* whose very title displays an artistic savagery that seems to delegate the author’s will to accomplish his role of writing literature as a unified whole—as “true art.”

**Conclusion**

Classified as nonfiction for its incorporation of codes of reportage, *Handcarved Coffins* underlies breaches of the tradition of nonfiction writing both through partly breaking the norms of new journalism, and through merging fictional and factual styles. Besides, breaching authorial detachment and adopting autodegetic narration, accredits the author the role of a narrator-reporter-protagonist engaged within his short novel. The latter forms a favorable ground for generic amalgamation, as the tool of intertextuality functions as a pivotal medium to spot the interrelatedness of *Handcarved Coffins* with its intertexts at both the level of form and content. Constitutive intertextuality thus, pictures the short novel as an arena of merged generic formats adapted in one text to denote the interrelatedness of literary genres and to reflect Capote’s intention of blurring the distinction between the factual and the imaginary.

Therefore, it is through the adaptation of stylistic tools of fiction into nonfiction through the prevalent use of symbolism and symbolic characterization, that Capote simulates his artistic missionary role of demolishing traditional generic limitations through assimilating genres as a determinant facet of “true art.” Hence, deciphered by means of symbolism, the paradoxical nature that generic assimilation might evoke in *Handcarved Coffins* at both levels of form and content, seems to be implicitly and artistically reflective of the paradoxical aspect of Capote’s community where antagonistic religious and cultural values prevail as targets of his implicit criticism. .
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Primary Source


Secondary source


Electronic sources

