

AMBIGUITY AND AMBIVALENCE IN TRUMAN CAPOTE'S HOLLY GOLIGHTLY

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Abstract: Some critics consider Holly Golightly from Truman Capote's "Breakfast at Tiffany's" a plain, vulnerable, and frivolous character whose single aim in life is to find a 'home' by acting as a call girl for rich people; she feels the need to belong and, yet, not to be enchained at the same time. There are, still, other writers who believe that Holly is a woman ahead of her times, courageous and reluctant to conform to the gender roles of the post WWII era. The aim of this article is to highlight Holly's paradoxical and difficult to categorize character, her ambivalence and complexity. She is both male and female and represents the child-woman, both innocent and experienced, conventional and non-conventional, simple and sophisticated.

Keywords: ambiguity, ambivalence, belonging, independence, American Dream

Introduction

Contemporary identity relies on ambiguity and ambivalence. American literature, in particular, has always been, by nature, ambiguous and ambivalent. Writers always negotiate their identities in specific socio-cultural environments, times, and places. **Ambiguity** or duality is understood as a clash of opposing and irreconcilable forces and bipolar oppositions; it is about two opposite principles that cannot meet; ambiguity divides and, therefore, the character has to choose one between two. **Ambivalence**, on the other hand, uses the same two opposites, but, unlike the ambiguous pairs, they do not clash and divide, but complement and work together in order to create a balanced whole; it can be understood as the uncertainty and or inability of an individual to make a choice between two conflicting desires, or, in psychological terms, the coexistence of mixed and conflicting feelings and emotions.

The aim of this article is to prove the superiority of ambivalence that creates for Capote's characters an unclear and confusing space, which is also a lively space, where they can overcome their personal flaws and become better holistic and more complex human beings. Some critics consider that Holly Golightly from Truman Capote's "Breakfast at Tiffany's" is a plain, vulnerable, and frivolous character whose single aim in life is to find a 'home' by acting as a call girl for rich people; she feels the need to 'belong' and, yet, not to be enchained at the same time. There are, still, other writers who believe that Holly is a woman ahead of her times, courageous and reluctant to conform to the gender roles of the post WWII era. The aim of this article is to highlight Holly's paradoxical character, her ambivalence and complexity. She is difficult to categorize: she is both male and female; she also represents the child-woman, or the child-wife, both innocent and experienced, conventional and non-conventional, simple and sophisticated. Holly is "young and childlike, slight but attractive,

friendly and yet remote, her personality a touching mixture of innocence and sophistication.” (Garson 79). She is a ‘traveller’, who goes lightly through the world, and seeks love, identity, but also experience: “She has a great hunger to explore, to live each moment completely, to do and see everything” (79). Obviously, Holly is not anymore representative of the nineteenth century traditional American girl, passive, dependent and domestic.

The novella portrays the American fifties, which saw women’s vulnerability and loneliness - “I have no friends” (20) -, but also their free spirit and emotional strength – “He's [Fred, her brother] the only one would ever let me. Let me hug him on cold nights. I saw a place in Mexico. With horses. By the sea.” (18). Truman Capote’s heroine shows her vulnerability (naïve, lonely, depressed), but also her independence (party-goer, call girl, a wild creature). He introduces us to Holly Golightly, a wild creature, always traveling to escape belonging to her past, to her flat in NY, to her cat, or to any human being. The reader follows her travel through life, and highlights her commitment to independence and her refusal to conform to the gender roles of the post WWII era, although her circular ‘journey’ apparently highlights her conventional and dependent role in society; despite her stylish clothes, the critics highlight her insecurity, inadaptability, and self-destructiveness, making her an eternal lonely wanderer, despite her posh appearance.

Truman Capote’s novella (published in 1958) was adapted for the screen by Blake Edwards (1961), and the film version, starring Audrey Hepburn, has become even better known than Capote’s short novel. While Capote’s book focuses on independence and nonconformity, Edward’s film insists on the themes of romantic love and conventionality. This research refers only to the book, and not to the film.

The **story** is told by an unnamed narrator, a writer that once knew Holly when he lived in an old brownstone apartment building in New York, fifteen years ago, at the beginning of WWII. He receives a phone-call from Joe Bell, a bartender in New York, in whose bar he and Holly used to spend a lot of time; Joe shows the narrator a photo of an African carving that resembles Holly. The bartender also knew that the subject of the sculpture travelled with two men in Africa and stayed briefly with tribesmen before disappearing. The narrator’s return to New York makes him recall the times when he and Holly Golightly lived in that brownstone in Manhattan’s Upper East Side. He finds out that Holly (Lulamae Barnes, as a child) and her brother Fred were poor and orphans (their parents died of tuberculosis) and led a harsh existence in foster homes in Texas. When they ran away, they were taken in by Doc Golightly, a horse doctor; he was a kind man, whose wife had died and left him with children older than Holly. However, she was only fourteen when she accepted to marry Doc, who gave her and her brother a home, shelter and food. Although much older, Doc was a good man who loved Holly for what she was: a poor and orphan girl. Soon after marriage Holly flees alone from Texas to New York, missing the chance to be selected for a role in a film; she dreams of improving her social and material condition. She rents a flat in the brownstone where she meets the narrator (later nicknamed ‘Fred’ due to his resemblance to her brother), while she is using the fire escape to escape a drunk man she has brought home. This is the beginning of a solid friendship between Holly and “Fred”; he becomes her confessor as if she knew him long time ago. She tells him she acts as a call-girl who socializes with rich and old men to obtain material rewards and to upgrade her social status. She also tells him about her brother Fred who was in the army and died in the war, about her sleeping problems, about her weekly visits to a prisoner, Sally Tomato, etc. Due to her childhood problems, Holly is obsessed with the sense of caging, and not belonging to anybody (all are “rats”) and she runs away from love, from getting affectionate towards people and animals (she has a no-name cat), from places

(she has almost no furniture in her flat). However, when she meets José, the Brazilian diplomat, she feels another chance is given to her, and dreams of becoming a good wife and mother. While in hospital, due to a miscarriage, she is disillusioned again when “Fred” comes and reads José’s farewell letter to Holly. Her “first non-rat romance” ends; still, she decides to use her flight ticket to Brazil, although she is under criminal indictment, and she will never be able to return to USA: “Home is where you feel at home. I’m still looking.” (23)

Holly Golightly: Ambiguity and/or Ambivalence

From the very beginning of the story, the narrator introduces us to an ambiguous and chameleonic character: “ragbag colors of her *boy’s* hair, tawny streaks, strands of albino-blond and yellow... she wore a slim cool black dress, black sandals, a pearl choker. For all her chic thinness, she had an almost breakfast-cereal air of health, a soap and lemon cleanness, a rough pink darkening in the cheeks. Her mouse was large, her nose upturned. A pair of dark *glasses* blotted out her eyes. It was a face beyond *childhood*, yet this side of belonging to a *woman*. I thought her anywhere between *sixteen and thirty*; as it turned out, she was shy two months of her 19 birthday.” (3, italics mine). The dark glasses enhance Molly’s mystery and rouses our curiosity. She represents both the elegance of the fifties as well as an escape from social conventions. It was an age in America of both innocence and optimism before John Kennedy’s assassination; an age when gender roles and norms started to be redefined: the homosexual culture and the sexual revolution, for instance, involved the rejection of typical gender roles. Holy is both male and female. Although she asks the narrator for a list of “the fifty richest men in Brazil” (24), she admits her own bisexuality: “Of course people couldn’t help but think I must be a bit of a dyke myself. And of course I am. Everyone is: a bit.” (5)

Holly wants to fit this changing role for women: her unconventional style and behavior defines her as a *flapper* who rebels against conventional ideas of ladylike behavior and dress. She wears her hair short, fringed black and sleeveless dresses, smokes, drinks, and is a party-goer. A paradoxical character, she represents an experiment in modernization of femininity in relation to the historical and cultural context of the American revolutionary fifties and sixties. Golightly, the protagonist from “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”, although she is an escort for rich people in New York, is a childlike person who desires love and a permanent home. This sentimental yearning for security is a reflection of [Capote’s] troubled childhood” (“Truman Capote” 274). The same source mentions the fact that Capote’s parents were divorced from an early age, and because his mother remarried in New York, he had to live with elderly relatives which made him feel lonely, unhappy and with an severe sense of displacement.

Truman Capote, although a Southern American writer, lived for longer periods of time in Northern States as well as in Europe. In “Breakfast at Tiffany’s”, “the protagonist, although living in New York City, cannot escape her Southern origins.” (*Lectures* 252). Mercer states that the American literature of the South, in particular, “focuses on the importance of *the sense of belonging* seen from a psychological perspective as a basic human need. It refers to being part and accepted by family, community and society.” (*Repression* 11). In *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), D. H. Lawrence insists that “the *American Dream* was never about freedom, but was actually about *escape*: the Pilgrim Fathers did not set out for America for freedom of worship but for that most simple of motives. To get away” (cited in Mercer 10, italics mine). Leslie Fiedler, identifies the typical male protagonist of American fiction as “a man on the run” whose rebellion against the restrictions of civilization see him become a “pariah in flight” haunted at every step by “phantoms” ... The quest for

freedom undertaken by the American here is also an impossible *escape* from a haunting past” (cited in Mercer 10, italics mine).

We will translate D. H. Lawrence’s and Leslie Fiedler’s notions about the typical male protagonist and his sense of freedom, understood as escape from a haunting past and rebellion against social restrictions, to our female character, Holly Golightly.

Apparently, Holly appears as a lighthearted person who listens only to the heart, breaks the rules and does not really care about her future. She seems untamable, and in a continuous search for a place she would call ‘home’. Billy Joel, the bartender, characterizes her in simple words in the film version: “She’s always a woman to me”. Mysterious, alcoholic, seductive, whimsical, and almost always in the company of elder, rich men,” she refuses to be “caged”, considering herself a “wild thing”:

"Never love *a wild thing*, Mr. Bell," Holly advised him. "That was Doc's mistake. He was always lugging home wild things. A hawk with a hurt wing. One time it was a full-grown bobcat with a broken leg. But you can't give your heart to a wild thing: the more you do, the stronger they get. Until they're strong enough to run into the woods. Or fly into a tree. Then a taller tree. Then the sky. That 's how you'll end up, Mr. Bell. If you let yourself love a wild thing. You'll end up looking at the sky." (17, italics mine)

Wild, untamed, unknowable, she belongs to ‘nature’, innocent, pure, and mostly free. She belongs to no one, perpetually travelling, like the name-slot card of the mailbox the narrator notices: “Miss Holiday Golightly, Traveling” (4). She never gets used to anything, she is afraid of being encaged and she could not bear to see anything in a cage. This fear of belonging and of being encaged is a consequence of her unhappy childhood and teenage and her much too early marriage to Doc Golightly. However, she likes a birdcage she sees in a shop window and buys it for the narrator, making him promise he will never encage a “living thing in it” (14).

She is seen as superficial, described by O. J. Berman, the agent who saw in her a possible movie star, as a “real phony” (22), a woman who is not what she appears to be, but is convinced she is. She is an extraordinary liar when she needs things to turn to her own interests and needs. He calls her a “real phony”, because, he claims, “she believes all this crap she believes.” (7) He says, “My guess, nobody’s ever know where she came from. She’s such a goddamn liar, maybe she don’t know herself any more.” (7) She lies herself by pretending she has “loved” or at least tried to believe she has loved all the men who paid for her favors: “I can't get excited by a man until he's forty-two... I simply *trained* myself to like older men.” (4) It is all about training and getting used to act as a prostitute, although she rejects the idea: “I'll never get used to anything. Anybody that does, they might as well be dead.” (4)

Lies, in Garson’s view (79-89), protect her from getting too close to people or from getting into “the mean blues” (i.e. sadness, depression) whenever she remembers her sad childhood or “**the mean reds**” (i.e. fear): “the blues are because you're getting fat or maybe it's been raining too long. You're sad, that's all. But the mean reds are horrible. You're afraid and you sweat like hell, but you don't know what you're afraid of. Except something bad is going to happen, only you don't know what it is” (9). And when she feels that, she takes a taxi and goes to Tiffany’s, a famous high-end jewelry store in New York, which represents an ideal place and world for her. Thus ‘the mean reds’ refer to that feeling of getting afraid, yet

not knowing what you are afraid of; it is a bout of anxiety when you cannot face the facts and hence, run from yourself. Holly feels like she has lost herself and she does not know where she is hiding. This feeling of insecurity makes her both accept and reject love by hiding herself in a metaphorical **cage**; the narrator tells Holly about her false fear that somebody is going to stick her in a cage. In fact she is already in that cage, which she has built herself. For her, loving somebody, people belonging to each other, all mean the same thing: putting her in a cage. She needs love, because loving is also about belonging to each other, which is the only chance anybody has to be really happy. She dreams of living the life of a “wild thing” in a consumer culture, but happiness cannot be defined thorough her unconventional exploration of independence and sense of belonging. In her assumption she is a no-name slob, good-for-nothing, like her cat. It is inconvenient, but, still, she has no right to give him a name, because that would imply owning, and she is not entitled to own anything until she considers that people and things do not belong to each other. At the end, after losing the cat, she realizes: “O, Jesus God. We did belong to each other. He was mine.” (25)

But lies and appearances are deceiving. In fact she uses her current life as a defense mechanism, a way from running from herself. Her sense of insecurity, inadaptability and self-destructiveness, makes her a lonely wanderer through life and reject all the things or people that would hamper her independence: “We don’t belong to each other: he’s [the cat] an *independent*, and so I am. I don’t want to own anything until I know I’ve found the place where me and things belong together. I’m not sure where that is yet. But I know what is it like.... It’s like Tiffany’s.” (9)

Holly’s ambiguity and ambivalence is also visible in her character traits. Holly is a party-goer and enjoys life: “I’d rob a grave. I’d steal two-bits off a dead man’s eyes if I thought it would contribute to a day’s enjoyment.” (19). This negative and frivolous character is immediately counterbalanced by Holly’s positive side of personality: “... good things only happen to you if you’re *good*... *Honest* is more what I mean... Be anything but a *coward*, a *pretender*, an *emotional crook*, a *whore*: I’d rather have cancer than a *dishonest heart*. Which isn’t being *pious*. Just *practical*.” (19, italics mine). The narrator himself, unlike Berman, sees in Holly a “lopsided romantic” (i.e. uneven), someone “gluttonous” (i.e. greedy) for life, rather than a pretender, that is, a ‘phony’. She simply needs to maintain her apparent independence in order to survive in this cruel world, which is indifferent to her needs.

She is afraid to love and to belong, although her husband tried to convince her that happiness means to fall in love, and to belong to each other. In fact, the narrator discovers that Holly is not afraid of being put in a cage. She has built herself a cage for running into herself, wherever she goes, afraid to open up, to fall in love or to belong to somebody or to some place. She gives no name to her cat, admitting it is not hers, although she finds it near the river and takes it home; she hardly has any furniture in her room, ready to move any moment; she runs away from Doc, her husband, although she knows he is a good man who will take care of her, etc. The only reasons she thinks can melt these firm beliefs and make her feel secure, calm, and at ‘home’ relate to Tiffany and to José. Simply being close to them triggers a stronger sense of security and pleasure. They represent her **American Dreams** and would make her put an end to her quest for belonging. She has two favorite dreams: to have breakfast at Tiffany’s (a jewelry store) and to marry José, a Brazilian diplomat. Nothing bad would happen to her, were these two dreams to come to life; while she dreams of an ideal Tiffany-like life, where she feels secure and calm, happy, not sad, the only romance she lives with José makes her dream of getting married, and being a good wife and a mother.

Moreover, torn between her refusal to accept her low social and material condition, she hopes that marriage will provide some sense of belonging.

American Dreams: to belong, and yet not to be chained

Apparently, Holly's dreams, as seen through the eyes of the narrator, have all vanished or remained unfulfilled: having a better life, of 'belonging', of having a family, a house near the sea in Mexico where she and her brother Paul could raise horses, of buying furniture in her flat, of giving a name to a cat that would belong to her, of having a good husband, of being a good mother, etc. Tiffany and José have represented temporary solutions that seemed to make up for what she did not have. The novella's ambiguous ending seems to make us pity Holly for not finding her 'Tiffany' anywhere in the world, which makes her an eternal traveller, a wandering and lonely soul. On the other hand, we also feel contentment in the small steps Holly has made towards independence, and how human beings can overcome their personal flaws by connecting with one another.

We remember Holly's black sleeveless cocktail dress and pearls, with big dark sunglasses. We do not know if she is memorable, but she is certainly and easily remembered and enjoyed. She has a complex identity, always ready to reinvent herself; she is both wise and naïve, sophisticated and simple. Controversial by nature, she is both conventional and non-conventional; she wants and rejects femininity at the same time; she is a wild creature and a sensitive soul as well, uncertain and dependent sometimes, and certain and independent other times. Appearances are more important for her than essences and truth. She has used fashion and designer brands, shiny costumes and sophisticated overcoats to enter a world which was not hers, but she has never gone inside Tiffany's. It all remains a fantasy.

Holly's divided beliefs about the sense of belonging has identified her as an eternal traveler through life. Her divided beliefs can make us draw the conclusion that Holly is both ambiguous and ambivalent. Capote's travelling route starts from the conventional, proceeds towards the unconventional, and ends back to conformity. One reason might be that Holly's unconventional style is completely out of character with 1950s era and her middle-class standards for gender and race. In any case, she is both ambiguous and ambivalent. Something ambiguous is unclear and vague, but Holly is at the same time ambivalent about this issue of gender and can argue both sides (male/female, conventional/unconventional, independent/dependent, wise/naïve/, honest/dishonest, woman/child, etc.) very effectively.

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