



visit educatguides.com for free VCE english resources

A short guide to: In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

written by Jonathan Wong

Author Bio

Name: Truman Capote

Key facts:

- American writer, playwright and actor, born September 1924
- *In Cold Blood* (1966) is considered his best work
- Childhood friends with Harper Lee (author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*)

Mini Plot Summary:

The novel details the real-life murders of the Clutter family in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas. It is a fictionalised version of true events, and the majority of the story is told from the point of view of the murderers, Richard ‘Dick’ Hicoock and Perry Smith.

Extended Plot Summary:

The story starts in Holcomb, Kansas, which is described as a ‘lonesome’ and isolated place. The residents of Holcomb are a ‘prosperous people’, and an example of this prosperity is the Clutter family, who own their own farm and ranch.

There are four members of the Clutter family: Herb Clutter (father), a charismatic man who is much liked amongst the Holcomb community. Bonnie (mother), a nervous woman

who does not like to socialise. Their children Nancy (daughter) and Kenyon (son) are well-adjusted teenagers.

In the middle of a mid-November night, Dick and Perry break into the Clutter ranch and proceed to murder the entire family. These 'four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives' send shockwaves through the small town of Holcomb.

The story then shifts perspective, following Dick Hickok and Perry Smith. Dick and Perry are two ex-criminals who have learned that Herb Clutter owns a safe in his ranch containing a lot of money.

Capote paints a detailed portrait of these men's lives. Perry is described more sympathetically by Capote, and it is mentioned that he has an interest in the arts, and literature, and that he has some talent for music. Perry's legs are abnormally short due to a motorcycle accident that occurred in his childhood, and his upbringing is explained to have been rough and traumatic. Dick is a 'normal' man, raised in a normal household, although his criminal history is highlighted; he used to write bad checks when he was younger in order to make money for himself.

When Dick and Perry reach the Clutter ranch, they soon discover that there is very little money to steal. They decide to kill the Clutters anyway, shooting each member of the family in the head with a shotgun.

Dick and Perry soon flee to Kansas City, where Dick writes bad checks to keep them afloat. Not long after, however, they flee again to Mexico - Perry has fantastical dreams of a 'skin-diving, treasure-hunting life'. Perry is noticeably dependent on Dick (and far more naive than him), and Dick is clearly the leader of the two criminals.

Meanwhile, back in Holcomb, fear and disbelief has spread quickly throughout the town. 'Locks and bolts are the fastest-going item' and the town's citizens are faced with 'the unique experience of distrusting each other'. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI), led by Alvin Dewey, begin searching for clues, although they are initially unable to make much progress.

The case is soon solved when Floyd Wells - a former cellmate of Dick's - informs authorities about Dick's plan to rob and murder the Clutters. The KBI begins a manhunt for Dick and Perry.

Dick and Perry - who have run out of money in Mexico - soon return to the United States. Capote provides us with an extended biography of Perry, whose childhood is described as horrific. He was very poor, and he did not have access to a proper education, and he was ultimately placed in a Catholic orphanage where he was beaten by the 'Black Widows'.

Dick and Perry spend some time writing bad checks, but after running out of money again, they soon make their way to Las Vegas. Perry has posted some of his belongings from Mexico (including a pair of boots worn on the night of the murder that will become a key piece of evidence against him). Dick and Perry are arrested right before they stop to collect a box containing some of these belongings.

After a long and arduous set of trials (Dick and Perry are put on Death Row for years), the court ultimately finds them guilty and sentences them to death. Questions are raised by Capote concerning the fairness of the judicial system in the United States.

After their last appeal is denied, Dick and Perry are hanged on April 14, 1965.

Overarching Themes:

The illusion of the American Dream

- The community of Garden City and its 'suburb', Holcomb, are significantly affected by the murder of the Clutters
 - Prior to the murders, there is a sense of 'contentment', and 'children are safe to run free'
 - It was a place where 'drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings' simply did not occur
 - But after the murders:
 - People feel alienated and disoriented
 - They feel as if they have been 'told there is no God'
 - People become suspicious and wary of each other

- The inability to live the American Dream can lead individuals to a life of crime
 - The murder central to the plot – the murder of the Clutter family – seems to be the result of murderers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock’s inability to respectively achieve the American Dream and reveals its flaws
 - Perry
 - Haunted by memories of a childhood wracked by poverty and abuse
 - ‘When he was seven years old, a hated, hating half-breed child living in a California orphanage run by nuns’ (need to integrate)
 - He is never able to achieve the American Dream of a middle-class existence
 - Dick
 - Is frustrated by the normal means by which he might achieve the American Dream
 - He turns to a life of crime
 - Primarily through “hanging paper” (writing bad checks) and, ultimately, hatching a plan with Perry to rob the Clutters

The influence of family and one’s upbringing

- A positive upbringing is advantageous in life
 - Contrast:
 - The Clutter family, particularly the children, who have grown up with material advantages
 - Perry
 - Suffered a horrific childhood
 - He was:
 - Rejected by his alcoholic mother
 - Deprived of access to an education
 - Never experienced emotional intimacy and security with another human
 - When he sought help from his father, he simply 'told [Perry] to

be good and hugged [him] and went away' (p.139)

- He was placed in a Catholic orphanage:
 - He was beaten by the 'Black Widows' (p.139) for wetting the bed
 - He was then placed in a children's shelter run by the Salvation Army where he was exposed to even worse abuses
 - These experiences taught him the 'evil' (p.139) of which people are capable
 - He then signed up for Merchant Marines
 - Where 'the queens on ship wouldn't leave me alone' (p.140)
 - 'the same problem came up' (p.141) years later when he was in the army
 - He was rejected and ostracised by his sister:
 - She tells him he cannot blame others for his childhood and must take responsibility
 - (need quotes)
- The portrayal of Perry provokes the reader to consider that he was not a natural-born killer
 - It is arguable that Perry's actions resulted from an unhappy childhood:
 - That he was not born evil
 - That he might have been 'savable'
 - Capote suggests that if Perry had received love and kindness, rather than growing up 'without direction' and '[without] any fixed sense of moral values]' then his life might have turned out very differently
 - His criticism is aimed not only at Perry's family, but also at institutions like the orphanage that enhanced Perry's homicidal potential by traumatising him rather than caring for him
- Capote believes that Dick and Perry's criminal tendencies are a consequence of mental illness, which questions the extent to which they are responsible for the murders
 - Capote points to a variety of evidence deemed inadmissible, including:

- Dr Jones' belief that Perry's:
 - 'Ability to separate the real situation from his own mental projections is very poor'
 - And that his 'present personality structure is very nearly that of a paranoid schizophrenic reaction'
 - Dr Jones' conclusions being corroborated by Dr Joseph Satten of the Menninger Clinic, who is a 'widely respected veteran' in the study of 'forensic psychiatry'
 - Dr Satten contends that when Smith attacked Mr Clutter he was under a mental eclipse, 'deep inside a schizophrenic darkness'
 - This conclusion seems to fit with Perry's statements that '[he] didn't want to harm the man' and that '[he] didn't realize what I'd done till [he'd] heard the sound'
 - Capote's decision to present this compelling (but inadmissible) evidence, shows us that the jury perhaps should have been privy to this expert testimony
- The portrayal of Perry provokes the reader to consider that his criminal tendencies are a result of nurture, rather than nature
 - It is arguable that Perry's actions resulted from an unhappy childhood:
 - That he was not born evil
 - That he might have been 'savable'
 - He was a man of talent and sensitivity whose mind was warped by neglect, abuse and trauma
 - '[Perry's] feelings [are]...easily hurt, and so [is Perry's father]'
 - Capote suggests that if Perry had received love and kindness, rather than growing up 'without direction' and '[without] any fixed sense of moral values]' then his life might have turned out very differently
 - His criticism is aimed not only at Perry's family, but also at institutions like the orphanage that enhanced Perry's homicidal potential by traumatising him rather than caring for him
- Economic pressure/poverty in early life can lead individuals to commit acts of crime
 - Perry is unable to live within the boundaries of normal society, which has shaped his decisions/life

- Perry was poor growing up
 - Until the age of five, Perry's parents '[worked] the rodeo circuit'
 - Perry recalls 'Six of us riding in an old truck, sleeping in it, too, sometimes, living off mush and Hershey kisses and condensed milk.'
- The same goes for Dick:
 - His parents, though poor, are 'plain, honest people' (p.171) who provided Dick with a happy childhood
 - Their only fault, it seems, is poverty, which prevented them from sending Dick to college because they 'plain didn't have the money' (p.168)

The fairness (or lack of fairness) of the justice system

- Capote questions whether the criminal proceedings brought against Dick and Perry were carried out in a just manner
 - Specifically regarding Perry:
 - Capote's argument is that the tests/measures used to determine whether he was mentally ill were far too 'colorblind' and that failed to take into account any 'permutations between black and white'
 - Capote laments that Dr Jones is 'confined' and '[made] impotent' by the 'M'Naughten rule'
 - Jones is only able to answer with 'yes or no' regarding the question of whether the defendants 'knew right from wrong at the time of the commission of the crime'
 - Capote thinks that the 'Durham Rule' would have been more appropriate because it was more lenient/flexible
- Capote believes that mental illness was not properly considered by the jury in the case
 - Capote paints a far more complex picture of Perry than is described in the trial in the latter half of the novel
 - He argues that Perry's traumatic experiences contributed to the development of his criminal psychopathology

- He includes Dr Jones' inadmissible findings on both Dick and Perry in the text
 - Dr Jones reveals that Dick shows 'signs of emotional abnormality' and states that 'organic brain damage ... cannot be completely ruled out'
 - Dr Jones also concludes that Dick 'shows fairly typical characteristics' of something resembling 'severe character disorder'
- Capote believes the questions marks over Dick and Perry's mental health call into question the degree to which they are culpable for their actions
 - Perry's culpability is questioned in particular
 - Capote points to a variety of evidence deemed inadmissible, including:
 - Dr Jones' belief that Perry's:
 - 'Ability to separate the real situation from his own mental projections is very poor'
 - And that his 'present personality structure is very nearly that of a paranoid schizophrenic reaction'
 - Dr Jones' conclusions being corroborated by Dr Joseph Satten of the Menninger Clinic, who is a 'widely respected veteran' in the study of 'forensic psychiatry'
 - Dr Satten contends that when Smith attacked Mr Clutter he was under a mental eclipse, 'deep inside a schizophrenic darkness'
 - This conclusion seems to fit with Perry's statements that '[he] didn't want to harm the man' and that '[he] didn't realize what I'd done till [he'd] heard the sound'
 - Capote's decision to present this compelling (but inadmissible) evidence, shows us that the jury perhaps should have been privy to this expert testimony
- Whether capital punishment is justified in this case
 - Inhumanity of capital punishment
 - Capote ponders whether capital punishment is really the most appropriate sanction
 - He considers in particular whether the testimony of the psychiatrists should have been considered

- Their testimonies are not presented at trial, but they are laid out in detail in *In Cold Blood*
 - Capote not only suggests that capital punishment is nothing more than sacrificial violence against the 'poor and friendless', but that it is in itself a cruel practice
 - He graphically describes the hanging of several criminals
 - He notes that Dick's hanging lasted for 'a full twenty minutes' and that he could be heard 'gasping for breath'
 - He describes the sight of Perry's execution: 'childish feet, tilted, dangling'
 - He doesn't feel that this ending represents a 'design justly completed'
- But arguably the inhuman act of hanging Dick and Perry is necessary due to the extreme circumstances
 - Capote implies that justice can only be achieved through the death penalty because of the fact that there is 'no such thing as life imprisonment without... parole' in Kansas
 - Allowing the possibility of parole would result in the people of Holcomb being deprived of closure
 - The state cannot risk Dick and Perry being released back into the community
 - Therefore they do everything possible to ensure the death penalty is given
 - The citizens seem unusually in favour of the death penalty in this case:
 - 'Ordinarily I'm against it. But in this case, no'
 - 'At the time not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them — four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives'
 - When prosecuting attorney Green argues that 'if ever there was a case in which the maximum penalty was justified, this is it' (p.304)

- He speaks for the majority of Kansans, though a few consider the action of hanging a man to be 'pretty goddam cold-blooded too'

Key Characters:

- *Perry Smith*
 - Murdered the Clutter family
 - Naive, idealistic
 - Handsome, but his legs are disfigured
 - Had a traumatic childhood
 - The subordinate partner in his friendship with Dick Hickock
- *Dick Hickock*
 - Murdered the Clutter family
 - Normal upbringing, but his parents were not rich enough to send him to college
 - Has paedophilic inclinations
 - Cold and calculating
 - The dominant partner in his friendship with Perry Smith
- *Herb Clutter*
 - Well-loved, upstanding citizen of Holcomb
 - Successful farmer and rancher - living the American Dream
 - Father of Kenyon, Nancy (and an older daughter, Eveanna) and husband of Bonnie Clutter
 - Murdered, alongside his family, by Perry and Dick
- *Bonnie Clutter*
 - Nervous
 - Suffers from mental illness - depression and social anxiety

Other characters:

- Nancy Clutter (daughter of Herb & Bonnie, liked by all)
- Kenyon Clutter (son of Herb & Bonnie - a nice, introverted boy)

- Alvin Dewey (primary investigator in the Clutter case, works for KBI)
- Floyd Wells (Dick's cellmate in prison, primary informant in the Clutter case)

Key quotes:

'Four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives.'

'The handsome white house, standing on an ample lawn of groomed Bermuda grass, impressed Holcomb; it was a place people pointed out.'

'Eden on earth.' (Herb Clutter re: America)

'Neither Dick's physique nor the inky gallery adorning it made as remarkable an impression as his face, which seemed composed of mismatching parts.'

'Long-jawed ... lips slightly aslant ... nose askew'

'Chunky, dwarfish legs'

'Why this unreasonable anger at the sight of others who are happy or content, this growing contempt for people and the desire to hurt them?'

'...dreadful enemies you carry within yourself - in time destructive as bullets.'

'A natural killer - absolutely sane, but conscienceless'

'He was seven years old, a hated, hating half-breed child living in a California orphanage run by nuns'

'I think there must be something wrong with us. To do what we did.' (Perry)

'Until Perry was five, the team of 'Tex & Flo' continued to work the rodeo circuit. As a way of life, it wasn't "any gallon of ice-cream", Perry once recalled: 'Six of us riding in an old truck, sleeping in it, too, sometimes, living off mush and Hershey kisses and condensed milk.'

‘... it was not an unhappy existence, especially for a little boy proud of his parents, admiring of their showmanship and courage - a happier life, certainly, than what replaced it.’

‘...they get together and gang up on you ... It can make you practically want to kill yourself.’ (Perry re: his time as a sailor)

‘Environment plays an awfully important part in our lives’ (Barbara)

‘We have very little control over our human weaknesses’ (Barbara)

‘It is no shame to have a dirty face - the shame comes when you keep it dirty’ (Barbara)

‘An outstanding athlete’ ... ‘A marks in several subjects’ ... ‘He wanted to go on to college’ ... ‘But we couldn’t do it ... plain didn’t have the money’ (Dick’s father talking about Dick)

‘Concussed his head in a car smash-up. After that, he wasn’t the same boy. Gambling, writing bad cheques. I never knew him to do them things before.’ (Dick’s father talking about Dick)

‘When he came out of Lansing, he was a plain stranger to me’ (Dick’s father talking about the effect of Dick’s incarceration)

‘He can seem so warm-hearted’ ... ‘He can fool you’ (Perry’s mother talking about Perry)

‘That bastard never gave me a chance’ ... ‘Dumb. Ignorant. That’s the way he wanted me to be.’