

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

In Cold Blood

by Truman Capote

written by Steve Weed

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Background Information

Truman Capote, birth name Truman Streckfus Persons, was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1924. During his teenage years, he attended private schools in both Connecticut and New York. Capote's formal education ended at seventeen, when he took an entry-level job at *The New Yorker* magazine.

Capote was 35 when he began research for *In Cold Blood*. By then, he had achieved success with other books: *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948), *The Grass Harp* (1951), and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1958). In a January 1966 *New York Times* commentary about *In Cold Blood*, writer Conrad Knickerbocker states, "The very forms of novel and short story seemed to [Capote] increasingly inadequate to the weird dynamics of the age." What inspired Capote to write the book was a desire to explore a form he invented and called "the nonfiction novel," a genre that uses the techniques of a journalist to gather information, but the techniques of a novelist to tell the story.

Capote recalled that he was reading the *New York Times* in November of 1959 when he stumbled upon a headline buried deep in the paper that reported the slaying of a wealthy Kansas farmer, his wife, and their two kids. Capote found this article to be the perfect story for his new literary form. He told the *New York Times* in January 16, 1966, "after reading the story it suddenly struck me that a crime, the study of one such, might provide the broad scope I needed to write the kind of book I wanted to write. Moreover, the human heart being what it is, murder was a theme not likely to darken and yellow with time."

The book, *In Cold Blood*, is told from the perspective of a third person narrator; Capote is not a character and does not personally narrate the book. He believed the nonfiction novel would be successful only if the reader could not detect the presence of the reporter and could focus on the story itself. *In Cold Blood* follows the lives of the Clutter family before their murder, the thoughts and actions of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith before, during, and after the crime, and the impact the crime had on the people of the greater Holcomb community.

In Cold Blood was critically and popularly successful, but it left Capote a changed person. He told the *New York Times* in 1966, "I'm still very much haunted by the whole thing. I have finished the book, but in a sense I *haven't* finished it: it keeps churning around in my head." Afterward, his writing never achieved the same level of recognition. Capote died in 1984 due to liver disease complicated by multiple drug intoxication.

Note: All references are from the Vintage International edition of *In Cold Blood*, copyright 1994.

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Objectives

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

1. define nonfiction novel and explain how *In Cold Blood* fits that genre.
2. study the qualities of, and the values held by the Holcomb community, and explain why setting is integral to the plot of the story.
3. examine how the Clutters are a representation of an educated, upwardly mobile Kansas family.
4. examine how the motif of mental illness functions in the novel, and explain how it affects the thoughts and actions of certain characters.
5. identify the motif of broken trust and give examples from the text.
6. discuss the relationship between Dick Hickock and Perry Smith and how the combination of their personalities led to the murders.
7. discuss ways in which an individual's upbringing influences his or her behavior and world outlook.
8. identify the methods used by the Kansas Bureau of Investigators to locate and convict Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, and evaluate their investigation as a structural device that drives the novel's plot.
9. explore historical context when analyzing a nonfiction novel, specifically by citing Kansas state laws in the 1950s and 60s that were relevant to the case.
10. explain the evolution of, and the reasons for the use of the death penalty in Kansas in the 1960s.
11. describe how a traumatic event affects a community.
12. compare arguments for and against publishing books that are about real-life crimes.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. In a January 16, 1977, *New York Times* interview with George Plimpton, Capote explains the literary value of the nonfiction novel and defines the genre in the following way: “[It is a] narrative form that employ[s] all the techniques of fictional art but [is] nevertheless immaculately factual...” How does *In Cold Blood* fit this description, and in what ways does Capote artistically manipulate the story to make it a good work of literature?
2. From relatively humble beginnings, Herb Clutter becomes a successful farmer. According to the book, what makes Herb so successful at what he does? Furthermore, how does the characterization of Clutter make the reader sympathetic about his death?
3. Compare Nancy and Kenyon Clutter’s upbringing to either Dick Hickock’s or Perry Smith’s family background. If Dick or Perry had been raised at River Valley Farm, do you believe their lives would have been different? Alternatively, do you believe they committed the crimes due to something ingrained in their natures? Explain your answer.
4. Compare what life is like in Holcomb, Kansas, before and after the murder. In what ways does the incident affect the community?
5. How would you describe Capote’s style of writing? How does his writing style affect the pace of the book?
6. It appears that Perry admires and trusts only one person, and that is his fellow inmate, Willie-Jay. What is it about Willie-Jay that Perry likes so much, and why does he trust him?
7. Explain in depth why solving the Clutter case is so important to Alvin Dewey and how Dewey’s involvement with the investigation helps characterize him.
8. The book ends with these lines: “Then, starting home, [Dewey] walked toward the trees, and under them, leaving behind him the big sky, the whisper of wind voices in the wind-bent wheat.” What message do you believe Capote is trying to convey to readers with these concluding words?

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Part 1: Section 1 – Central Characters

Vocabulary

abstemious – refraining from drinking alcohol
changeling – a child secretly exchanged for another
despondency – a feeling of being downcast; hopelessness
enigma – a mystery
ethereality – delicateness
ineffable – defying expression or description
keening – wailing
melancholy – gloomy
reticent – quiet or reluctant to speak
roguish – mischievous; deceitful
unmarred – pure

1. From what point of view is the novel written, and how does the type of narration affect how the book is read?

2. Where is Holcomb located?

3. Herb Clutter is a successful farmer in Holcomb, and he owns the River Valley Farm. What are some characteristics ascribed to him?

4. For what large event is the Clutter family planning that will soon take place at their farm?

Part 2: Section 1 – The Investigation Begins

Vocabulary

annihilating – devastating
peculiarities – odd traits or habits
potentialities – potential abilities
prevarications – lies
promontory – a high point of land
solemnized – married

1. What do the death certificates state was the cause of death for all of the Clutters?

2. Alfred Stoecklein helps cleanup of the Clutter household following the murders. He claims that people have been talking about him and his wife. Why have the locals attach the Stoeckleins' names to the murders?

3. Who is Alvin Dewey?

4. What are the names of the three Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) agents who come to Garden City from Topeka?

5. Why does the lead investigator doubt that only one individual is responsible for the crime?

23. Dewey cannot find a “meaningful design” to the murders. What conclusion does he draw about the crime?

24. How much money did Perry and Dick get from robbing the Clutters?

25. When Dick and Perry are brought to the jailhouse in Garden City, how does the large crowd react as the two are led inside?

Part 4: Section 2 – The Trial

Vocabulary

auditors – listeners
contrition – sincere remorse
dirge – a song mourning the dead
languid – lifeless; lacking energy
ministrations – acts of care
pathological – caused by disease
staid – composed; fixed
stealthy – marked by caution
vicissitudes – changes or variations

1. The only member of the Clutter family to attend the trial is Herb's younger brother, Arthur. Why does Perry focus on him for a brief moment?

2. What does Perry's relative lack of response to Arthur reveal about his character?

3. What causes Hickock's father to believe that Judge Tate is prejudiced against the defendants?

4. Floyd Wells testifies, and the defense addresses his criminal past and his indirect role in the murder, telling Dick about the Clutter estate. Why does he still prove to be an effective witness for the prosecution?
