

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

In Cold Blood

by Truman Capote

written by Eva Richardson

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In Cold Blood

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. analyze the characteristics of non-fiction.
2. trace and analyze the theme of sexuality throughout the text.
3. analyze the narrative chapter structure and varying viewpoints throughout the text.
4. discuss the novel as a critical commentary on the American Dream.
5. study how tone and level of language create meaning and reinforce Capote's themes.
6. examine the text as a reflection on 1950s middle-class America.
7. analyze and discuss the role of author and narrator.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. offer a close reading of *In Cold Blood* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

Background Information

AMERICA IN THE 1950S

1950s American society was marked by an expanding middle class, confident consumer spending, and the early development of American suburbia. Having emerged from its involvement in World War II, America was eager to focus on the proliferation of an affluent middle class at home. The popularization of the automobile and new product advertising through television and magazines revolutionized American households. Most middle class homes quickly came to be equipped with television sets, microwave ovens, and washing machines. A booming construction industry helped develop the earliest American suburbs, and the first enclosed shopping malls appeared and soon drastically changed the American landscape. As Americans migrated to comfortable communities on the outskirts of cities, those cities entered a period of deterioration and social and economic decline that, in many instances, has lasted well into the twenty-first century.

While the American economy was prosperous and progressive throughout the 1950s, American society was marked by social conservatism and conformity. America's ongoing involvement in the Cold War, which lasted from 1945 through 1991, presented an ideological clash between the capitalist consumer culture of the United States and the Western world on the one hand and the Communist regime of the Soviet Union and its allies on the other hand. Cold War tensions brought about a widespread fear of Communism and even escalated into irrational and unfounded persecution of individuals suspected to be Communist allies. The proliferation of anti-Communist propaganda that accompanied US Senator Joseph McCarthy's "Communist Witch Hunts" created an atmosphere of social compliance, fear, and intolerance.

HISTORIC REFERENCE: THE CLUTTER MURDERS

Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is based on the true events surrounding the murders of the Clutters, a prominent Kansas farming family. On November 15, 1959, Herbert Clutter, his wife Bonnie, the couple's sixteen-year-old daughter Nancy, and their fifteen-year-old son Kenyon were brutally murdered in their farmhouse in Holcomb, Kansas. The perpetrators were Richard Hickock and Perry Smith, two ex-cons who had learned from a former farmhand that Herb Clutter was a wealthy man. They falsely believed that Mr. Clutter kept a safe stocked with large sums of cash in his study. Hickock and Smith, both petty criminals and social outcasts, planned to steal the cash and start new lives in Mexico. Once inside the Clutter home, Hickock and Smith quickly realized that Herb Clutter did not, in fact, have a safe or any cash in his house. Having agreed not to leave any witnesses to their crime, the two perpetrators bound Mr. Clutter and locked him into the upstairs bathroom along with the other members of the family. Then, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith killed all members of the Clutter family one by one. First, they led Mrs. Bonnie Clutter into her bedroom and shot her through the head. Then, they executed young Nancy, also in her bedroom. The killers then led Kenyon into the basement where they shot him. Finally Hickock and Smith forced Mr. Clutter into the basement as well. In the boiler room of his farmhouse, they hanged Mr. Clutter, slashed his throat, and shot him. The two left the farm with less than fifty dollars.

Literary and Narrative Techniques:

THE NON-FICTION NOVEL

With the publication of *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote debuted a new literary genre: the non-fiction novel. The non-fiction novel presents real events through the use of literary techniques generally associated with fiction narratives. In the case of *In Cold Blood*, Capote used newspaper accounts, investigative reports, letters, and interviews to piece together the story of the Clutter murders and the subsequent hunt for and eventual execution of Richard Hickock and Perry Smith. Capote traveled to the Holcomb area just months after the murders, and he spent six years collecting information, interviewing residents, and observing the work of the Kansas Bureau of Investigations under the leadership of Al Dewey. Yet, like a novel, the story is presented in vivid sentences and filled with evocative descriptions, poignant word choice, and lyrical images.

As a non-fiction novel, the text does not present the voice of the author or a specific narrator but, instead, relates the events and presents details from the points of view of different characters. The genre is closely associated with the **journalistic novel** and is generally considered to be a forerunner of the **True Crime** genre. True Crime has since evolved into one of the most popular literary genres, often exploiting highly sensationalized crimes. True Crime most frequently presents real, often well-publicized, murder cases and focuses on investigative strategies and criminal psychology, including psychological profiling of perpetrators and victims.

CHAPTER DIVISION

In Cold Blood is divided into four sections: “The Last to See Them Alive,” “Persons Unknown,” “Answer,” and “The Corner.” Each section focuses specifically on one part of the case. The first section presents the murder. The reader knows right from the start who the perpetrators are and what their motivation for killing was. Yet, the story is able to capture the reader’s attention and remains suspenseful; rather than presenting a traditional murder mystery, Capote’s text is dedicated to bringing the characters alive and casting them as genuine human beings in front of the readers’ eyes.

The first section, “The Last to See Them Alive,” introduces the individual members of the Clutter family. Herb Clutter is depicted as a successful and likeable farmer who came from humble beginnings and—with dedication and hard work—turned River Valley Farm into a profitable operation. His wife, Bonnie Clutter, lives a quiet and withdrawn lifestyle, due to her frequent bouts with mental disease. Her “spells” and “nervousness” have sent her to seek medical attention several times over the years since her children were born. Capote explains that “everyone knew she had been an on-and-off psychiatric patient the last half-dozen years.” Yet, Bonnie Clutter is not depicted as an outcast of society. She “had a relaxing quality, as is generally true of defenseless persons who present no threat.”

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What is the significance of the American Dream in the novel?
2. What attitudes toward the murderers are expressed by the citizens of Holcomb before and after Richard Hickock and Perry Smith are caught?
3. What are the motivations behind the murder of the Clutter family?
4. Why does the text discuss the murders and reveal the identities of the perpetrators right in the beginning of the narrative?
5. What roles do mental disease and psychological disorders play in the novel?
6. How does the novel portray American middle-class life?
7. What is the role of the author/narrator in *In Cold Blood*?
8. Why is Perry Smith unable to relate to society?
9. How does the novel address the question of responsibility regarding the Clutter murders?
10. How does life in prison influence the thoughts, behaviors, and actions of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith?
11. What characterizes the relationship between Perry Smith and Richard Hickock?
12. How does the novel describe the investigative process of the Kansas Bureau of Investigations?
13. How does the text present the individual members of the Clutter family?
14. How does the novel represent the notion of guilt for Perry Smith and Richard Hickock?
15. What are the characteristics of the non-fiction novel? How does Capote realize the principles of the non-fiction novel?
16. What role does sexuality play within the novel?

In Cold Blood

The Last to See Them Alive

1. What effect is achieved through the use of the simile comparing grain elevators to Greek temples?

2. What is the purpose of the opening section of the text ending with “and as strangers”? What details are discussed and why?

3. According to the text, what is Mr. Clutter’s only reason for “disquiet” in his life?

4. What aspect of River Valley Farm is Mr. Clutter’s pride and joy?

5. How do the narrative voice and the sentence structure of the text change when the story shifts from descriptions of the Clutter family to descriptions of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith?

Persons Unknown

1. What aspects of the crime scene as observed by Al Dewey examining photographs foreshadow the eventual capture of the suspects?

2. How do the opening pages of this section serve to establish *In Cold Blood* as an important forerunner of the True Crime genre?

3. What effect is achieved through the simile that likens Dick's confidence to a "kite that needed reeling in"?

4. What does Susan Kidwell find most disturbing about her visit to the funeral parlor? Why?

5. What is significant about the way Dick gains the store clerk's confidence when he attempts to pay with a check? How is this ironic?

Answer

1. What event in the opening pages of the section “Answer” turns the investigation around?

2. Why might Dick’s father propose that Dick “wasn’t the same boy” after he injured his head in a car accident?

3. According to Mr. Hickock, what was unusual about Dick when he returned from his alleged trip to Fort Scott? Why is this observation significant?

4. What incident occurs on the road from Mexico to the United States that Perry calls a “goddam miracle”?

5. What does the nickname Perry has given himself reveal about his character and his self image?

The Corner

1. What is Mrs. Meier’s first impression of Perry Smith?

2. What changes does Perry want to make to his initial statement to police? What is his motivation for making the changes? What does this suggest about his character?

3. What is significant about Perry’s reaction to the letter written by Don Cullivan?

4. What is the symbolic significance of the big yellow bird?

5. According to Dick’s written statement composed in prison for his psychiatrist, what ultimately was Dick’s motivation for invading the Clutter place?
