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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



In Cold Blood

by Truman Capote

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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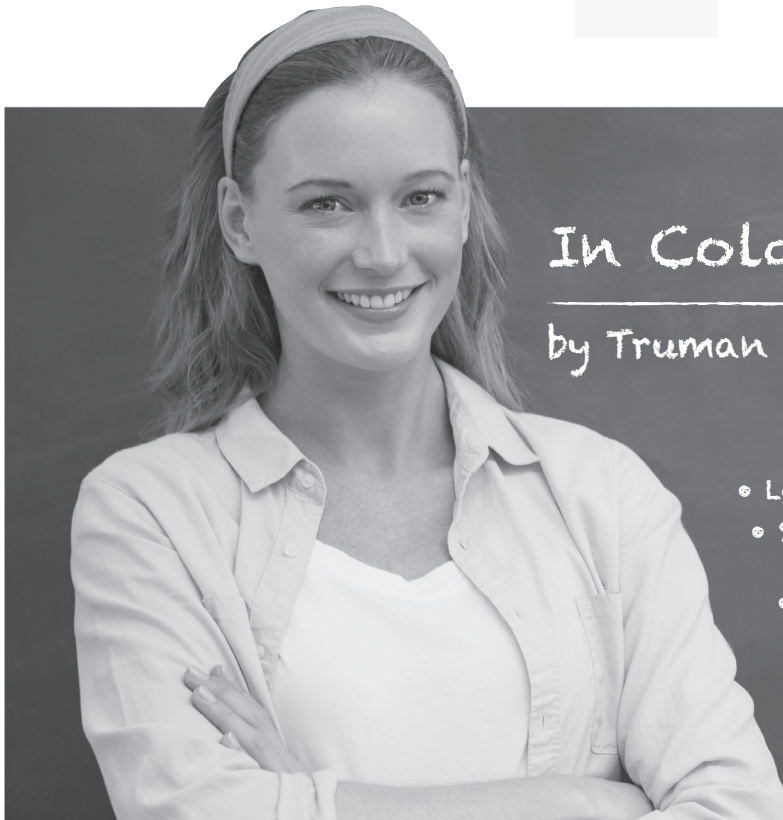
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ISBN: 978-1-60843-978-2

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Item No: 304347

In Cold Blood

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.

In Cold Blood

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?

In Cold Blood

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?

5. What objects signal to Dick that he has found the correct house for the score?

6. Why do Nancy Ewalt and her father suspect that something is not right at the Clutters' house?

7. Who are the first two people to discover the bodies of the Clutter family?

8. Mr. Hendricks, Nancy Clutter's teacher, and the Sheriff go into the house to search the scene. When Mr. Hendricks first sees Nancy in her bed, he thinks she was murdered before she went to bed. Why does he think this?

9. Upon seeing Herb's eyeglasses, why does Mr. Hendricks believe that wherever Herb is in the house, he is not there of his own accord?

10. All four of the murdered Clutters had been tied up with rope and shot with a shotgun. What is different about what the killers did to Herb?

Part 3: Section 1 – Investigating a Big Break in the Case

Vocabulary

ambivalent – undecided
corroborated – confirmed
dissuaded – persuaded not to do something
egomaniacal – conceited
emaciated – thin
ominous – warning danger
palliatives – anything that relieves the symptoms of an illness but does not cure it
timbre – pitch or tone

1. Why does Floyd Wells believe he knows who committed the Clutter murders when he hears news of it on the radio?

2. Dick told Wells that he and Perry were planning to rob and kill the Clutters when they got out. Why did Wells not talk them out of it?

3. Why does Wells wait before telling the authorities the information he has about Dick and Perry?

4. Why does Wells finally speak out?
