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Al Capone: The Face of Crime

The 1930's are viewed as years of great change not just in the United States but also around the world. As technology continued to improve and individuals began taking big strides toward their futures, the ideas of the great America became fleeting ones and tomorrow began to look a lot differently than once before; the fear of a new day developed. People were taking risks and bending the rules, which led to disputes and violence and in some cases murder. By analyzing a picture of the gangster Al Capone, it can be argued that the 1930's were a dangerous time to be growing up in America because of the outlaws.

If one were to look at the picture of Al Capone, it becomes apparent quite quickly that it is a mug shot of the individual. By completing a basic scan of the photograph, any individual would be capable of inferring this. If one takes the picture for what it is and looks at all the parts of it, one clearly sees a list of five numbers below the individual's face. Everyone is aware that when someone lands himself or herself in a position where a mug shot is taken, they are given a serial number, which becomes their inmate number. This number is used when referring to the individual and dealing with the person's visitors, court dates and so forth. This basic examination of the photograph already gives someone enough information to know that the man is not an upstanding citizen¹. The man's full name is Alphonse Gabriel "Al" Capone and he was a gangster who was in charge of smuggling illegal alcoholic beverages into Chicago during the

¹ This basic examination of the photograph is similar to the way new critics believed in "Art for Art's Sake." Nothing is being inferred, rather all the details gathered are given to us.

Prohibition Era.² This information cannot be found on the photograph obviously but by analyzing it more closely, one can find clues that lead to the discovery of the identity of the man.

One detail that pops right out of the photograph is the man's clothing. Going based off of the whole outfit, it is apparent that the man is not poor; he is in a suit, which suggests that he comes from at least some money. This can help one identify what social class he is in and potentially what he may do for a living. The fact that he is in a suit makes one assume that he is some type of businessman or maybe a banker. On closer observation of the suit, one sees that it is pin striped. This makes the suit special; it is not just a plain suit resembling that of a businessman. Pinstriped suits have been associated with gangsters since they began wearing them in the 1930's and in movies made today one of the signifying details between a crime boss and a responsible citizen is the presence of the famous suit style. By this minor observation, one can come to the conclusion that the man photographed was involved in crime in one way or another. Upon further investigation, the crimes Al Capone committed and the havoc him and his "crew" created can be found. Another distinguishing feature is the fedora he is wearing. This was another article that was associated with the wardrobe of gangsters of the time³. These details are given to us directly in the photograph, one does not have to look hard to find them or infer whether or not they are there. The picture shows Al Capone as a representation of 1930's gangsters simply based on his clothing⁴.

² "Al Capone." *Wikipedia The Free Encyclopedia*. Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License. 3 Feb. 2014. Web. 28 January 2014.

³ Beshears, Laura. "Honorable Style in Dishonorable Times: American Gangsters of the 1920's and 1930's." *Journal of American Culture* 33.3 (2010). Print.

⁴ The idea of Al Capone as an icon of the 1930's. New Critics distinguished the difference between symbols and icons. Capone is seen as an icon based on his fashion as well as the activities he took part in.

If this fact is related back to the bigger idea that the 1930's were a dangerous time, one realizes that gangsters were actually in practice and they ran the streets freely completing their illegal activities. Today, mobsters and gangsters have ceased to exist so individuals are only exposed to what they see in the various movies dramatizing the time or the Internet, which gives accounts of different crime bosses, and the crimes they are associated with and responsible for. It seems like a different world to think that far back in time and compare it to today and realize how much has changed. The photograph provides proof that once upon a time, things were less safe than they are now. Of course there is still crime today and there are other things to fear but the individuals classified as gangsters represented a different type of threat. They were seen as ruthless and caring about business above all else. This furthers the idea that the 30's were not the safest of times.

An analysis of Capone's facial expression gives away more details of him as a person and the gangster community. He is staring directly at the camera for obvious reasons but what he is portraying is not that of fear or guilt. He does not appear to be ashamed but rather angry and tough. He is not smiling, he has a very straight face and his eyes do not appear to resemble those that have shed any tears. It is as though he would like to assert a certain image of himself and let the police officers know that he is not afraid of them and he feels no remorse for any crime he may have committed or been involved with. By completing this evaluation of the picture, an individual learns even more about the era and the individuals that were a part of it. Not only were these individuals classified as gangsters taking part in illegal activities that potentially put others in harms way but also they were doing so without thinking twice about it. To take it a step further, Capone looks almost annoyed that he has to deal with law enforcements and having to take a picture. It suggests that he did not second guess his actions or consider the people that

would be caught in the crossfire. He had a task to do and he was going to get it done no matter what. This creates an even more terrifying picture of what the 30's were like. Not only were there actual gangsters, but also they were individuals that took part in crime and did not feel bad about it in any way. They were ruthless and careless and all they could see was the money and power.

The photo is in black and white, which is a big indicator of when the picture was taken⁵. Although photography had improved by the 30's, they still had not developed the technology to print images in color. Because of this, certain things can be gained and lost in the photograph. An individual cannot see the color of Capone's tie or fedora; the color of his eyes and skin tone remain unknown as well. What is gained is the feeling that the picture is timeless. Although it is old, it has survived and it has become a document of someone very famous during the time. It gives a sense of history to the object, which allows an individual to associate it with the time period it was taken in and the events that were going on in the world. This picture as an example documents crime and an individual responsible for it. It reminds someone that what is depicted in movies and on television actually happened at one point in time; that the 30's were not a peaceful time.

The photograph chosen represents a big piece of American History and it is one that is not remembered in the nicest of lights. Al Capone was an individual who knew the law and chose to interpret it in his own way. He and others put innocent bystanders in danger and brought chaos into the world. He made Chicago an unsafe place to live in and because of the photograph individuals are reminded of this. All the details found in the single photograph give clues to the

⁵ Using direct evidence and critically thinking about it and relating it back to the bigger ideas of the paper. Like New Critics, they took evidence that was readily available to them and thinking about it in more detail.

man he was and the things he was involved in and they support the idea of the 1930's as a violent time in American History.