

---

# The Crisis of the *American Dream* in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*

Lorena-Florina Turcuș<sup>1</sup>

---

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the *American Dream*, both as a philosophical concept and as a mindset that provided strength and hope to post-World War II American generations. While many aspired to achieve success through their own efforts, Truman Capote, in his first non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*, deconstructs this myth by depicting the tragic story of the Clutter family, a symbol of the *American Dream*, whose fate ends in a dramatic and senseless manner. The article examines the ways in which the *American Dream* is reflected in American society, analyzing whether it is truly attainable or merely an illusion by correlating real-life observations with the events presented in *In Cold Blood*.

**Key words:** crisis, American Dream, postwar America, society

## Introduction

20<sup>th</sup>-century America was a land of contrasts, marked by the fear of communism, discrimination, post-war trauma, and civic tensions, alongside a period of economic and demographic growth. In this context, people were guided by an ideal that kept their hope alive – the *American Dream*, the promise that anyone could achieve success through their own efforts, as long as they worked hard enough, and that the rewards of this labor would not be long in coming. Yet, this dream was never entirely real; rather, it was a sweet illusion for those who clung to hope above all else, in order to avoid existential crises, dilemmas about their role in life, or social inequality.

Truman Capote's nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1966) presents this crisis of the dream from the very title. What dreams can ordinary people still have in a community where its most respected members

---

<sup>1</sup> University of Oradea, Romania

(the embodiment of the American Dream) were senselessly murdered? Attempting to confront this collective trauma, this article will examine in turn the factors that led people to believe in the American Dream, as well as its opposite – the elements that contradict it, what happens in the real world, and whether this dream can truly be *dreamed* by everyone.

Before starting a thorough analysis, both in theory and on how the concept of the *American Dream* is put into practice, it is essential to explain the relevance it has in the book, which will be analyzed in the following lines. In the novel *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote uses the *American Dream* to juxtapose the Clutter family, an epitome of success achieved through hard and diligent work, with Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, who illustrate human decay and the effects of marginalization and social segregation. Clutters are a symbol of the fulfilled, realized, and idealized *American Dream*, while the killers symbolize the failure of the *American Dream*, the frustration and resentment of a ruined life caused by the profound impact of social and economic inequality. The author exposes the discrepancy between the materialized *American Dream* myth, which leads the way for others to continue to aspire to it, and the painful reality of systemic inequalities that limit equal access to its victims to achieving their goals. One can also approach the question this way: the Clutter family achieved the *American Dream*, but what good did it do them? At what cost? How did it help them in the face of death? Isn't their fate even more tragic from this perspective?

## **1. What exactly is the *American Dream*?**

The *American Dream* can be understood as a symbolic concept that has not only shaped but continues to define the national ideals of the United States, as well as the aspirations of American citizens who either continue to pursue or have abandoned this ideal. America has long been thought of as the land of endless possibilities, where anyone can improve their life. The only thing they need to do is to work hard, to be self-determined, and to trust the limitless opportunities this country offers since its colonial origins. This idea is deeply rooted in the American culture and preserves the aspirations of people who dream of a brighter future on this land, considered as being blessed. The *American Dream*, however, is not a reality that applies to everyone, even though it is something everybody wants to hear and believe.

How might the *American Dream* be defined? The term itself is almost philosophical, as it speaks, as the name suggests, of a dream –

an abstract, intangible concept that eludes direct measurement. Therefore, the challenge arises: How do we measure it? Or, more critically for this paper, how do we define it? In essence, the *American Dream* embodies the notion that success and prosperity are attainable by anyone, regardless of their social standing or financial background, through hard work, determination, and individual abilities. To consider that anyone, regardless of their origins, can achieve a better life, is an ideal that transcends social, ethnic, and economic barriers. In the explanation of this dream, freedom and equality are regarded as fundamental principles and values that facilitate access to opportunities for everyone. This term was coined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his groundbreaking book, *The Epic of America*. Here, he portrays the *American Dream* not as an individual goal, but as a collective contribution to human progress and people's well-being from America to the entire world. Even though there were numerous threats to subvert it, this ideal has become an intrinsic part of the American national consciousness:

that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank which is the greatest contribution we have as yet made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of the ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming and dispelling it. Possibly the greatest of these struggles lies just ahead of us at this present time — not a struggle of revolutionists against established order, but of the ordinary man to hold fast to those rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' which were vouchsafed to us in the past in vision and on parchment. (Adams 8)

Although it was first defined by James Truslow Adams, Harmon Leon (7) also offers a charming explanation of the *American Dream* in a playful manner:

When I was a child, my active imagination told me that the American Dream was to become a doctor who drove a garbage truck [...] Ask a room full of any other seven-year-olds, and if they'd each have a completely different take on the question. Just imagine if all those children's American Dreams had been fulfilled; we could have a world made up entirely of ballerinas, superheroes and rappers. (7)

This *American Dream* is embodied by the Clutter family, with Herbert Clutter, as the head of the household, serving as the breadwinner and

the one who has naturally attained this ideal. Capote meticulously crafts Herbert's character from the very first pages, establishing an immediate connection with the reader and evoking a sense of compassion, the same force that has inspired generations to believe in the American Dream and sympathize with those who have achieved it. "The master of River Valley Farm, Herbert William Clutter, was forty-eight years old, and as a result of a recent medical examination for an insurance policy, knew himself to be in first-rate condition." (Capote 5) By portraying the Clutters as ordinary, relatable people, Capote provides readers with the hope that they too might succeed, should those around them succeed: "He was, however, the community's most widely known citizen, prominent both there and in Garden City, the close-by county seat, where he had headed the building committee for the newly completed First Methodist Church." (5)

In his portrait, Capote goes beyond physical or superficial description (how others saw him or how he appeared in the eyes of the community), offering instead a moral portrait and an account of his life achievements – all of which reflect not only Mr. Clutter's confidence and success, but also how he had achieved the *American Dream*: "Always certain of what he wanted from the world, Mr. Clutter had in large measure obtained it." (6) Thus, we learn that he is a self-made man, respected by the community and very secure financially and socially. What more could one want? Here, Capote anticipates one of the themes he will explore in the book: whether the *American Dream* truly exists or is merely an illusion, what it means for different people, and whether everyone has an equal chance of fulfilling it.

In contrast to her husband, Bonnie Clutter is presented as a fragile woman with precarious health, suffering from depression. Capote, however, presents her with delicacy, in a way that does not judge but rather gives the 'Angel in the House' a sense of depth and humanity through the suffering she endures:

In regard to his family, Mr. Clutter had just one serious cause for disquiet – his wife's health. She was 'nervous,' she suffered 'little spells' – such were the sheltering expressions used by those close to her. Not that the truth concerning 'poor Bonnie's afflictions' was in the least a secret; everyone knew she had been an on-and-off psychiatric patient the last half-dozen years. (6)

As a seemingly perfect family that embodies the fulfilled *American Dream* in every aspect (financial, social, and personal), the Clutters also have two children, a girl and a boy: Nancy and Kenyon are portrayed in the same affectionate manner. Nancy, in particular, stands

out as lively, hardworking, an excellent student, and adored by the community:

Where she found the time, and still managed to ‘practically run that big house’ and be a straight-A student, the president of her class, a leader in the 4-H program and the Young Methodists League, a skilled rider, an excellent musician (piano, clarinet), an annual winner at the county fair (pastry, preserves, needlework, flower arrangement) – how a girl not yet seventeen could haul such a wagonload, and do so without ‘brag’ with, rather, merely a radiant jauntiness, was an enigma the community pondered, and solved by saying, ‘She’s got character. Gets it from her old man.’ (17)

This method of detailed characterization serves a clear, intentional purpose. Capote successfully constructs a vivid portrait of the Clutter family so that, later, their murder is perceived not merely as a sad event, but as a personal loss. We are not simply told they were good and decent people – the writer brings us into their intimate family life, presenting their daily routines and relationships (for example, Nancy’s relationship with Bobby Rupp, one of the school’s basketball stars, seen by the community as classic high school sweethearts). Through this writing technique, Capote moves beyond a purely journalistic presentation of these real events and turns them into an emotional narrative for the reader. This quality of Capote’s writing style in his novel is also discussed by Harold Bloom and Blake Hobby in their book *Death and Dying*: “Capote purports *In Cold Blood* to be a work of nonfiction; all the principals were real people and the events presented happened. But he also claims for the book the status of a novel, a literary form traditionally understood as fictional.” (106)

## **2. How did the American Dream emerge?**

This desire to achieve the American Dream did not arise in ordinary people by chance. From Cal Jillson’s book, *The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction*, we learn that the *American Dream* was primarily instilled in them by the political class throughout history:

Political leaders, and social and economic elites more generally, all and always praise the American Dream. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and many others have lauded the singular promise of American life. (9)

They used this tactic to energize their voters and restore hope to their lives:

Political leaders, especially in great national campaigns, and while in office, make stirring speeches intended to pluck at our collective heartstrings. They recall our national triumphs, and they promise that America's best days lie ahead. (Jillson 10)

However, from the same book (9-10), we learn that the *American Dream* also became a dream for those who were not necessarily American, but had a dream:

The American Dream, the right to rise unfettered, urged wave after wave of immigrants and each new generation of Americans to the effort, innovation, and entrepreneurship that cumulated over time to national wealth and power. Leaders know that citizens will applaud praise of the American Dream, so they regularly offer it in hope of basking in that applause themselves. (Jillson 9-10)

In this category of people (those who had to restore hope in their lives and/or who were not *pure-blood* Americans) fall the other main characters of the novel, without whom neither the plot nor the book itself would exist: the murderers Perry Smith (of mixed ancestry – Dutch and Shoshone, or alternatively Irish–Cherokee) and Dick Hickock. Even though racial issues are not the primary obstacle in this book, they still frequently appear as a recurring concern in the discourse surrounding the *American Dream* throughout history.

Capote proves himself a keen psychologist, presenting the future killers in relation to their immediate reality and society, thereby logically linking the toxic environment in which they lived to the people they became, raising again the question of whether the *American Dream* is truly attainable for everyone. In *In Cold Blood*, we see that they have no way of believing in this dream; as a result, they attempt to deceive both those around them and life itself: living day by day, stealing, and committing crimes.

### **3. The *American Dream* through the eyes of Capote's murderers**

While both killers are introduced with a cause-effect background (each having suffered physical accidents that may have influenced their paths), Perry is seen by the narrator as a man tormented by dreams, a

misunderstood artist who failed to become what he once aspired to due to the complicated life he led (he still carries his guitar with him):

[...] took control completely when he played the guitar and sang. Singing, and the thought of doing so in front of an audience, was another mesmeric way of whittling hours. He always used the same mental scenery – a night club in Las Vegas, which happened to be his home town. It was an elegant room filled with celebrities excitedly focused on the sensational new star rendering his famous, backed-by violins version of ‘I’ll Be Seeing You’ and encoring with his latest self-composed ballad. (Capote 15)

His disillusionment with the *American Dream* is seen: being a failure himself, Perry is no longer able to feel joy for those who succeed; he does not consider that maybe they were lucky or worked tirelessly to achieve their goals. Instead, he becomes bitter and accusatory, convinced that life is unfair and that others must have succeeded through dishonest means.

This sympathy for the murder suspect is viewed critically by Lars Ole Sauerberg in his book *Fact into Fiction: Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel*, where he raises the issue that Capote’s book cannot present an absolute truth, since the author becomes personally involved in shaping and shading that truth according to his own preferences:

It is fairly obvious that we have to do with different kinds of truth. As a document to be used in court, the book certainly has its shortcomings, since the general tone evinces a degree of sympathy for the murderer Perry, stemming from Capote’s conviction that Perry was socially and psychologically ‘predestined’ for violent crime. (21)

In contrast to Perry, Dick is portrayed as the mastermind, more cerebral, cynical, and manipulative than his partner in crime:

Of course, Dick was very literal-minded, very – he had no understanding of music, poetry – and yet when you got right down to it, Dick’s literalness, his pragmatic approach to every subject, was the primary reason Perry had been attracted to him, for it made Dick seem, compared to himself, so authentically tough, invulnerable, ‘totally masculine’. (Capote 16)

#### 4. The motive behind the crime

In the post-war era, particularly during the 1950s, the *American Dream* became closely linked to an idealized vision of suburban life, characterized by a private home with a garden, a traditional family structure, and stable employment. Richard Reeves discusses this notion in his book, *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It*:

The American dream is not about superwealth or celebrity. The American dream is of a decent home in a pleasant neighborhood, good schools for our kids, a steadily rising income, and enough money put aside for an enjoyable retirement. It is about sustaining a strong family and seeing your children off to a good college. (15)

These elements were perpetuated in popular culture through movies and advertisements, which transformed the *American Dream* into a standard to which millions of people aspired. These examples, considered attractive and possible to obtain for the vast majority of Americans, strengthened the optimistic conviction that success and personal achievements are rewards that will not be delayed after hard and diligent work. Thus, it promotes the idea that anyone, without exception, can imagine and realize their own version of the *American dream*, a concept also pointed out by Jim Cullen (5) in his book, *The American Dream*:

Actually, American Dream has long since moved beyond the relatively musty domain of print culture into the incandescent glow of the mass media, where it is enshrined as our national motto. Jubilant athletes declaim it following championship games. Aspiring politicians invoke it as the basis of their candidacies. Otherwise sober businessmen cite achieving it as the ultimate goal of their enterprises. The term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like 'democracy', 'Constitution', or even 'the United States'. (5)

The Clutter family possessed all of this: they were wealthy and owned their farm, which is precisely why Dick and Perry chose them as their target. Although the reader discovers that their intention was not initially to kill them, but to steal their money (from a safe they could not find), they ultimately murdered them to avoid being caught.

Therefore, to be or not to be the *American Dream* a reality? If



one chooses to believe that it is, then it is accepted that it was born from every individual's desire to believe they can succeed if they are willing to work hard enough to fulfill their dreams. The *American Dream* embodies an optimistic perspective where the major challenges of life are seen as personal hurdles that can be surmounted through determination and diligent effort, with the ultimate aim being to become a self-made man. As Richard Weiss notes in his book *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale*, Benjamin Franklin was the first example for Americans to embody this ideal: "Though the phrase 'self-made man' did not become current in American folk culture till some decades after Franklin's death, he – the boy of modest circumstances who grew up to share the company of kings – became its first archetype." (29)

Nevertheless, this idyllic view does not take into account the inequalities existing for ages in American society, thus excluding the problematic face of this myth. A fundamental aspect of the *American Dream* is the fact that it implies a boundless social mobility, with the help of which all individuals have equal chances to achieve the long-awaited success, with no exceptions or obstacles to achieving it. But the reality is different, because American social mobility is far more limited than the *American Dream* can make us believe. Although many Americans still believe that their success depends solely on their abilities and efforts, economic mobility remains relatively low. Children who come from poorer families have much lower chances of reaching a higher financial level than those who were born into wealthy families. This indicates that economic and social barriers have a stronger impact than the myth allows to be understood, and this view is illustrated by Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, who deconstructs the fundamentals of the *American Dream* in his study, *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*:

the American dream – has always been a cherished American ideal. But data now show that this is a myth: America has become the advanced country not only with the highest level of inequality, but one of those with the least equality of opportunity. (4)

He addresses the tangible realities on the ground, focusing on the lives of young American dreamers and their actual opportunities to become everything they aspire to in real life:

The life prospects of a young American are more dependent on the income and education of his parents than in other developed

countries. We have betrayed a fundamental value. And the result is that we are wasting a most valuable resource, our human resources: millions of those at the bottom are not able to live up to their potential. (Stiglitz 4)

This is exemplified in *In Cold Blood* through the Clutter family's killers, who had unequal opportunities compared to Herbert, Bonnie, Nancy, and Kenyon. Perry and Dick represent *the failure of the American Dream*. Perry is far from a simple or flat character; Capote portrays him as a tragic product of the traumas he endured throughout his life, such as family abuse, poverty, broken family ties, and the dubious influence of his prison acquaintance, Willie-Jay. He never had a real chance at success. He dreams of becoming educated, wealthy, and respected, yet his troubled past prevents him from achieving these goals. His story illustrates how social and economic barriers can render the American Dream unattainable for some, with his anger and resentment stemming from a profound sense of being cheated by life.

Dick Hickock, in contrast, grew up in a stable, middle-class home. However, a car accident and subsequent financial struggles pushed him toward crime. He attempts to *cheat* his way into success through deception and robbery, embodying a distorted version of the *American Dream*, one in which people take what they want rather than earn it. Together, Perry and Dick demonstrate how the *American Dream* can fail those who are disadvantaged or desperate, highlighting the gap between ideal and reality.

## **5. The dark side of the *American Dream***

Is the *American Dream* an attainable goal for everyone or not? Despite its idealized narrative, the reality is far more complex. Let's face the truth – since we are not born into equal backgrounds, we cannot have equal chances of success. Economic and social inequalities in the USA frequently get in the way of the *American Dream* for those who are less fortunate, creating a large divide between those who succeed and those who fail. While the *American Dream* promises, in theory, opportunities for everyone, in practice, it often turns into a process of selection shaped by factors outside of anyone's control. This notion could be considered *the reverse of the American Dream*, as D. L. Mayfield describes in her aptly titled book, *The Myth of the American Dream*:

This myth is a double-edged sword. If the systems and structures that shape your world have worked for you, then you will believe this idea

[...] And if other people experience it differently – say, if they are unable to find a job that pays a living wage or get access to education or secure a loan to buy a house – then something must be wrong with them, not the system. (18)

In this framework, Capote examines the lives of the criminals, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, placing them within the context of poverty, different kinds of traumas, childhood abuse, vices and a lack of education. This is not just a presentation of their motives, but also a reflection on how society can influence individual decisions and how people can influence others' lives for better or worse. A similar interpretation of the darker side of the *American Dream* is explored by Lawrence R. Samuel in *The American Dream: A Cultural History*:

The American Dream has hardly been just an everything-is-coming-up-roses-and-daffodils fantasy there to cheer us on and up, however, having a dark side just as powerful as its positive side. For each and every American Dream, there is an American nightmare, this evil twin always lurking in the shadows when the country is going through interesting times, as the Chinese curse goes. (9)

Samuel further clarifies the origins of this idea, exploring when and why it emerged: “In fact, the potential of the nightmare was frequently conjured up since the very beginnings of the Dream, not too surprising given that the phrase was conceived in the darkest days of the Depression.” (9)

This aspect of the nightmare is closely related to Capote's most haunting statement about his literary masterpiece. The author told his biographer, Gerald Clarke, that: “No one will ever know what *In Cold Blood* took out of me. [...] It scraped me right down to the marrow of my bones. It nearly killed me. I think, in a way, it did kill me.” (398) In *In Cold Blood*, Capote also famously referred to the murders as four shots fired, which did not merely kill four innocent souls, but marked the end of six lives in total: “At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them – four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives.” (5) These gunshots can be interpreted on several levels. Literally, they refer to the four blasts that killed the embodiment of *the American Dream*: the four members of the Clutter family: Herb, Bonnie, Nancy, and Kenyon. Yet the number of lives lost, according to Capote, is six. Where do the other two come from?

This aspect can also be interpreted from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, the other two lives could belong to the killers

themselves – Perry Smith and Richard Hickock – who shaped their own fate as a result of the crimes they committed. Those who kill will be killed in turn. On the other hand, the six lives that ended metaphorically could also include those of Truman Capote and his close friend, Harper Lee. Although they are not characters in the book, they were intrinsically linked to it. As mentioned earlier in this paper, Capote, deeply shaken by the senseless violence that struck the peaceful town of Holcomb, was somehow magnetically drawn to document the crime in the smallest detail. He was accompanied by Harper Lee throughout the investigation, and they both produced their own writings based on it.

## **6. The problematic facets of post-war American society**

### **6.1. Financial (in)equality**

One of the most evident obstacles leading to the crisis of the *American Dream* is economic inequality. This financial inequality can be seen as a possible trigger point for the criminals in *In Cold Blood*, especially for Perry, who suffered extensively in childhood due to poverty. No one resorts to theft simply because they have too much money. Moreover, even if Perry and Dick were employed, these types of individuals are aware that they would not be able to accumulate wealth, but only manage to get by from day to day. As a result, feelings of anger, frustration, despair, and social prejudice emerge, which can easily slide into criminal behavior.

While the American economy has experienced substantial growth in recent decades, most labor income has not increased correspondingly for many workers. For instance, why have salaries for much of the middle class stagnated or even decreased, while the incomes of the wealthiest have risen and continue to rise significantly? This economic polarization has created a significant divide between those who can afford to live comfortably and those who live in poverty.

Additionally, the high costs of education and housing have greatly diminished the ability of many Americans to achieve the *American Dream*. Perry suffered because he was unable to complete his education. The readers even discover that, despite his disability and lack of formal education, Perry was, in a way, a kind of teacher himself. As he recalls:

I was on crutches, I was pretty helpless. Just had to sit around. So to give me something to do, try to make myself useful, I started what became a sort of school. The pupils were Joe's kids,

along with some of their friends, and we held classes in the parlor. I was teaching harmonica and guitar. Drawing. And penmanship. Everybody always remarks what a beautiful handwriting I have. [...] Also, we used to read stories—the kids did, each one in turn, and I'd correct them as we went along. It was fun. I like kids. Little kids. And that was a nice time. But then the spring came. It hurt me to walk, but I could walk. (Capote 124)

Thus, can we really blame him (or people in general) for being formally uneducated? Are they at fault for their limited schooling, or is it the lack of financial resources that holds them back? This financial aspect is presented in detail by Robert D. Putnam (31) in his book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*: “The distribution of income and wealth among adults in today’s America [...] has generated much partisan debate during the past several years.” In the book, Putnam provides real examples of Americans who openly discuss their perceptions of the *American Dream*, highlighting its financial dimensions and the inherent differences taken for granted among different groups of people:

‘Most parents around here are Midwest parents who work for their money. It’s not like Beverly Hills and the Hamptons.’ [...] ‘You have to work if you want to get rich’ [...] ‘If my kids are going to be successful, I don’t think they should have to pay other people who are sitting around doing nothing for their success.’ (25)

The *American Dream* also promotes an extreme idea of self-reliance, suggesting that success is one hundred percent the result of individual effort, but this idea ignores reality. Many successful stories are influenced by social and economic factors such as education, networking, or family resources. For example, there are many successful people in America who have been fortunate enough to be born into rich families that have given them access to private schooling from the beginning, professional connections, or even financial support to launch their own businesses. Therefore, it is obvious why success is not just about hard work – it is often the result of other advantages which do not belong only to the person in question. This point is also explored by David Kamp in his study, *Rethinking the American Dream*:

‘Opportunity for each’ is promised, but within the bounds of each person’s ability; the reality is, some people will realize the American Dream more stupendously and significantly than others.

(For example, while President Obama is correct in saying ‘Only in America is my story possible’, this does not make it true that anyone in America can be the next Obama.) (4)

However, the novel reflects the idea that wealth itself represents nothing more than a shattered dream, since the Clutter family had everything financially and could offer their children a valuable education, yet these assets did not protect them from death. Ironically, the Clutters were killed by someone *beneath* their social level, thus once again illustrating that the distinction between social classes means nothing more than a human-made construct without any tangible foundation or real benefit. Indeed, the Clutter family could have afforded to improve their security, but as Capote writes in his novel the people of Holcomb, Kansas, were such a peaceful community that they could leave their doors unlocked without worry:

But afterward the townspeople, theretofore sufficiently unfearful of each other to seldom trouble to lock their doors, found fantasy recreating them over and again – those somber explosions that stimulated fires of mistrust in the glare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers. (5)

## **6.2. The quality of life**

Another aspect that undermines the *American Dream* as a reality is the US health system. Access to healthcare is highly unequal, with many Americans struggling to afford the high costs of health insurance and medical treatments. In a country where health is considered an essential factor to have a successful career and live a comfortable life, lack of access to adequate medical care can seriously affect the financial stability, well-being, and life expectancy of a family. There are many Americans who die because they do not have health insurance, or who would rather die than plunge their families into debt. In this context, the *American Dream* becomes an illusion for those who cannot afford health insurance or adequate treatments, as highlighted by Kant Patel and Mark Rushefsky (1980) in the specialized book, *Health Care in America: Separate and Unequal*:

The United States spends more money per capita on health care than any other country and has the best medical care, yet around 45 million people do not have health insurance. The United States remains the only industrialized country in the world without a national health insurance system.

Although the healthcare system itself is not the central plot of the novel, it is closely intertwined with it. Through the psychological cause-and-effect approach that Capote employs in depicting the events and characters of the story, it is important to note that Perry suffered a motorcycle accident that left his legs permanently impaired, causing him chronic pain and later leading to insecurities about his health and physical appearance, including his limp. Dick, in turn, was involved in a car accident, which did not affect his legs but did impact his head and face. While it is not explicitly stated whether he sustained lasting brain injuries, his facial features remained asymmetrical. This raises a theoretical and rhetorical question: did these health issues affect their quality of life and their image in society? The answer is certainly yes. Consequently, one may wonder: if these two men had had sufficient financial resources to receive proper medical care and recover fully from their accidents, would they still have carried the insecurities and complexes that plagued them throughout their lives? The truth is, we will never know.

This aspect serves as a transition to the next philosophical issue explored in the novel: accidents, beyond leaving physical sequelae, are also traumatic events. One cannot discuss the crime without considering the trauma it generates. Thus, *In Cold Blood* can be seen as a compendium of traumas, depending on the perspective from which it is examined. There is the personal trauma of the Clutter family, who were brutally murdered; Perry's trauma, stemming from his life experiences, childhood, misguided choices that led to unfulfilled dreams, and his accident; Dick's trauma, including his accident, divorces, and the consequences of his own life decisions; and Bobby Rupp's trauma, following the death of his high school sweetheart.

In addition to these individual experiences, there is also collective trauma: the relatives of the Clutter family, of the murderers' families (who could hardly believe that those they had known for so long, related by blood, their own kin, were capable of such an act. For example, Perry's sister and Dick's father, who was gravely ill when he learned of the crime and during the investigation and trial, experienced profound emotional shock), and the tight-knit community of Holcomb, who suffered an unimaginable shock and were forced to reconstruct an entirely different way of life after the events in their small town, burying their dead: "The four coffins, which quite filled the small, flower-crowded parlor, were to be sealed at the funeral services – very understandably, for despite the care taken with the appearance of the victims, the effect achieved was disquieting." (Capote 87)

Also, discrimination based on race, class, and gender continues to be a major barrier for many ethnical groups in reaching the *American Dream*, leading to various crises. The *American Dream* myth assumes that everyone has equal access to the same opportunities. But, in a country with a history of racial segregation and gender inequalities, this could not be further from the truth. Although the killers in the novel did not commit murder on the basis of race, the concept of race can still be acknowledged and identified through the most burdened character, Perry Smith. Being of mixed ancestry (Dutch, Indigenous, and/or Irish) this aspect became an additional weight for him, compounding the emotional baggage he carried throughout his daily life.

While there has been some progress in civil rights and gender equality compared to other historical times, inequality is still a harsh reality. People of color, especially African Americans and Hispanics, often face fewer opportunities to access quality education, secure high-paying jobs, and move up in their careers. Racial and gender discrimination continues to be a reality that hinders access to the economic opportunities promised by the *American Dream*, as discussed by Mark Robert Rank, Thomas A. Hirschl, and Kirk A. Foster in their study, *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes*:

Millions of Americans have been excluded throughout our history from meaningful participation in the American Dream. In particular, race, class, and gender have loomed large in terms of who has had greater or lesser access to viable opportunities. This side of America is represented by ongoing poverty, racism, sexism, and economic retrenchment. (3)

In addition, it is noted that one of the main characters belonged to the LGBTQ+ community, and the reader is left to determine whether this fact affected his life. This character is none other than Perry himself, who is portrayed in a more sympathetic light at multiple points throughout the chapter. Readers learn numerous details about Perry's biography, from his troubled childhood to his brief stint in the military (which, once again, emerges as another source of trauma) as well as revelations about his sexual orientation. Perry is depicted as queer, like the author himself.

Interestingly, Capote mentions this aspect of Perry only subtly, suggesting that other characteristics are far more central in defining him as a person. This technique is noteworthy, as it is uncharacteristic



of Capote. As Jeff Solomon observes in *So Famous and So Gay: The Fabulous Potency of Truman Capote and Gertrude Stein*, Perry's portrayal differs from other characters created by the same gay author: "Yet *In Cold Blood* is atypical of Capote's work in having a homosexual subtext rather than overt gay concerns. What are commonly called Capote's 'early' writings [...] frequently include overly homosexual characters and homosexual themes." (144)

## Conclusions

All in all, Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* shatters the reverie of the *American Dream*, confronting it with harsh reality. Although ordinary people have popularized this term and mindset as something to cling to for hope in life, the reality is entirely different. Yes, the Clutter family embodied the *American Dream*, but how did it help them? It did not protect them from death. The community was not more privileged because their neighbors had achieved the *American Dream*; on the contrary, they suffered even more: shocked by the tangible evidence of this dream's collapse and confronted with the despair and trauma that naturally follow the shattering of such an ideal. Perry and Dick, for whom the *American Dream* was denied, also prevented others from experiencing it. In this way, Capote holds up a true mirror to society, one worn down by trauma, burdens, social inequalities, worries, and needs, yet still hoping (perhaps naively) that through their own efforts they can achieve absolute success.

## Works cited

- ADAMS, J. T. *The Epic of America*. Little, Brown and Company, 1931.  
BLOOM, Harold, and Blake Hobby, editors. *Death and Dying*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009.  
CULLEN, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. Oxford University Press, 2003.  
CAPOTE, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. Penguin Random House UK, 2000.  
CLARKE, Gerald. *Capote: A Biography*. Simon & Schuster, 1988.  
HARMON, Leroy. *The American Dream: Walking in the Shoes of Carnies, Arms Dealers, Immigrant Dreamers, Pot Farmers, and Christian Believers*. Nation Books, 2008.  
JILLSON, Calvin. *The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction*. University Press of Kansas, 2016.  
KAMP, David. "Rethinking the American Dream." *Vanity Fair*, 2009.  
MAYFIELD, D. L. *The Myth of the American Dream: Reflections on*

*Affluence, Autonomy, Safety*. InterVarsity Press, 2020.

PATEL, Kant, and Mark Rushefsky. *Health Care in America: Separate and Unequal*. Routledge, 2015.

PUTNAM, Robert. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015.

RANK, Mark Robert, Thomas A. Hirschl, and Kirk A. Foster. *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

REEVES, Richard. *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It*. Brookings Institution Press, 2017.

SAMUEL, Lawrence R. *The American Dream: A Cultural History*. Syracuse University Press, 2012.

SAUERBERG, Lars Ole. *Fact into Fiction: Documentary Realism in the Contemporary Novel*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1991.

SOLOMON, Jeff. *So Famous and So Gay: The Fabulous Potency of Truman Capote and Gertrude Stein*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

STIGLITZ, Joseph E. *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

WEISS, Richard. *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale*. University of Illinois Press, 1988.