

Close Study 4: 'A History of My Boy's Life' by Tex Smith – a biography written for the parole board of Kansas State Penitentiary

(a study on Perry and Capote's style) – pages 133-137

Feel free to type your responses!

Note: these different 'texts' that Capote includes, such as Hendricks's testimony, Don Cullivan's letter to Perry, Barbara's letter to Perry, Tex Smith's parole composition, Willie-Jay's analysis of Barbara's letter, etc. are ostensibly written by others, and so we must analyse them as if they are written by others.

*However, as Capote has chosen to include them, we can analyse them in terms of how Capote **uses them** to shape how the audience responds to them (in other words, how Capote positions readers to think and feel through what is said in the texts).*

As you read, consider: how is the text composed (made up/structured)? What is its literary qualities (its stylistic elements)? Can you detect the hand of Capote in any way?

*If it is through these other texts, seemingly written by others, that Capote most clearly reveals his own ideas (his views and concerns) – **then what are they?** What is Capote trying to communicate (VVCs) through these texts?*

1. Why has Tex Smith written this document/text/composition/biography?
2. How would you describe the writing style? (give some examples) And what does it tell us about Tex Smith?

Jake's musing: to what extent might the obvious lack of education of Perry's dad influence us to see Perry's motivations as a reaction against his father - e.g. Perry's intense desire to seem educated – to try to remember fancy words, etc. can be seen as an (un)conscious desire to not be like his father.

*Also consider the role of **family (theme)** in shaping who Perry becomes. The theme of **nature vs nurture** is explored through this composition, and the following text of Barbara's letter. To what extent is Perry shaped by his environment; to what extent is he innately who he is; to what extent should he be blamed; to what extent should he be understood?*

Please note: You may end up combining question 2 and 3 together if you wish – I don't mind, I kind of did – but I expect there to be many examples given – I wrote over 500 words for these two questions. There are lots of good quotes for Perry and for themes in this composition.

3. Considering what we know of who Perry becomes, and **using quotes**, write a summary of how Tex characterises his son.
4. Which specific things does Tex write (that Capote includes) that help to shape the person Perry becomes and the way we feel about Perry?
5. Pay special attention to the top half of page 136. Consider the picture of Perry that Capote gives through Tex, of a young man with enormous talent and skills, a sensitive young man with amazing potential who only needs to be treated correctly/fairly/with understanding in order to do amazing work – so many of his qualities are listed – and they all seem genuine; but Perry doesn't fit into 'the system' that starts with school and "books", and because of his upbringing, making it nearly impossible for him...

Is it Perry who failed the system, or the system that failed Perry?

What views, values or concerns might Capote be expressing in this part of the text? (see if you can come up with a few dot-points)

Extension: make a list of pros vs cons for Perry – in what ways as he let himself (and others) down vs ways that life & the system has let him down (could even make it a 3-way table of who is to blame: himself / the system / life... and then see if you can come to some kind of a conclusion as to how much you believe Perry is to blame for his part in the crimes in the novel...).

6. The First sentence after Tex's letter reads "The biography always set racing a stable of emotions – self-pity in the lead, love and hate running evenly at first, the latter ultimately pulling ahead."

What is your interpretation of this? Why do you think this letter, that Perry has read over 100 times, so important to him? Why does it encourage self-pity beyond anything (and does it, or is this just Capote suggesting something)? What is the significance of love and hate being so even before hate "ultimately" pulls ahead? What might this mean, or even foreshadow?

7. Please read the following notes & quotes – I have written them rather than asking you to do them as questions, so please read and pay attention.

feel free to copy paste them, or parts, into your own notes.

- In the following pages, Perry gives his own (auto)biography to complement the missing pieces in his father's, which Capote writes in his own words interspersed with quotes from Perry. **These pages are important in detailing how the system failed Perry and (potentially) led to the conditions that formed him into a criminal (theme/idea).**
- p138. We learn that in his early years, during his "**not unhappy existence**" with his family together travelling on the rodeo circuit, he had a very poor diet, and was sustained largely from "**mush and Hershey kisses and condensed milk**".

Note: this gives an alternative reason for Perry's wetting the bed – **“the sugar content... weakened my kidneys”** which led to poor bladder control.

*It is good to have **alternative** or **conflicting** evidence to show in your essays that there are different ways to interpret the text. In this case, his diet might also complement his psychological issues of abandonment leading to wetting the bed – we don't know.*

Another example could be his potential homosexuality – is he? Does his innate sensitive, feminine nature suggest such? Or, can his dedicated allegiance to Dick be explained by his own father-issues? We don't know, therefore, it is interpretable.

- 138-39: He repeatedly tries to leave his mother to find his father. Shows the importance of a father figure to him, and goes some way to explaining why he needs Dick.
- 139: His mistreatment from the nuns – beating him for wetting the bed led to his aversion to **“nuns... God... religion.”**
- 139: After the nuns he was sent to a shelter run by the Red Cross which was even worse. Here he had his head held underwater whenever he wet the bed **“held me under until I was blue. Nearly drowned”**, until he contracted pneumonia and was hospitalised for two months (fortunately the nurse was “found out” from this).
This is physical and psychological torture, and the trauma of this should not be underestimated. Was his sister Barbara subjected to such treatment? Is her assessment that she came from the same situation and survived a good enough reason to confidently assert that Perry is 100% responsible for his lot in life?
- p139: Another important bit of formative evidence of Perry's character can be found with the nurse comparing him to, and calling him a “nigger” – this goes some way to explaining his disdain for negroes and why he felt killing one “didn't count”.

Remember: for someone who was taught to be ashamed of his own heritage, it makes sense that he would latch on to any opportunity to elevate his own ethnic identity, in this case by thinking something like ‘well at least I'm not a nigger’...

- Page 140 details his relationship with his father as a teenager – seems like his dad tried to some extent but could/did not give Perry what he needed – love (but we also know that Perry is very defensive and quick to anger...).
- Theme: Perry's potential homosexuality
bottom of page 140-141 – Capote uses an extended quote from Perry to reveal that when he joined the marines he was constantly harassed “the queens on ship wouldn't leave me alone” (140).

He details how they would gang up on him (he was a small 16 year old) and we do not know to what extent they went with him. Then in the army there were similar issues – he believes he never got promoted because he “wouldn't roll over” – meaning he wouldn't let his sergeant sleep with him. (note: this is Perry's conjecture – what do you think – true or not?...)

He then finishes by admitting "Some queers I've really liked" and that his best friend (we assume Willie-Jay?) "turned out to be queer".

- 142: we learn Perry's beautiful penmanship comes from hard work (and a point to prove) – buying a book and practising until it was "same as in the book".
- He spent his time recuperating from his crash with an Indian family who took him in – and he spent a lot of time with their 4 kids. Could go some way to explaining why he is so against Dick's predilections for children.
- 143 has a huge fight with his dad and tries to choke his dad – who gets out of the hold and gets his gun and points and squeezes the trigger to shoot/kill his son – until realising he gun is unloaded.... Shows the intensity of their relationship!
- Theme: fate & destiny
144 his first crime of burglary " **'fate' in the form of 'bad company' asserted itself.**" – when he meets another guy called "Smith".

Perry does have a strong sense of fate/destiny – look for other examples.

Ask: does he use the idea of fate to alleviate his own sense of responsibility and guilt?

- This section leads up to his first major arrest, he writes to his dad and Barbara, which leads up to the next Close Study: Barbara's Letter.