Marji Dzenko

*Here is another essay written for Principles of Style, where we had to research an author with a distinctive style, read several of pieces, analyze these works, and then write about what is characteristic of their writing. I chose to write my paper on Truman Capote, and in finding a chronological anthology of his essays I decided to analyze how his style changed throughout his career. This exemplifies my skills in analysis of more creative works and my understanding of specific aspects of style.*

The Development and Refinement of Truman Capote’s Style

 Truman Capote was a Southern Gothic author, whose career spanned from his 20s until he passed away at age 59. Throughout his writing career, he wrote a rich collection of observational essays. This essay analyzes what elements characterize Capote’s style repeatedly throughout his career as well as how his style became refined from his young adulthood to his later years. I chose the essays “New York”, “Lola”, and “Dazzle” from 1946, 1964, and 1979, respectively, for this essay to represent the beginning, middle, and end of his career. By finding and comparing the changes and consistencies in the stylistic choices made in each essay, what is “true” or typical of the author is revealed as well as what was gained or lost through maturity and experience.

 When a writer first begins their career, they may write in a way so as to appeal to the audience more, instead of in their own personal style. This would be so that they can sell their work and get a foot in the door in the business. They may write more collegiately and sophisticated, so as to sound impressive and create a first impression with the audience that they are educated, well-versed, skilled, and talented. This is evident in Capote’s writing; in “New York” the highlights of the piece are the rich imagery and other figurative language. By the time he wrote “Dazzle” it seems that Capote has come into more of his own casual, relaxed style with use of dialogue and colloquialisms. He shifts from creating immersive, sensory scenes to telling entertaining anecdotes.

 Although some components of his style changed over his career, Capote retained several elements throughout. These include alliteration, asyndeton, similes, and repetition. This suggests that these elements are true of or classic Capote. Although he used these stylistic choices throughout his career, he developed and changed his usage of them. Overall Capote often incorporated themes of myth and magic as well as writing about his many travels.

Other elements became more present over Capote’s career such as his use of humor, and inclusion of interesting, colorful characters. He uses these sparingly at first, but then by his later years it is clear that it is something characteristic of his writing that he was able to foster as he matured, and his career grew. Overall his style shifted from creating graphic sceneries for the reader to immerse themselves into to anecdotal essays of personalities he encountered.

 Alliteration is a stylistic choice that is heavily used from Capote’s early work to his last pieces. This creates a poetic quality, especially when read aloud, which lends to the underlying theme of magic and mysticism in most his essays. In “New York” he uses short alliterative phrases such as “perilous peak” and “dreamy and detached,” whereas in “Lola” he expands this to phrases like “services with a song sung in the most bull-like of baritones (housewives hurried!)” and “skidded down the six flights of slippery stone stairs” (11; 246; 254). This also shows his more humorous quality of writing emerging, as the almost excessive alliteration is fun to read.

 Similarly, Capote also frequently used phrases with a word and then a variation of the word, as a stylized form of repetition. This is seen in “New York” when he calls his friends “the talented untalented” and “artists without art,” (11). He later uses it in “Lola” and “Dazzle”, but with a subtler effect such as “rosy cheeks; rosier lips,” “in an…uncomplaining fashion, complained of it constantly,” “her round Irish face with its round full-moon eyes,” (246; 247; 412). This shows him moving away from his dactylic descriptions to a more natural narrative style as he matured and refined his personal writing.

 Capote uses plenty of similes in all of his essays, which aids his characteristic of rich descriptions. This remains a constant throughout all his pieces, as in “New York” when he describes the city as “floating in river water like a diamond iceberg” or on a hot day where “the heat closed in like a hand over a murder victim’s mouth,” “the steaming willow-limp stretches of Central Park were like a battlefield where many have fallen: rows of exhausted casualties lay crumpled in the dead-still shade,” and “hot weather opens the skull of a city, exposing its white brain and its central nerves, which sizzle like the inside of an electric-light bulb” (10; 14). These are all very abstract and dramatic compared to the similes he used in “Lola” and “Dazzle” such as “kept it locked in there like a mad relative,” “its black beak agape like the jaws of an idiot,” “laughter that sounded like vomit smells” (247; 420). These similes are also more comical than the melodramatic ones in “New York” again showing the transition to a more humorous style.

 His prolific description is furthered by the use of imagery. This is seen in “New York” when he uses phrases like “his large, spectacular appearance and roaring, giggling monologues, gives even the dreariest occasions a bubbling glamour,” “to be glamorous, to be a story-book creature,” “the grayest of folks are coated with legend-making glitter” (13). He uses vivid words to create specific images in an abstract way. While in his later essays he still creates some imagery, it is not to the extent as seen in his early work, as he is focusing more on recounting a story instead of setting a scene. However, he provides striking portraits of his characters, as they are move the stories along instead of recalling random memories from a visit as he does in “New York”. For example, in “Lola” he provides details about characters to further enrich the characters and engross the audience in the story, without straight out saying their personality. For example, Luchino is described as “a slim-waisted waiter with oily, curly hair and a film-star profile. He spoke a little English, a little German; he wore green suede shoes and drove his own Vespa” (250). From this one gets the impression of a sleek, suave guy, without Capote directly stating that. This is also seen in “Dazzle” when describing Skeeter: “unlike Mrs. Ferguson, his emerald eyes were not dumb comic-strip dots, but narrow and mean, weapons, bullets threateningly aimed and primed to explode…He was natty, dressed like the adult sharp-guy hoodlums who lounged around the waterfront hangouts” (416). Again, Capote does not tell the reader what a person is like, but rather shows them and provides enough descriptive information for one to make an inference.

Another change is seen in the first and last sentences of the essays. The opening sentence of “New York” being lengthy and eloquent: “It is a myth, the city, the rooms and windows, the steam-spitting streets; for anyone, everyone, a different myth, an idol-head with traffic-light eyes winking a tender green, a cynical red” (10). The final sentence of this essay is “But mostly they were lies I told; it wasn’t my fault, I couldn’t remember, because it was as though I’d been to one of those supernatural castles visited by characters in legends: once away, you do not remember, all that is left is the ghostly echo of haunting wonder” (16). He stretches out these sentences with the use of asyndeton and expressive adjectives. “Lola” begins with a sentence that is brief and grabs the reader’s attention, unlike the moodiness seen in “New York”. It starts with, “Yes, it seemed in every respect a curious gift,” leading the reader to wonder what this curious gift may be (246). Capote ends the essay with several short sentences: “I told him, ‘She thought she was something else.’ He frowned. ‘A dog.’ The frown thickened. ‘She’s gone.’ That he understood. He bowed his head. We both did,” (255). This ties in with how Capote was focusing more on characters, as he finishes the story with a dialogue between him and a mute instead of the mystical ending as seen in “New York”. Again, “Dazzle” begins with a short first sentence: “She fascinated me,” like “Lola” leaving the reader to ask questions like who fascinated him and why (412). He ends “Dazzle more similarly to “New York” in that it’s a longer sentence with asyndeton; however, the focus is still on a character. He writes, “Her laughter, her fury, the swinging, spinning yellow stone: spindazzledazzle” (421). Although, the way that this is read is almost like several short sentences due to the commas between only a word or two.

Asyndeton was in each of the essays and remained constant in its purpose throughout Capote’s career to create a sense of strong emotion or chaos. An example of it in “New York” is when he is describing how a retired swimmer who was “forced upon the beach like a half-dead shark, returned to hear not the mermaids singing, but curses, catcalls, police whistles” (13). This shows the intensity and shock of all the horrible sounds going on when the old man resurfaced. In “Lola” he uses it to show how Graziella was exhausted by all the work she had to do due to her new engagement: “she had her fiancé’s socks to mend, laundry to do (and such a lot of it!), not to mention the hours she spent preparing a trousseau, embroidering underwear, fitting a wedding veil” (251). This both tires the reader to read all at once as well as giving the effect that the list of chores could go on and on. Another strong emotion, desire, is shown in “Dazzle” when Capote describes how a laundress/witch employed by the local ladies “sent for her for other reasons as well: to obtain desires—a new lover, a certain marriage for a daughter, the death of a husband’s mistress, a codicil to a mother’s will, an invitation to be Queen of Comus, grandest of the Mardi Gras galas,” (413).

Somerset Maugham once called Capote “’a stylist of the first quality’,” and this is proven to be true through his variety of stylistic choices and his skill of using them (n.p.). Capote began his career with talent and a sophisticated, poetic way of writing, but later brought out his own qualities of humor and character-driven storylines, all while continuing, but developing and refining, his early style. He became more relaxed with his language, from creating moody scenes to approachable stories, but maintained themes of magic throughout. From the middle to the end of his career not much changed, but they are both different than the beginning, when Capote could have been either trying to find his own style or writing to try to appeal to the public. Either way, Capote became one of the most highly regarded American authors of the 20th century, and this is most likely due to his ability to write with a distinct, proficient, and captivating style.

Capote, Truman. *Portraits and Observations: The Essays of Truman Capote*. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.