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“The Many Faces of Holly Golightly: Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and Hollywood”

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In the preface to the 1954 edition of his *Berlin Stories*, Christopher Isherwood relates a recent encounter with the actress Julie Harris. Harris played the female lead in *I Am A Camera*, John van Druten’s stage adaptation of Isherwood’s story ‘Sally Bowles’, which – like the other *Berlin Stories* – is a strongly autobiographical account of his experiences in Berlin in the early 1930s. Isherwood writes:

Now, out of the dressing-room, came a slim sparkling-eyed girl in an absurdly tart-like black satin dress, with a little cap stuck jauntily on her pale flame-colored hair, and a silly naughty giggle. This was Sally Bowles in person. Miss Harris was more essentially Sally Bowles than the Sally of my book, and much more like Sally than the real girl who long ago gave me the idea for my character . . . I was dumbfounded, infatuated. Who was she? What was she? How much was there in her of Miss Harris, how much of van Druten, how much of the girl I used to know in Berlin, how much of myself? It was no longer possible to say.¹ Isherwood freely, and joyfully, admits that the hold he has over his own creation is tenuous at best; that Sally Bowles has a life of her own, which is beyond the author’s reach. The real-life person he modelled this character on had merely been a pale shadow of the essential Sally Bowles as Isherwood envisioned her; and his own story had only partially succeeded in capturing this essence. Now, through an actress’ interpretation was he finally able to see this character fully realized, twenty years after he had met the young woman who inspired her creation.² In this essay, I want to apply some of the questions Isherwood asked himself when confronted with Julie Harris, to a close literary

relative of Sally Bowles – another extrovert, moody, playful and oddly stylish nineteen-year old party girl, who thoroughly enjoys her sexuality while also exploiting it for material gain. Holly Golightly made her first public appearance in Truman Capote’s novella *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in 1958. Prompted by a conversation with the owner of a bar in his old neighbourhood, the narrator tells the story of his acquaintance with a young woman who was his neighbour for a while in 1943–44. Writing from a first-person perspective, Capote followed Isherwood’s example of presenting a sketchy self-portrait of the artist as a young man. In both stories, the protagonist is a budding young writer who is perceptive and sensitive, yet lacks goals and determination. His strong emotional attachment to the dazzling heroine is intensely romantic yet completely asexual. At the end, she moves as easily and speedily out of the young man’s life as she entered it, leaving him with unresolved feelings and powerful memories which eventually compel him to write about her. Like Isherwood’s Sally, Capote’s literary creation was brought to life on screen and stage, and for most people, the personality, if not the ‘essence’, of Holly Golightly was most impressively and memorably realized in Audrey Hepburn’s performance in the 1961 film. However, in this case, quite unlike Isherwood’s response to Julie Harris, the author violently objected to the casting and the resulting interpretation of his character. Said Capote:

Audrey was not what I had in mind when I wrote that part, although she did a terrific job. But Marilyn (Monroe) was what I wanted.³

The book was really rather bitter, and Holly Golightly was real – a tough character, not an Audrey Hepburn type at all. The film became a mawkish

valentine to New York City and Holly and, as a result, was thin and pretty, whereas it should have been rich and ugly.⁴

The aim of this essay is not to demonstrate the shortcomings of the film version, its corruption of the author's original text, but to ask, with Isherwood: Who is Holly Golightly? What is she? How much is there in her of Audrey Hepburn, how much of the script-writers, how much of the women Capote used to know in New York, how much of himself? In trying to answer these questions, I will delve deeply into Capote's biography, into contemporary critical responses to book and film and into Hollywood's production and censorship records. To begin with, it is important to point out that the remaking of Holly Golightly does not begin with the film adaptation, but is the very subject of the novella itself, which proceeds by gradually revealing the many layers of her identity: a self-assured enterprising young woman; a gold digger who expects to be paid, not for sexual encounters, but for her company (\$50 'change' for every trip to the powder-room), and who is looking for a rich husband; a former Hollywood starlet who casually discarded her film career; a Southern child bride who ran away from her husband but stayed loyal to her brother; an expectant mother who is ready to settle down into domestic life with a Brazilian diplomat. Holly is always on the move, continually reinventing herself. Her last fleeting appearance is on the photograph of an African wood sculpture showing her likeness; it is the confrontation with this portrait, which inspires the narrator to create his own literary portrait of Holly more than ten years after he has last seen her in person. If we move beyond the text of Capote's novella in either direction, backwards in time to the author's past experiences informing his writing, or forward in time to the novella's adaptation by Hollywood, we find that ever more layers are added to Holly's already complex and contradictory identity. In this long drawn-out process of making and re-making Holly Golightly there are many points at which a struggle over her identity takes place, an attempt to privilege some aspects of her multi-faceted being and suppress others. This struggle, I would suggest, is not confined to Hollywood's adaptation of the novella but also takes place within the author's

very conception of Holly Golightly. Furthermore, this struggle over the identity of Holly Golightly is also a struggle over the identity of Truman Capote himself.

A Child of the South

In February 1958, when Capote was finishing *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, he received a letter from his editor at Random House who warned him about the legal action threatened by one Bonnie Golightly: 'She says that coming from the South and having undergone similar experiences, she wouldn't welcome your retaining the name (of the heroine).'⁵ Since Capote only changed his character's first name from Connie to Holly, he was sued, unsuccessfully, by Miss Golightly soon after the publication of his novella.⁶ The response to the book amongst Capote's many female friends was equally passionate, yet much more positive. Capote's biographer Gerald Clarke reports that 'half the women he knew . . . claimed to be the model for his wacky heroine', and they were proud of it, too.⁷ Unlike Miss Golightly, their claim had some basis in reality, since Capote's portrait of Holly Golightly made use of biographical details and character traits of a myriad of young women he got to know after he permanently moved to New York in the early 1940s. Capote later said:

The main reason I wrote about Holly, outside the fact that I liked her so much, was that she was such a symbol of all these girls who come to New York and spin in the sun for a moment like May flies and then disappear. I wanted to rescue one girl from that anonymity and preserve her for posterity. He also stated that the story was very closely based on one particular young German woman he befriended in the early 1940s.⁸ It is worth noting that of the many women who served as an inspiration for Holly Golightly, several longterm friends of Capote's, such as writer Doris Lilly, may have started out as party girls, yet resolutely refused to move back into anonymity and instead made a permanent success in New York society, and some of them, like Gloria Vanderbilt and Oona O'Neill, had even been

born into it.⁹ Holly Golightly, then, represents two different types of liberated women in 1940s America: those who come from a foreign, provincial or lower class background and therefore have to reinvent themselves to gain entry into the social and economic elite; and the daughters of that elite, who are ‘naturally’ sophisticated and privileged to do pretty much whatever they like.

In his discussion of the novella, Gerald Clarke draws out further biographical references: [T]he one Holly most resembles, in spirit if not in body, is her creator. She not only shares his philosophy, but his fears and anxieties as well – ‘the mean reds’ she calls them. ‘You’re afraid and you sweat like hell, but you don’t know what you are afraid of’, she says by way of explanation.¹⁰ Like Holly, Capote had a rather chaotic and traumatic Southern childhood. When he settled in New York as a teenager, like Holly he was soon able to use his charm and good looks as well as his literary talent to become the centre of various elevated social circles.¹¹ Perhaps an even more important biographical reference point, which Capote himself never mentioned in his otherwise generous comments about the many influences on his literary creation, is his mother. Clarke writes: ‘Both Nina (Capote) and Holly grew up in the rural South and longed for the glitter and glamour of New York, and they both changed their hillbilly names, Lillie Mae and Lulamae, to those they considered more sophisticated.’¹² Furthermore, Lillie Mae married at the age of 17, almost a child bride like Lulamae, and within a year Truman was born. After several affairs Lillie Mae separated from her Southern husband to move to New York, where she revived a previous relationship with a Latin American businessman. Unlike the novella’s heroine, who is deserted by her Brazilian lover, Lillie Mae eventually married Joseph Garcia Capote and settled down in New York with him and Truman.¹³ Clarke convincingly argues that Capote’s whole life was overshadowed by the fraught relationship with his mother. She abandoned him for long periods of time when he was a little child, bewitched him with her beauty, vivaciousness and glamour while he was growing up, expressed disbelief,

disgust and rage when he confronted her with his homosexuality. She committed suicide in 1954, and it is quite possible to see *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, the first major new project Capote tackled after her death, as, amongst other things, a portrait of his mother, an attempt to deal with his love for her and her rejection of him, and, most importantly, with his loss and mourning.

A Character Sketch by an Effeminate Writer

After Capote had finished *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in the spring of 1958, the story was supposed to be published – like many of his previous works – in Harper’s *Bazaar*, before coming out as a book in the autumn. However, the magazine’s publishers objected to the explicit sexual references in the story and to what was perceived as the heroine’s immorality. When Capote refused to make any changes, the magazine refused to publish the story.¹⁴ This rejection did not bode well for the future sale of the potentially very lucrative film rights to Hollywood, because the major studios were still operating within the narrow moralistic strictures of the so-called Production Code. Nevertheless, even before the book’s publication in October 1958, its galleys had been requested by Paramount’s story department. The studio reader’s evaluation of the manuscript was negative. However, this was not due to its controversial subject matter. Instead the reader complained that ‘it is unfortunately too similar to Isherwood’s work, dramatized as *I Am A Camera*’, which had been made into a film in 1955. Also, ‘this is more of a character sketch than a story.’¹⁵ The reviews of the book were on the whole rather positive, yet frequently voiced the same kind of moral concern that had caused the story’s rejection by Harper’s *Bazaar*. They also confirmed the studio reader’s evaluation of the story with numerous references to Isherwood and Sally Bowles, and to the fact that the novella worked mainly as a beautifully written and highly inventive character sketch, but lacked the drama and insight that a more dynamic and decisive

male narrator-protagonist could have brought to it.¹⁶ The reviewer of the *New Republic*, for example, accused Capote of lack of maturity and questioned his masculinity: '(Capote's) naive enthusiasm for Holly Golightly is the child's enthusiasm for the mysterious adult world'; '(Holly) is the romantic adolescent's projection of the ideal woman who will make no demands on anybody's manhood.'¹⁷

In the light of the fact that Capote was openly gay, and had styled himself as a witty and flamboyant pretty-boy, such comments are hardly surprising. Indeed compared to the controversy surrounding the homosexual content and seductive dustjacket portrait of Capote's first novel *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948),¹⁸ there was some relief about his present restraint in these matters: 'The vague undertones of homosexuality . . . are not as pronounced as in former books', commented one critic.¹⁹ Whether pronounced or not, the author's and, by implication, the narrator's homosexuality were as serious a stumbling block for the novella's film adaptation as the heroine's sexuality and immorality. Therefore, when Paramount bought the film rights for *Breakfast at Tiffany's* for \$65,000 in December 1958,²⁰ it was clear that turning the book into a usable script would be a difficult task. In April 1959 Sumner Locke Elliott handed in a first draft, which was seen as a complete failure. The film's producer Richard Shepherd wrote in an angry memo: (Elliott) failed to capture the warmth, the zest, the humor, the beauty and, more importantly, the basic heart and honesty that is Holly Golightly. The young man he has written is petty and unattractive in character, borders on the effeminate, which we all detest.²¹

Shepherd's strategy for dealing with the dual threat of a controversial sexually liberated heroine and an effeminate hero was an obvious one: he was convinced that 'boy and girl get together at the end of our story, that Holly's problem, which is the principal one, is in some way resolved through the understanding, love and strength of the boy.' The traditional romantic comedy formula of boy-meets-girls-girl-wins-girl-in-the-end provided the story

with the tight narrative structure and satisfying dramatic resolution that the novella lacked, while also demonstrating that the heroine was basically a good girl, who had been waiting for the right man all along, and that the hero was a 'real' man after all, who knew what he wanted and how to get it.

Interestingly, in his script Elliott had already introduced a sexual relationship between Holly and the hero, as well as a happy end. Yet, Shepherd felt that the ending was undermotivated, since the rest of the script stayed too close to the novella. As a consequence, the producer brought in George Axelrod for a complete rewrite. Axelrod updated the story from 1943 to 1960, introduced the famous opening scene in which Holly has breakfast outside Tiffany's, and gives Paul, the hero, a climactic speech, which explains Holly's inner conflict to the viewer and to herself, and thus motivates her final change of mind. Paul says that the reason why she moves from lover to lover and wants to leave New York now, is that she is afraid of true love, and, indeed, afraid of life. Holly realizes that she has been running away from commitment and potential happiness all her life and decides to stay with Paul.²² Thus, Capote's character sketch had been turned into a proper Hollywood story, and the questionable characters of Holly and Paul were redeemed by love.

The Romantic Union of Party Girl and Kept Man

An internal studio report on Axelrod's script summed up the moral of his tale as follows: 'Overcoming her fear of life, (Holly) is eventually able to love and accept the love of just one man.'²³ This report also commented favorably on another change Axelrod made to the story in order to motivate Paul and Holly's relationship: Paul is a kept man, supported by a married society lady who in effect pays him for sex. The rationale is that 'since Paul and Holly are in the same line of work, so to speak, they quickly become fast friends.' Thus, they are both severely compromised morally, which allows them to

understand and forgive each other's transgressions, and this in turn helps the viewer to do the same. This new plot twist also gives Paul a dilemma which he has to resolve before he can help Holly resolving hers. In dramatic terms, this parallel is surely an elegant solution, but it would seem to reinforce the very doubts about the hero's masculinity that all these changes were supposed to do away with in the first place. Axelrod commented at the time: '[we] had . . . no hero. Just a neuter, uninvolved narrator. What we had to do was devise a story, get a central romantic relationship, and make the hero . . . a red-blooded heterosexual.'²⁴ Making him a kept man did indeed confirm Paul's heterosexuality, but it also raised further moral concerns.

Consequently, when the script was finally submitted to the Production Code Administration in August 1960, the Hollywood censors were more worried about Paul's sexual activity than about Holly's. One memo stated: 'the relationship between 2E (the society lady) and Paul as presently described in this script is unacceptably blunt.' The censors demanded that the fact that she paid him for sex had to be obscured, and also that Paul should not even have a sexual relationship with Holly.²⁵ While the producers agreed to these changes, and Paul and Holly's night of passion was only discreetly hinted at in the film, the 'blunt' facts of Paul's prostitution are presented visually and verbally on several occasions. Thus, compared to the novella, the film does indeed turn the hero into a 'full-blooded heterosexual' and 'clean up' Holly's

lifestyle and character, yet it does so only by making the hero a kind of male prostitute.

A Screen Icon

When, at the age of 31, Audrey Hepburn got involved with the film version of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in the autumn of 1960, Paramount's publicity department started to issue a constant stream of press releases highlighting the clash between her established star image and the notoriety of Holly Golightly.²⁶ One of the earliest press sheets in September 1960 stated, for example, that Hepburn 'has never played any part that has suggested she was anything but pure, polite and possibly a princess.' Quoting *Time* magazine, the text went on to describe Holly as 'a grown-up Lolita' and 'an expense account tramp . . . who by her own countdown has had only eleven lovers' (which was considered a lot for a teenager).²⁷ For Paramount's publicity and advertising campaign, the sharp contrast between star and role served two functions. Audrey Hepburn's celebrated style, respectability and even nobility finally neutralized Holly's sexual transgressiveness; on or off screen Hepburn was hardly perceived as a sexual being at all. On the other hand, against the background of the very purity of her image, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* promised to show Hepburn like she had never been seen before, injecting a sense of contemporary reality into the romantic fantasies she was associated with, and some sex

into her otherwise ethereal existence. Unlike the usual combination of Hepburn with a much older male star which had characterized all of her Hollywood successes up to this point,²⁸ in this film she would finally be teamed up with an attractive man her own age.

Lest anyone thought that due to her age and image, Hepburn would not be able to portray the character convincingly, one of Paramount's press books quoted Capote's first description of Holly Golightly, matching each sentence with an appropriate picture of Hepburn:

. . . the ragbag colours of her boy's hair, tawny streaks, strands of albino-blond and yellow, caught the hall light . . . 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 mouth 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.²⁹

Notwithstanding all the changes made to the original story in the Hollywood version, this description would indeed seem to be captured perfectly in Hepburn's first appearance as Holly, stepping out of a cab on 5th Avenue just outside Tiffany's at the very beginning of the film. Even though Capote himself would not agree, during this first encounter with the film's Holly many viewers have surely been tempted to say, as has this viewer, using Isherwood's words: This is Holly Golightly in person. Miss Hepburn is more essentially Holly Golightly than the Holly of the book. I am dumbfounded, infatuated.

Notes

1 Christopher Isherwood, 'About This Book', *The Berlin Stories* (New Directions, 1954) unpaginated preface, reprinted in Christopher Isherwood, *The Berlin Stories. A Single Man. A Meeting By the River* (Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992).

2 From today's perspective, we know, of course, that Julie Harris' stage impersonation did by no means conclude this process of trying to capture the essence of Sally Bowles, and we are perhaps more likely to envision Sally through Liza Minnelli's performance in the 1972 film *Cabaret*. A study of several stage and screen adaptations of Isherwood's story can be found in Linda Mizejewski, *Divine Decadence: Fascism, Female Spectacle, and the Makings of Sally Bowles* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

3 Richard Zeerink, 'Truman Capote Talks About His Crowd', *Playgirl* (September 1975), reprinted in M. Thomas Inge, ed., *Truman Capote: Conversations* (University Press of Mississippi, 1987), pp. 308–319; p. 317.

4 Eric Norden, 'Playboy Interview: Truman Capote', *Playboy* (March 1968), reprinted in Inge, *Truman Capote*, pp. 110–163; p. 160. Emphasis in the original.

5 Hiram Haydn to Truman Capote, 11 February 1958, *Random House Papers, 1954–59*, Editorial Correspondence, Box 432, Columbia University Library.

6 See, for example, 'Golightly at Law', *Time* (9 February 1959).

7 Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography* (Ballantine, 1989), p. 314.

8 Norden, 'Playboy Interview', pp. 141–2

9 Clarke, *Capote*, pp. 94–5, 313–4

10 *Ibid.*, p. 313

11 *Ibid.*, Chs. 11–13.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 313. Cf. the following comment by Capote's aunt: '[Lillie Mae] had a wildness in her that could not be tamed. I think Truman, the writer, understood this. He put some of Lillie Mae into Holly Golightly.' Marie Rudisill with James C. Simmons, *Truman Capote: The Story of His Bizarre and Exotic Boyhood by an Aunt Who Helped to Raise Him*, (William Morrow, 1983), p. 92.

13 Clarke, *Capote*, Chapters 1–7.

14 The story came out in the November issue of *Esquire*. Clarke, *Capote*, pp. 307–8.

15 William Pinckard, Reader's Report, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* file, *Paramount Script Collection*, *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS)*, Beverly Hills.

16 Cf. the reviews abstracted in Dorothy P. Davison, ed., *The Book Review Digest 1958*, H.W. Wilson, 1959, p. 191, and in Robert J. Stanton, *Truman Capote: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (G.K. Hall, 1980), pp. 84–98.

17 Gordon Merrick, 'How to Write Lying Down', *New Republic* (8 December 1958), pp. 23–4.

18 Clarke, *Capote*, Ch. 20.

19 Review in *Kirkus*, 1 September 1958, abstracted in Davison, *Book Review Digest*, p. 191.

20 Memo from Bernard Feins to Sidney Justin, 8 December 1958, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* file, folder 1, *Paramount Production and Budget Records*, AMPAS.

21 Letter from Richard Sheperd to Y. Frank Freeman, 16 April 1959, *ibid.*

22 Sumner Elliott Locke, *Dramatic Outline*, 16 April, 1959; George Axelrod, *First Draft Screenplay*, 24

August 1959; these and other script materials are in the Breakfast at Tiffany's file, Paramount Script Collection, AMPAS.

23 Tom Boyd, Report on First Draft Screenplay, 27 August 1959, *ibid.*

24 Show (October 1961), unpaginated clipping, Breakfast at Tiffany's clippings folder, AMPAS.

25 Letter by Geoffrey M. Shurlock to Luigi Luraschi, 17

August 1960; memo by E.G.D., 20 September 1960; Breakfast at Tiffany's file, Production Code Administration Records, AMPAS.

26 For discussions of Hepburn's evolving star image in the 1950s, see, for example, Janice R. Welsch, *Film Archetypes: Sisters, Mistresses, Mothers, Daughters*, Arno Press (1978), pp. 288–321; Caroline Latham, *Audrey Hepburn (Proteus, 1984)*; Peter Krämer, "'A cutie with more than beauty': Audrey Hepburn, the Hollywood Musical and Funny Face", in Bill Marshall and Robynn Stilwell, eds, *Musicals: Hollywood and Beyond* (Intellect, 2000), pp. 62–9; Peter Krämer, "'Faith in Relations Between People": Audrey Hepburn, Roman Holiday and European Integration', in Diana Holmes and Alison Smith, eds, *100 Years of European Cinema: Entertainment or Ideology?* (Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 195–206; Gaylyn Studlar, "'Chi-chi Cinderella": Audrey Hepburn as Couture Countermodel', in David Desser and Garth S. Jowett, eds, *Hollywood Goes Shopping* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 159–79; Rachel Moseley, *Growing up with Audrey Hepburn* (Manchester University Press, 2002).

27 Press sheet, 13 September 1960; Breakfast at Tiffany's file, folder 3, Paramount Production and Budget Records, AMPAS.

28 *Green Mansions* (1959), the only previous Hollywood film in which she had co-starred with a young man (Anthony Perkins), had been a flop.

29 Truman Capote, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Penguin, 1961), p. 17. This section is quoted in a Paramount Information Guide for the film; Breakfast at Tiffany's clippings folder, AMPAS.