I

Truman Capote once replied when asked about his ideas on the short story in the course of an interview:

‘When seriously explored, the short story seems to me the most difficult and disciplining form of prose writing extant. Whatever control and technique I have, I owe entirely to my training in this medium.’ (Cowley, p. 287)

If he had talked with candour and sincerity (because he had a notorious penchant for pretentiousness and manipulation of his own images), some part of the ‘control and technique’ the American author gleaned during his apprentice days could be inferred through scrutiny of his works in the genre of short fiction. Of all Capote’s stories, ‘A Christmas Memory’ occupies a special position, nearly the last in order of composition, almost the highest in critical acclaim, and arguably the most beloved by his fans and followers. Kenneth T. Reed asserts that ‘The most engaging of all Capote’s ventures into short fiction is A Christmas Memory, a blend of fiction and autobiography concentrating once more on the author’s remembered life in the South’ (p. 64). The celebrated story was first printed in the December issue of Mademoiselle magazine in 1956, reprinted in Breakfast at Tiffany’s: A Short Novel and Three Stories in 1958, and further reissued in The Selected Writings of Truman Capote in 1963 (the last edition is adopted for reference in this study with page numbers alone indicated parenthetically). It was nonetheless the Random House edition in solo book form, published in 1966 in the wake of Capote’s sensational semi-documentary novel In Cold Blood, that established the unfailing reputation of the story. The relatively recent edition of A Christmas Memory, comprised of the eponymous story and two more, ‘The Thanksgiving Visitor’ (originally 1967) and ‘One Christmas’ (1982), came out in 2007. The present study intends to delve into ‘A Christmas Memory’ primarily for appreciation of its intrinsic beauty and charms and secondarily for elucidation of Capote’s concept and crafts for storytelling.

The widely acknowledged reception of ‘A Christmas Memory’ as an autobiographical fiction will make it more than appropriate to provide some basic information about the author as a person and a professional writer even in an interpretative research. Truman Streckfus Pearson was born on
September 30, 1924, in New Orleans, Louisiana. His mother, Lillie Mae Faulk, was a former Miss Alabama and married a travelling salesman, Archulus Pearsons, at the tender age of sixteen. She was still seventeen when Capote was born and was divorced from her husband four years later. She decided to go to college and left her young son in the care of her old parents, who had adopted her when her own parents died. There was no direct blood kin around Capote during his infancy. He stayed with an elderly man and three elderly women in Monroeville, Alabama, until ten. One of the women was Miss Nanny Rumbley Faulk, who was called ‘Sook’ by Capote and became an important presence during his formative years. Even with the unconditional love, aid and friendship of this woman, Capote’s early life as a whole seems to have been harsh and bleak, accentuated by abandonment, separation and destitution. If it had not been for this old woman, the writer’s puberty and adolescence would have been painfully difficult and unbearable.

In 1935, Capote was sent to a series of schools in New York including St. Joseph Military Academy. By 1939, his mother married Joseph Garcia Capote, a Cuban businessman, who legally adopted her 16-year-old son. The Capote family then moved to Greenwich, Connecticut, where the son attended Greenwich High School. When they returned to New York City in 1942, he went to Franklin School and graduated in 1943. With a diploma from this high school, Capote’s formal education was finished. He went on to teach himself and work his way through the competitive world of journalism and publication. Much to his distress and consternation, his mother later killed herself in 1953. His adult life, like his childhood, was no stranger to loss of beloved people by way of separation and bereavement.

It is a well-known story that, a bizarrely precocious child, Capote discovered his calling at the early age of eleven and started to write stories with such vigour and devotion as is rarely seen in children of that age. He was indeed a prodigy, a wunderkind, of story making and stylistic writing. His career took off with ‘Miriam’ in 1945, merely a few years after his graduation from high school, and gained further momentum with Other Voices, Other Rooms in 1948. Breakfast at Tiffany’s in 1958 made Capote a popular writer, winning favorable reviews from various quarters of the literary world. His fame then reached the apex in 1966 with In Cold Blood, to which the author himself gave the contradictory or paradoxical name of a ‘nonfiction novel’. He can be classified as one of the few American writers who secure a double foothold in the urban, sophisticated ambience of New York and in the rural and traditional landscape of the South. In his private life, he was a self-proclaimed homosexual and hardly refrained from talking in a high-pitched voice and acting in an effeminate manner in public as during TV talk shows and interviews. Later in his career, after his success in the literary world and journalism, Capote began to indulge himself in an extravagant
lifestyle of high society. He recklessly flirted with social reputation, prestige and affluence and partied wildly with an a menagerie of celebrities. In due course, he grew dependent on drugs and alcohol and eventually died from liver cancer at the relatively young age of 59 in Los Angeles on August 25, 1984. His mostly illustrious, partly scandalous life was turned into a movie posthumously in 2005. (For Capote’s biographical data, see Garson, pp. 1-12, Reed, pp. 18-33, and Wikipedia.)

II

There is little doubt that ‘A Christmas Memory’ is an autobiographical piece of fiction and that Capote had an extremely hard, brutal time as a child. It would then be inevitable that the story should rest by and large on dismal topics and pathetic episodes which might be deemed less appetizing for the general public. The quick inventory of its major parts and components might sound as disheartened as follows. Topographically, it is rooted in an undesignated obscure place in the countryside of the South. Its human resources, pared down to a minimum, are all derived from marginal and down-trodden denizens of society as is to be discussed later in detail. Its theme hinges precariously on the prosaic friendship between a little boy and one of his distant and much older cousins, a friendship which is doomed at its inception at best to be short-lived and not to go far and wide. The Great Depression looms ominously in the background against which the joint life of the principal characters is cast. The only invigorating factor may be provided by that familiar euphoria that grows steadily crescent as the festive season approaches and reaches the climax on Christmas Day. Capote deploys this hotchpotch of factors and ingredients to his advantage and spins out an indelible, heart-warming vignette which instantly revives the old familiar Christmas memories preserved in anyone’s heart. The first clue to how the author achieves the tour-de-force can be discerned at the outset of the story where a significant portion of his artistic design and purport is laid open.

The first paragraph, which strikes the keynote of the whole story and defines the contour of the thematic issue, makes two things clear, the author’s approach to storytelling and his tone of narration. The two imperative sentences, led by ‘Imagine’ and ‘Consider’ respectively, sound more like an invitation than a command, more like a beckoning than an instruction:

Imagine a morning in late November. A coming of winter morning more than twenty years ago. Consider the kitchen of a spreading old house in a country town. (48)

The conventional mode of starting a fiction is discarded and replaced by the unique style of direct addressing in the imperative mood. The tense can, as a corollary, be none other than the present,
which infuses the story with a robust illusory sense of spontaneity and directness. The action unfolds as if occurring perennially before the reader's eyes and erodes its own limits as a fiction with a penetrating sense of reality and even déjà vu. The latter sense leads, and more often misleads, the reader into a hallucinatory assumption that he may himself have experienced in the past what is verbally chronicled and more often visually conjured up in the narrative. The narrator, whose identity is yet unknown at this stage, solicits anonymous readers to join him in the imaginary venture of traversing time and space and trekking through an evergreen land of childhood which never grows old or brownish for him. The guide is convinced that the sleepy idyllic life which is still vividly retained and adored in his memory twenty years later is worth his while to tell about and the visitors' while to visit and live through as their own.

This mode of opening allows the narrator swiftly to formulate a psychological link, even a spiritual bond, with the readers via a channel of 'shared' experiences and memories. The liaison is somewhat akin to what binds the two principal characters in the story: Buddy and the old woman find themselves 'wallowing in the pleasures of conspiracy' (5) by counting the money they have assiduously garnered out of their meagre incomes and stored in a secret place. The analogy once again serves to blur the boundary between reality and fiction and reinforce the emotional involvement of the readers with the fictional characters. Besides, the readers are inadvertently lured into a complicity with the writer, since the feeling of sharing something personal and autobiographical transmutes them not only into close sympathizers of the author-narrator's feelings and view of the world but also into more active collaborators in his narrative rendition and designs. What counts most in the experience of reading an autobiographical story is after all the intimacy and mutual trust as of accomplices between author and reader. On the other hand, the readers would hardly agree to this temporary and impromptu partnership for nothing: they greedily expect to be entertained in the process and rewarded at the end of their joint stint with a profound 'spiritual purgation' or 'aesthetic catharsis', which 'A Christmas Memory' seldom fails in delivering abundantly.

In the meantime, the author is aware, for one thing, that the recollection of his own early life is basically irrelevant and possibly uninspiring to most of his readers since it is in its intrinsic nature no more than a minutia of experiences that pertain only to himself. For another thing, the contents of his reminiscences are embarrassingly humdrum and devoid of artistic appeal to the world outside his own. These fundamental flaws and shortcomings of his raw material are counterpoised by his high-flying, declaratory style of narration at the opening and his subsequent adoption of a comical tone in his narrative voice. Capote seems to be shrewdly aware that it is the manner of
telling that makes or mars a fiction and also that a clownish style of delivery alone could convert a material of essentially pitiable loneliness, impoverishment and separation into something readable and entertaining. Presumably in this sense, Mark Schorer, comparing the two types of stories by Capote in his ‘Introduction’ to Selected Writings of Truman Capote, maintains that ‘Violence gives way here to pathos, even sentiment, and melodrama to comedy’ (p. x). While ‘A Christmas Memory’ is rife with insinuations of dismal isolation and destitution, no direct mention is made of separation or death until the final section: comedy holds back the onset of a tragic emotion up to the denouement and suddenly releases it into a poignant burst. The episodes of miseries and failures, of sorrows and heartaches, are primarily overpowered by the scenes and dialogues that potently demonstrate the bond of love and devotion between the boy and the old woman. They are otherwise camouflaged with a high dose of humour and comical application of common wisdom and knowledge and refashioned into a series of uplifting, hilarious incidents. The narrator’s voice never grows too serious or pessimistic before it abruptly glides into a confessional mode at the very end. As a result, ‘A Christmas Memory’ successfully sheds off most if not all of its inherent bathos and mawkish elements and steers its plot within a permissible range of sentimentality and melodrama, although the playwright Tennessee Williams’ acerbic verdict on it as ‘saccharine, overly sentimental, or even repulsive’ is well worth listening to (Brazil, ‘Critical Overview’). Moreover, it is finely tuned into an enjoyable, moving piece of fiction that delineates a lot more than domestic chores and routines conducted during the festive season in the early part of the twentieth century. That ‘lot’ poses itself to the readers as a formidable target of elucidation and appreciation.

Still, the greatest of the feasible setbacks harboured in the constituents of ‘A Christmas Memory’ might be detected in casting. The narrative is extremely short-supplied in terms of manpower: there are only two principal characters and one animal. The narrator is the author himself, who looks back on one specific year when he was a seven-year-old boy left in the care of his distant relatives for an unspecified reason: he is a virtual orphan whose parents are neither seen nor mentioned, whose background or circumstance is never elaborated. The haziness of his personal information conduces to the lucid focusing of the action and description on his love and friendship with the old woman. And she is the other character, his sixty-something cousin, who is physically disabled as is clearly stated in ‘her shoulders are pitifully hunched’ (148) and perhaps also handicapped to some extent in mental capacities as is implied in ‘She is still a child’ (149). A real child and a childlike elderly woman thus take the centre stage of the story and carry the plot on their fragile shoulders, one undeveloped and the other disfigured.

The narrator remains nameless but is nicknamed ‘Buddy’ by the old woman after her childhood
friend. This seemingly harmless recycling of the appellation actually evokes piercing memories of loss and separation, which are later to be reverberated more emphatically upon the departure of the boy, for the original Buddy died a long time ago in 1880's when he was still a child. The second Buddy and the old woman take care of each other and additionally of an orange and white rat terrier named Queenie. Or, it might be the other way around, and the canine companion guards and solaces the neglected boy and the useless, old spinster-kitchenmaid to the top of her capacity. Another character who needs to be referred to here is Haha Jones, a giant Indian bootlegger, who runs an ill-famed café near the river. The unavoidable visit by the pair to this infamous man’s store for a bottle of whisky during the Prohibition Era raises the trepidations of their hearts and Queenie’s as well. It turns out, however, that the giant is ‘a lovely man’ who well deserves ‘an extra cup of raisins in his cake’ (153, emphasis in the original). The discovery of the feared man’s humanity contributes saliently to the permeation of a good will that fills the closed but close-knit world of the boy and his cousin. As individuals, all these persons are nobodies who barely subsist in the periphery of their community, all but ignored and far removed from anything gorgeous and privileged. Equipped with this shabby cast of social misfits and castaways bundled with a scruffy pet dog, ‘A Christmas Memory’ attains an artistic sea-change and proudly occupies the other end of the aesthetic and conceptual spectrum of storytelling from Breakfast at Tiffany’s.

III

‘A Christmas Memory’ opens with a brisk and ringing announcement by the old woman of the arrival of a new season and closes in a subdued mood with reference to her demise. Despite the stark contrast in tone and sentiment, however, the opening anticipates the ending, and the finale harks back to the beginning. Scattered in between are multiple streaks of recollections which are integrated towards the end into a restored panorama of episodes and allusions, especially catchwords and key-actions. The old woman’s annual proclamation of ‘Oh my, it’s fruitcake weather!’ (148), installed at both ends of the story, spans the whole sentimental journey of Buddy from bliss to despair, from innocent childhood to sceptical young adulthood. When it is repeated in an inaudible echo at the end, his cousin lies in her bed even though it is not the thirteenth of the month. Her joint seasonal production of fruitcakes with the boy at the beginning turns into her single endeavour when he is placed at a new home and a new school somewhere else against his wishes. Implicit in the transition is the pungency of their mutual sadness. For the old woman, who owns no control or power even over her own uncertain existence, this specific incident might be felt all the more tormenting since she is totally excluded from the process of decision-making about
the boy’s welfare, education and future. As a matter of fact, she senses all passively and helplessly that separation ever hangs low over her friendship with Buddy. Child as she remains, time creeps in on her, lays hold of her and eventually confounds her pristine soul by thrusting to her the dreadful reality of Buddy’s steady growth out of childhood. It is with fear and awe, as if for something sacred, mysterious and unavoidable like fate, that she comes to acknowledge an ostensible physical change over her friend: ‘Seems like your hand used to be so much smaller’ (159). From that moment onwards, it is merely a matter of time that she is to be deprived of her Buddy for the second time, this time with a far greater impact that will sap strength and sprightliness from her declining physique and mind.

The main bulk of the plot is made up of a series of small episodes which trace the annual routine work and activities carried out by the odd pair before and during the festive season. Picking nuts, counting money, shopping for fruitcake ingredients, baking and sending fruitcakes, cutting and decorating a tree – these obligatory chores in preparation for Christmas demonstrate how simple life once was in the rural areas of old America. The contemporary reader might feel a kind of culture shock by seeing in ‘A Christmas Memory’ that sharing and giving are still in practice, that people mingle and communicate even with total strangers like a priest on a lecture tour, a bus driver, and motorists who happen to pass by. Notice that the pecan trees whose nuts Buddy and his friend handpick belong to someone else, that the right of common is still alive to allow a community member to go into the mountain and bring home any tree he likes. In either case, there remains a slight likelihood that Buddy and his cousin may commit the crime of trespassing on someone else’s property. What is still felt astonishing is the fact that no one comes forward pointing a finger of accusation against them. Something more than mere nostalgia is poised in Capote’s touches of illustration, something like conviction in human goodness or subdued but profound love for others, especially for the weak and poor. Each episode is endowed with certain independence and highlighted by a small crisis whose solution often precipitates the next episode. The addition of a portion of comic relief in each anecdote serves to credit the entire story with buoyancy and vivacity befitting for a Christmas story. A smile, and occasionally a laugh, might be induced by mention of ‘the Fun and Freak Museum’, the old woman’s bravery in tossing a penny out of the window, and of course the encounter with Haha Jones. In collaboration with humour is the clear contrast between the familiarity of the seasonal events and the particularity of the way the main characters handle them. Buddy and his friend, sketched with a distinct individuality, perform the dual role of Everyone and their own selves.

The last section is slightly separated from the preceding bulk by additional space and the critical
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The one-liner ‘This is our last Christmas together’ (160). The ending is doubly charged with an emotional adieu to the past and a resigned departure for a new life. The end of something generally marks the beginning of something else; a new step forward is often prompted by a loss of something that is dear and indispensable in life. But, at the end of ‘A Christmas Memory’, the narrator feels a far greater sorrow for the days gone by and life denied than a hope for the bright opportunities newly burgeoning. He neither displays interest in nor appears grateful to what has been arranged by ‘Those who Know Best’ (160). Buddy and the old woman, the only companion to each other in the entire world, are now separated and displaced, never to see each other again. The boy’s heart flies back, or wishes to fly back, to that ‘sprawling old house’ (148) he shared with his elderly cousin, the only place he can call by the name of ‘home’. He gives vent to his wretched feeling by means of the simplified, stoically subdued expression of ‘Home is where my friend is, and there I never go’ (161).

The rest of the story is what the narrator hears, perceives and imagines but never sees or experiences at first hand. For him, adversity, never lulled into a single misery, aggrandizes itself into a monstrous mass of woes and heartaches after the separation from the old woman. First arrives the news sent by her of the accidental death of Queenie, whose burial at the site where she used to hide her bones is a painful reminder of the joyful time spent together by the three. The canine companion’s death locates the trio in all different places of hopeless distance from each other. A passing allusion to the buggy follows, eliciting the same bitter-sweet effect of envisaging the gleeful past and endorsing the grim present. A ‘dime’, which used to enable the boy to watch a motion picture, still arrives enclosed in an envelope albeit he is now a young adult. The message of this episode is double-pronged, showing how eccentric, how much out of touch with the real world the old woman is, and, more significantly, how pure and how true she ever is. Another of the key-expressions comprehensible only to the boy and his cousin is ‘Buddy, the wind is blowing’ (160). It serves as the cue to kite-flying and paves the way to the ending scene. When the two Buddies become indistinguishable in the old woman’s failing and fading memory, her breath no longer smokes the windowpane of the kitchen with the cheerful utterance of ‘Oh my, it’s fruitcake weather!’ even as November is on the wane and December around the corner. Neither is ‘Buddy, the wind is blowing’ directly recapitulated at the time of her death. This ‘battle cry’ is reenacted visually instead for a special effect.

It is intriguing that the word ‘death’ is seen nowhere in the final section. The narrator intentionally holds it in check and, in its place, employs an oblique expression or a piece of euphemism which cushions the pangs of his own heart: ‘And when that happens, I know it’ (161,
emphasis added). But, in a story which is designed to come to an end with death, he cannot utterly evade the ominous word or what it embodies. To solve this crux, the narrator executes the unavoidable task of ushering death into the plot prior to the final section. The main bulk of the story that precedes the separated piece at the end is concluded by the narrator’s description of the sunny afternoon on the last Christmas spent together with his cousin. Lying on the grass next to Buddy and watching the kites swimming in the sky, the old woman suddenly realizes how the end of life occurs to a person: ‘… just what they’ve always seen, was seeing Him’ (160). Her awakening to the new vision of death, a luminous, blissful death, eliminates the spookiness that she has felt scared of all the time before. She goes as far as to say ‘As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes’ (160), which once and for all prepares her spiritually for the ultimate event that is to happen to her sooner or later. With this readiness of the mind that newly dawns on the old woman, ‘A Christmas Memory’ prepares itself beforehand for the closure of its narrative life.

And ‘that’ takes place finally. It reaches Buddy in the form of ‘a message’ from home, but he has no need of it. He already apprehends the most dreaded thing intuitively through such a mysterious feeling of pain and loss as is displayed in ‘… severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself’ (161). The distress breaks his heart and leaves him somewhat tongue-tied. The narrator chooses to let one memorable image finish his tale curtly rather than saying it all and explicitly, the image of a pair of kites adrift in the winter sky. The early preparation delivers the intended effect here and modifies what could be an uncontrollably tragic, sentimental moment into a serene, highly personalized ritual of farewell. Alone and out in the campus of his new school on a December morning, the narrator braces himself to bid adieu to the ‘irreplaceable part’ of himself. Winter is the season of ‘giving’ for him and his friend: the time has finally come for him to give away what defines him. His scathing sense of solitude finds expression not in his words but in the direction of his sight. The act of looking up and far high mirrors his attempt to restrain the overwhelming emotion. A lonely, abandoned child at the beginning of the story, Buddy is left feeling still lonelier and more forgotten when his story is terminated. He no longer has a true home to go back to or a genuine friend to write his comments on the motion pictures to. Also lost are his days of happy, innocent childhood protected by the dedicated love and care of his cousin. While she remained a child and died as a child, bonded indissolubly with her first Buddy who died as a child, the second Buddy is a soul of child trapped inside a body close to maturity. The supremacy of his spirit over his body surrenders him to a pull backward to childhood rather than forward to adulthood that is about to beset him. The closing phrase, ‘a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven’ (161), insinuates that Buddy’s heart is bent on accompanying the departing soul. What lingers in the
aftertaste is a bitter misgiving on how his solitary soul, now without the adamant comradeship or absolute spiritual support of his cousin, his only friend, will confront the unkind world crammed with those who know too well.

Works Cited

Text:

Critical Commentaries:


