In Cold Blood and “A Christmas Memory”

So, we have been talking about Capote and his manipulative ways of engaging his reader in the novel *In Cold Blood.* We must not, however, forget that we are also looking at this book for Capote’s distinctive stylistic choices. Despite how we, or for that matter other critics, may judge Capote for his narrative methods, he was a stylistic artist. Before moving forward with the rest of this sheet, I would like for you to read his short story “A Christmas Memory.”

It’s a little different from the feeling you get when reading *In Cold Blood*, huh?

Now, we all know that when an author uses specific details and diction, he can create a different image of a character or setting. He can also do that through syntax. By changing up the organization of a sentence, the emotional response of the reader may change. This is particularly notable when an anecdote is taking place and suddenly the author hits the reader with a short, pithy sentence. It shocks the reader. (See?) Long, wieldy sentences with multisyllabic words tend to sooth the reader. Short, curt sentences seem to sound, well, sharp. Authors use syntax, diction, and tone to create characterization in their texts. Imagine mixing together short sentences with Southern colloquialisms, and the voice of the character is suddenly from Alabama. Let’s take a look at a couple of passages from the two, as you will note obviously different, texts from Truman Capote. Do it now. Seriously. (See…)

This passage is taken from “A Christmas Memory”:

“Other people inhabit the house, relatives; and though they have power over us, and frequently make us cry, we are not, on the whole, too much aware of them. We are each other's best friend. She calls me Buddy, in memory of a boy who was formerly her best friend. The other Buddy died in the 1880's, when she was still a child. She is still a child.”

1. Look at the complicated sentence structure in the first sentence. Describe the effect of this construction on the reader. Describe the way the speaker may feel and the way the reader might feel when he or she reads it. How does the author create that feeling with the syntax?

2. The last sentence of this passage is a short declarative sentence. What impact does that have on the passage?

3. Describe the voice of this narrator. How is that voice achieved? Here is another passage to analyze.

*In Cold Blood* stuff on the back…

This is from *In Cold Blood*:

“’This is authentic. I’ve got a map. I’ve got the whole history. It was buried there back in 1821 – Peruvian bullion, jewelry. Sixty million dollars – that’s what they say it’s worth. Even if we didn’t find all of it, even if we found only some of it – Are you with me, Dick?’”

1. Describe Perry Smith after reading this excerpt. How does the syntax of the sentence impact your characterization?

Another passage: “Dick ordered another hamburger. During the past few days he’d known a hunger that nothing – three successive steaks, a dozen Hershey bars, a pound of gumdrops – seemed to interrupt. Perry, on the other hand, was without appetite; he subsisted on root beer, aspirin, and cigarettes. ‘No wonder you got leaps,’ Dick told him. ‘Aw, come on, baby. Get the bubbles out of your blood. We scored. It was perfect.’”

1. How does this presentation of Dick differ from the presentation of Perry? How did the author achieve this feat? In addition to the syntax, look at the details and diction.

2. What was the author’s purpose in this presentation of Dick at this moment? When does this occur in the story? Feel free to look in your book.