

## SLOVENE REACTIONS TO TRUMAN CAPOTE'S WRITING

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### Abstract

The article focuses on Slovene reactions to Truman Capote's writing. It takes into consideration both his early and his later work. The former (as e. g. *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*) earned him recognition as a talented young author whose fame rested on stylistically accomplished short stories, while the latter (as e. g. *In Cold Blood*) praised him mainly as the father of the so-called "non-fiction" novel. It is somehow hard to believe that his openly acknowledged homosexuality still represents an intriguing enough theme for Slovene literary critics to comment on, and thus a very recent article on the subject is dealt with as well.

In Slovenia, Truman Capote's early writing (in the 1940s and the 1950s) did not receive a lot of critical attention, nor were his early works translated into Slovene. Nevertheless, a few articles and reviews can be found in Slovene magazines and newspapers, concentrating mainly on Capote's extraordinary style but at the same time expressing doubts whether this is a good enough point to sustain his career. It should be mentioned, however, that not only did the critics deal with his work, they also fancied writing about his vivid personal life marked by his openly acknowledged homosexuality.

Capote's first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948) and short stories compiled in the volume entitled *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* (1949) earned him recognition as a talented young author. His early work met with immediate critical reaction in the USA, while Slovene literary critics did not consider him too seriously and carefully. The works mentioned have not yet been translated into Slovene and have thus stayed unknown to the widest array of Slovene readers (and critics). There have been, however, a few enthusiasts and literary experts whose interest in American literature of the 1940s and 1950s was wide enough to include Capote's first novel and his short stories into their reviews as well. Janez Gradišnik, for example, spent quite some time describing the development of American literature of the 1940s and the 1950s. His analyses offer an insight into the writings of the young generation of American writers and Gradišnik discusses the ups and downs of their literary achievements, Truman Capote included.

The magazine *Novi svet* published the article "Pogled na ameriško literaturo v letu 1950" (A Look at the American Literature in 1950) where Gradišnik focuses on

the American literary scene in 1950, comments on various publications and gives mixed reviews. Truman Capote is mentioned because of the publication of his first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* which, according to Gradišnik's opinion, classifies him as one of America's finest writers of the time. Furthermore, he is seen as one of the most promising young American authors.

The young generation of American authors was put into the spotlight again in the article that appeared in the magazine *Nova obzorja* in 1958 under the title of "Sodobno svetovno pripovedništvo in naša prevajalska dejavnost" (Contemporary World Fiction and our Translating Activity). Here Gradišnik draws parallels between the changes in society and the way these young writers write, the differences being clearly visible not only in the choice of their style but also in the subject matter. These were not "časi hudih socialnih bojev, stavk, spopadov, gospodarske krize, ubožanj, samomorov in organiziranega nasilja, v katerih je pisal svoja močna socialno kritična dela John Steinbeck" (the times of great social unrest, strikes, conflicts, economic crisis, impoverishment, suicides and organized crime, when John Steinbeck wrote his powerful socially critical works) (Gradišnik 1958b: 226). Steinbeck, too, followed the changes in society – his novels became less complicated and a humorous note was added, which enabled the author to make the presentation of his protagonists more to the point. His heroes, consisting mostly of people living on the verge of society, were thus brought closer to the reading masses. It should be noted, however, that Steinbeck was one among many who opted for something new in order to attract the readers' attention and make the American readership less apathic and more involved.

Such were also the attempts of the young generation who, by using in their novels and/or short stories various themes of conflicts between different races and nationalities within the USA, sparked public interest in their work. Furthermore, they often resorted to describing their heroes' search for identity, most often their search to find themselves sexually. The theme of homosexuality appeared quite often, Gradišnik (in the same article) lists three authors dealing with this theme, namely Gore Vidal, Frederick Buechner and (of course) Truman Capote. His views are critical for he claims the authors in question got stuck "v nekakšnem skonstruiranem svetu, ki ga drži pokonci le rafiniranost njihovega sloga" (in some sort of artificially constructed world, sustained by the refinement of their style only) (Gradišnik 1958: 226). Furthermore he seems to know the answer as to why the Slovene translators have not yet reached out to their work and brought it closer to the Slovene public: the reason lies in the simple fact that underneath the works filled with metaphors and mysteries there is really not that much left. Supposedly the authors hide behind such characteristics as to avoid having to struggle with the cruel and unpleasant real world that surrounds not only the protagonists of their novels but themselves as well.

The article entitled "Ameriška 'ne-jezna' mlada generacija" (American "Un-angry" Young Generation) shows Gradišnik's views on the American literary scene compared to the one in Great Britain. No such movement as "Angry Young Men" appears in America. There is no need for it; namely, the American society of the 1950s thinks very highly of the artists, writers included. They are widely accepted and have their own position in the world – no contempt can be traced towards them and therefore an artist need not be "angry" with society.

Truman Capote, Gore Vidal and Frederick Buechner are once again put into the spotlight and mentioned as typical representatives of the young generation and Gradišnik once again salutes their style. In them he sees “nekaj izjemno nadarjenih mladih ljudi, ki so z dvajsetimi ali celo osemnajstimi leti v svojih prvencih kazali že slogovno mojstrstvo, kot ga težko doseže zrel pisatelj” (some exceptionally talented young people who at the age of twenty or even eighteen showed stylistic mastery in their first novel, not easily achieved even by an experienced writer) (Gradišnik 1958: 252). Unfortunately the rapid success of their first books seemed to have put these “Wunderkinder” to sleep and their mastery has (unfortunately) come to a standstill. Their future remains unknown even to the world of critics.

Vlado Habjan is another critic who critically evaluated recent American fiction in the newspaper *Primorski dnevnik*. While Gradišnik makes comparisons between American and British authors of the time, Habjan puts into perspective the authors of the so-called “Lost Generation” with the ones blossoming in the 1950s. In the article “Nekaj misli o sodobni ameriški književnosti” (Some Thoughts on Contemporary American Literature) he concludes that the former enjoy the fruits of their labor, “medtem ko se morajo mlajši še truditi, da bi dosegli pri kritikih in založnikih vsaj kanec razumevanja za svoje probleme in za svoj pisateljski način” (while the young authors still have to strive for success with critics and publishers to acquire at least a basic understanding of their problems and their way of writing) (Habjan 1951: 4). The article moves on to introduce a few young authors, whom “ameriška kritika po stari navadi odreja kvaliteto in jih naziva ‘nova izgubljena generacija’” (American criticism according to its usual practice diminishes their quality and calls them “The New Lost Generation”) (Habjan 1951: 4), but at the same time optimistically wonders which one of them is to become the new Steinbeck, Dreiser or Faulkner. Despite the fact that “ljubljenec prvih povojnih let ne more iz blestečih, a primeroma tesnih okov svojih zgodnjih pisateljskih uspehov” (the darling of the postwar years cannot escape the glamorous, yet appropriately tight chains of his early literary success) (Habjan 1951: 4) Truman Capote is mentioned as one of the possible candidates.

In the same year the unknown author of the article “Povojni roman v Ameriki” (Postwar Novel in America) – published in *Vestnik*, the daily regional newspaper for economy, politics and culture – critically evaluates the writings of the young generation and reproaches them for not having any ideas nor wish to change the world as such. The criticism is directed at their indifferent attitude towards the world and towards their obvious apathy. Truman Capote (similarly to his contemporaries Frederick Buechner and Speed Tamkin) avoids any contact with what is happening in the (outside) world and stays shut in a world of his own.

Capote’s writing is the focus of another article published in the magazine intended for the youth *Mladinska revija*. In it an unknown author (signed by his initials only) not only speculates on Capote’s career but also informs its readers about his vivid personal life. Prior to his career as a writer Capote took up several jobs in order to survive. His jack-of-all-trades jobs include: being a dancer on a ship, writing speeches for a local politician, reading the scripts to documentaries, trying his luck painting on glass and spending some time fortune telling.

A description of his (writing) career follows where a somewhat unusual comment stands out. Namely, Capote's snobbery seemed to pervade all his being so that he defied being called the author of the American South, claiming this had never done him honor whatsoever. The author of the article does not dwell on it but quickly moves on to summarize the novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, at the same time calling Capote "umetnik, ki se zaveda svojega poslanstva" (the artist who is aware of his mission) (Ocvirk 1950/1951: 500).

Such an artist is highly appreciated in France as well, which can be seen in an article "Truman Capote, novi ameriški pripovednik" (Truman Capote, the New American Story-teller) from the fortnightly review for intellectuals *Naši razgledi* where an unsigned author presents Truman Capote as a new writer from the United States whose quality has also been recognized in Europe. A French translation of his volume of short stories, originally titled *A Tree of Night and Other Stories*, turns out to be a success in Paris, enabling Capote to make his mark with the European literary circles. The critics agree that his writing differs considerably from that of Faulkner, Hemingway, Dos Passos and Steinbeck and have high expectations for his future work.

Another unknown author comments on the literary development in America in the 1950s. In "Študija o sodobni ameriški književnosti" (The Study on Contemporary American Literature) published in the review *Naši razgledi* he relies on Malcolm Cowley's study on contemporary American literature titled "The Literary Situation". One of the main tendencies of the time was the great variety of novel writing in which various types of novels appeared, one of the seven different types mentioned being also a novel whose main tendency is a keen interest in the protagonists' love life and their (typically teenage) problems, highlighted by strong melancholic feelings connected with the author's regular meditations on childhood and teenage years that have gone by too quickly. Capote's novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is given as a representative example. Furthermore, it is not only similar subject matter that binds these artists pertaining to this type of novel writing together – it is characteristic of them to live in isolation, appreciate a peaceful life and modesty. The critic suggests that these characteristics, however, do not hold true for Truman Capote, for he was one of the first true so-called celebrities who enjoyed most being in the spotlight, enjoying all the media attention he could get. He regularly appeared on covers of newspapers and magazines, may it be due to his open homosexuality, drug addiction or wild parties he held (to mention his notorious private life only, leaving his work in the background). His fame thus rested both on his career choices/moves and on his wild personal life.

The publishing company Obzorja in Maribor decided to dedicate a few of its books to the lively literary scene in postwar America. By 1955 two of the books belonging to the series "Naša doba v knjigi" (Our Time in a Book) had already been published. An unsigned author of "Zakaj ne rajši kar tam?" (Why Not Rather There?) published in the fortnightly review *Naši razgledi* critically evaluates both of these books – one dedicated to Italian literature, the other to American. The latter is reviewed and the critique is aimed at the editor who limited his choice to the publication of eight short stories only, thus leaving out many masterpieces that (according to the author of the article) should have appeared in the volume. Young authors were largely overlooked. Among the youngest, at least Truman Capote should have been included.

Here, too, emphasis was given to the all-important matter of style, being rich in symbolism and in the use of dark images.

The name of Truman Capote did not only appear in newspaper articles, it also enriched the theater bulletins of the Mestno gledališče (The Municipal Theater) and of the Slovensko narodno gledališče (The Slovene National Theater) commenting on the season's hottest premieres, naming both the Broadway and the Vienna's Volkstheater productions of *The Grass Harp* an instant success. The memorable production of the above-mentioned sentimentally poetical drama brings Capote closer to a new sort of public – the theatergoers, who make his name even more recognizable in the mid 1950s (for more details on the productions see “Kaj pa po svetu?” (“What About Around the World?”) and Langer's “Dunajska gledališka pisma” (Vienna's Theatrical Letters).

The early 1960s not only aroused curiosity about Capote's work within the scope of the printed medium but moved one step forward to bring it closer to the television world (and viewers). The article published in the main Slovene newspaper *Delo* from September 10<sup>th</sup> 1960 entitled “Naš podlistek” (Our Feuilleton) expresses the opinion of an unknown author, naming Capote a widely known American author with whom the Slovenes would like to be better acquainted. His award-winning short story “Miriam” has been a source of great fascination to a wide audience, owing to its depiction of the world of the subconscious. Due to its strong emotional value it has applied to the masses worldwide (Slovenes included) it played a crucial role when television producers decided to present “Miriam” in a show dedicated to culture – Slovene television aired it in September of the same year.

The author's early period did not have a strong impact within Slovenia. Nevertheless, his early literary achievements and a lively personal life caught some attention, which can be seen from the articles discussed above. It is mainly the young author's style that was greeted with gasps of admiration, while any career prospects for the future were carefully refrained from. Theater-related literature mentioned the successfully staged *Grass Harp*, while more recent authors elaborate on his sexual orientation (see Andrej Karoli's article discussed below). It should be pointed out, however, that his later work evoked a much stronger critical response in comparison to his early writings. The critics' enthusiasm about the novels *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood* can easily be seen through the sheer abundance of notes, remarks, articles and short comments.

Capote's short novels, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* being the most popular, strongly appealed to readers worldwide. In 1966 the novel was translated into Slovene by Maila Golob, thus bringing it to the attention of more readers. An unknown author of the article “Prave knjige za počitnice” (The Right Books for the Holidays) published in the newspaper *Delo* praises the novel and comments on its rightfully earned place in the Zenit collection as one of the fifty most beautifully written and artistically accomplished works of both foreign and Slovene literature. The great popularity of the book can be seen from the article published in one of the main Slovene newspapers *Ljubljanski dnevnik* (09. 09. 1965), where an unknown author gives numbers on the best-selling books in Ljubljana bookstores, where *Breakfast at Tiffany's* took second place (following Erich Maria Remarque's *A Time to Love and a Time to Die*). Further on, the

author comments on the literary situation in Slovenia and points to the often (too) high price of books, resulting in a steady decline of buying power: books sold are mainly those of high quality and/or the ones recommended by friends.

The article “Razočaranje Trumana Capota” (The Disappointment of Truman Capote) published in the regional newspaper *Večer* cannot overlook the critically much acclaimed movie with the talented Audrey Hepburn based on the equally popular Capote’s novel, but at the same time (as its title suggests) shows the dark side of “novel-treatment”. The theatre production of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* fell through and proved a costly failure. The musical comedy on Broadway appealed to practically no one – neither the critics nor the audience accepted it and therefore the play was not a part of Broadway repertory for long. Not only did the unsuccessful stage production leave a bad taste in the producers’ mouth but it also turned out to be a loss-making business. Rumor has it (according to the unknown author of the same article) that it sustained losses of no less than \$400,000.

The Broadway fiasco contrasts sharply with the international acclaim won by the movie shot in 1961, starring Audrey Hepburn. It proved a major commercial success, won public applause and many television reruns followed it. The viewers and the critics were swept off their feet, mainly due to the phenomenal above-mentioned leading actress – Audrey Hepburn (1928-1993) whose interpretation of the heroine Holly Gollightly masterfully brought to life her romantic and dreamy nature, parallel to her longing for freedom, accompanied by the simultaneous realization one cannot lead a fulfilling life without the company of others. The Slovene review, together with the praise for Hepburn’s glorious performance, is the main theme of the article entitled “Pogled na platno” (A Look at the Screen) published in the newspaper *Delo* in May 1965.

An article, written by an unknown author and published in previously mentioned *Naši razgledi* in 1963 does not focus on one individual Capote’s work but instead offers an insight into the author’s whole opus, ranging from the beginning to the mentioned year. The unknown author of “Mala kulturna panorama” (Little Cultural Panorama) emphasizes Capote’s use of a wide variety of styles as well as a number of themes he provides and thus divides his writing into many phases, also shown through the choice of Capote’s collected works. *Selected Writings of Truman Capote* incorporate early novelettes and short stories, as well as his more humorous work, commentaries and (last, but not least) his mature, stylistically more accomplished writings. The article is clearly a tribute to Capote’s mastery and great variety of styles. He obviously managed to find (and express) the best and the most heterogeneous he had to offer and aroused the readers’ enthusiasm for his novels. A survey, obtained from an unknown source and published in already mentioned *Nedeljski dnevnik* in “Nedeljski mini magazin” (Sunday Mini Magazine), summarizes Capote’s words: “Vsi ljudje imajo sposobnost delati ustvarjalno, samo mnogi med njimi tega sploh ne opazijo” (All people have the ability to be creative in their work, but many of them do not even notice this) (*Nedeljski dnevnik* 1970: 21). Without doubt, Capote did not have any problems with it – given the rich variety of his work, crowned by the publication of *In Cold Blood* that made him the father of the so-called non-fiction novel.

The latter was highly acclaimed by Adrijan Lah who was one of those Slovene critics who showed great interest in American literature. It is the 1960s and the early 1970s that are put in the forefront of his research. Lah's commentaries, reviews and articles thus often mention the name of Truman Capote. He praises highly Capote's novel *In Cold Blood* and in his article "Svet v knjigah" (The World in Books) published in the weekly newspaper *Nedeljski dnevnik* draws comparisons between this non-fiction work and J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. While commenting on William Styron's *Lie in the Darkness* in an article of the same title ("William Styron: *Lezi v temo*"), Lah once again describes Capote as one of the most significant American authors of the time, whose work had an impact in Slovenia as well.

The novel that exerted the strongest impact among (also our own Slovene) literary circles was undoubtedly *In Cold Blood* which was based on real-life facts about a brutal multiple murder that had taken place in Kansas. Its publication made a stir in America as well as in other parts of the world. The interest grew steadily even prior to the publication and Capote devoted six years of his life to a thorough investigation of the murders themselves. The novel was an instant success, it brought Capote fame and international recognition, not to mention financial success. Its morbid theme captivated readers and the novel soon became a bestseller, placing Capote on a pedestal and making him the father of the non-fiction novel.

The novel itself was first mentioned as early as in 1966 (the year of its publication). In the regional newspaper *Večer* an unknown author critically comments on the literary scene in New York and in the article "Kulturna panorama" (Cultural Panorama) declares Capote's non-fiction novel a bestseller: "Med nebeletrističnimi deli je na prvem mestu knjiga *Ohlajena kri* Trumana Capoteja" (Among the non-fiction work, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* ranks first) (*Večer* 1966: 9). Not only that, there is also a photo of the author included. The title of the novel, however, is translated very clumsily if not inaccurately as *Ohlajena kri*, which contrasts sharply with the original translation that appeared a year later by Maila Golob (Golob 1967). She opted for the title *Hladnokrvno*, under which the novel has been known to the Slovene readers ever since.

A lively response followed and the article "Hladnokrvno" (*In Cold Blood*) published in the 9<sup>th</sup> issue of the magazine mainly intended for librarians *Knjiga* (1967) introduces the novel as a horror story about a multiple murder. The unknown author also mentions Capote's attempt to make it as realistic as possible by constantly repeating how true-to-life it was – both, the characters and the scenes being taken from real life. The stress is also put on the fact that this kind of writing is something that had not existed before and many compliments are paid to Capote's mastery in his being able to combine the numerous police notes into a meaningful new whole, representing a literary masterpiece that is a source of fascination to a wide readership. The latter appears as the main topic of an article published in the June issue of the regional *Večer* (1967), the author unknown yet again.

Not only did the literary critics respond to Capote's *In Cold Blood*; the writer's active involvement in the murder case and his at times perilous collaboration (he was the assistant confessor to both the murderers) was crowned with great success – not only by the fact that the book immediately became a bestseller, but it was also filmed.

The film rights to his novel were soon paid to him and supposedly this earned Capote a real fortune, making him an even bigger celebrity than he had been anyway. Some critics accused him of being “worldly” – cf. “Mala kulturna panorama” (Little Cultural Panorama) from the January issue of *Naši razgledi* (1966). Financial profit was something many critics turned up their noses at. An unknown author of the article “Brooks hoče živčni zlom” (Brooks Wants a Nervous Breakdown) published in *Večer* in June 1967 states the numbers clearly: Capote allegedly received no less than half a million dollars for film rights and 33% awaited him from box office receipts. Not bad for a guy from Louisiana.

The shooting of the film shortly followed the publication of the novel. Richard Brooks, a well-known director who is still in the film business today, responded enthusiastically to the great challenge of making the film as realistic as possible, sticking to all the sordid details from the novel, shooting on locations in Kansas where the multiple murder actually took place. *In Cold Blood* is still considered one of the scariest in its genre, for it terrifies the viewers with its close-to-life scenes. The unknown author of the article “Brooks hoče živčni zlom” (Brooks wants a Nervous Breakdown) from *Večer* comments on the shooting, telling the readers a not very humorous anecdote of how a certain student suffered a nervous breakdown after a scene that obviously imitated facts a bit too precisely. The author moves on to give Capote’s rather brief and passing comment: “Če prikrijemo le majhno resnico, sploh nimamo niti najmanjše priložnosti, da bi reš prikazali resnico” (If we conceal the slightest truth, then we have no opportunities whatsoever to really reveal the truth) (*Večer* 1967: 13).

The film (together with its true-to-life story) left a lasting impact on Robert Blake, the male lead. Blake, whose popularity reached new heights after appearing in the infamous film, made another appearance on the covers of tabloid newspapers and television shows in 2002. Obviously he took his role of the murderer too seriously and transferred the filmed version into reality. As seen on television, he was arrested for murdering his ex-wife, Bonnie Lee Bakley, an actress and a model, and was committed for trial. Truman Capote could not have imagined such a development – not even in his wildest dreams. Be it as scary as it is, the truth remains (in my opinion) that even such unfortunate events bring the name of the artist to the forefront, keeping him interesting for masses and known to younger generations, too.

Capote’s popularity nowadays has (unfortunately) much more to do with his lifestyle than with his work. His overt homosexuality never ceases to amaze all sorts of critics and scholars, putting his name next to an array of other prominent 20<sup>th</sup>-century artists (see below). Being different is the main concern of Andrej Karoli’s very recent article that appeared in the daily *Dnevnik* in June of 2003 – his meditation on being different. The question of who is “normal” enough to judge it arises. Karoli hopes that there are many people, “ki se [jim] zdi, da drugačnost ni in ne sme biti problem, če si le pripravljen na debato in tudi kompromise” (who think that being different is not and cannot be a problem as long as you are ready for discussion and making compromises) (Karoli 2003: 16). He respects their rights and cherishes their individuality, at the same time providing a long list of famous artists whom he (and the public) appreciates despite their being different e. g. Hans Christian Andersen, Jack Kerouac, Oscar Wilde, Virginia Woolf, Giorgio Armani, Elton John, Frida Kahlo,



Freddy Mercury, Leonardo DaVinci, Peter Illyitch Tchaikovski and last, but not least, Truman Capote.

As already mentioned above, the artist's later work received a lot of critical attention – not only at home, but also worldwide (Slovenia included); *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood* being in the forefront. Slovene critics praised Capote as one of the finest American authors of the time, they had nothing but praise for his brilliant non-fiction work *In Cold Blood*. The book (as well as the film) was well received by the Slovene audience, and so was *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Both novels were translated into Slovene by Maila Golob (*Breakfast at Tiffany's* appeared in 1965 as *Zajtrk pri Tiffanyju*, while *In Cold Blood* was translated two years later and is known under the title *Hladnokrvno*). Nowadays Truman Capote is most often seen as an author of great skill, evolving from his stylistically accomplished early darker stories and novels to a widely accepted non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*. It is somehow hard to believe that his sexual life should still remain intriguing as well.

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Note: the article is based on the author's M. A. thesis, which was supervised by Professor Igor Maver.