

## ***In Cold Blood* Study Guide**

### **Commentary**

Since the early frontier days, America has been fascinated by violence and outlaws, a fact reflected in the stories and songs of popular culture. Such fascination did not subside as America created a more established order: twentieth century America has produced a number of novels, songs, and, most noticeably, movies, exploring the personalities and terrible deeds of criminals. Movies, such as Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), Terrence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) about the killer Charles Starkweather, and more recently, Spike Lee's *Summer of Sam* (1999), not only feature the outlaw as a character, but also try to say something serious about the larger American culture in relationship to its outcasts. But whereas in the late nineteenth early twentieth centuries, Americans often viewed outlaws as heroes, as men and women who shared their origins and were acting against institutions they themselves despised, the newer writing and cinema necessarily depict outlaws in a far darker light.

Just prior to this series of movies (now about real criminals opposed to the fictional gangsters of earlier movies), Truman Capote, in 1965, took the logical step of what had been the territory of popular culture and newspapers and turned it into serious art form for which he coined the term non-fiction novel (*The non-fiction novel is a genre that fascinates many readers because it combines historical realities with fictional devices to explore, interrogate, and imaginatively re-create actual events*). The combination was intended to achieve historical accuracy, but was also free to use fictional devices to shed creative light of actual events. Reading about the murder of an entire family in Holcomb, Kansas, Capote arranged to interview the convicted killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. He became fascinated not only with the murderers' personalities and crime, but even more so with the harsh contrast these outcasts and their actions made against the utter normality of the small, mid-western, middle-class town of Holcomb and the nearly unqualified wholesomeness of the family they killed.

Other non-fiction novels of note include: Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) about the writer Ken Kesey's acid commune (another type of outlaws); Norman Mailer's *Armies of the Night* (1968) about Pentagon March Mailer took part in 1967 in protest against the Vietnam War, and *Executioner's Song* (winner of the 1980 Pulitzer Prize) about Gary Gilmore, who after being convicted of robbing and killing two men insisted on being executed for his crime; and Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) about Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination. These books differ from the historical novel in that the central characters are real (not invented), and the writers strive for documentary accuracy where facts are known. The novelists, however, also use fictional devices—such as nonlinear presentation of time, and access to the inner-lives and emotional states of real-life characters (even when the character himself might be inarticulate)—to shed interpretative light upon the events. For example, Capote shapes Perry as an American misfit whose violent aggression is more motivated by social detachment than by than anger. The intent is not, however, to provide a final interpretation or explanation, as say with a work journalism or sociology, but to offer an

interpretation open to further analysis, as with other works of art.

Some critics object to hyphenated art forms, such as the non-fiction novel or the prose-poem, arguing in combining genres neither is done well. This objection, however, is not well founded, because it would close off artistic experimentation and evolution, which is neither desirable nor possible. New art forms evolve as artists (who Ezra Pound once referred to as “the antennae of the race”) express new points of view about their materials. Thus, as serious artists adapt the materials of contemporary current news events and shape them with selected fictional devices, they are giving us insight into who we are and how we live.

One of the insights that can be inferred from these works is that we have become voyeuristic in our fascination with violence and people who act out. Another insight is that our fascination with celebrities, such as Elvis, Marilyn Monroe, President Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald, and a number of well-known serial killers (all of whom have been used as central characters in non-fiction novels) have become the central characters in our individual and collective imagination in the same way that fictional characters, such as Huck Finn, Daisy Miller, Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, and Atticus Finch and his daughter Scout once were. The former fictional creations were models of behavior we could use to help us develop our own character, or they were cautionary examples of what we might become if we did not develop an inner strength of character. Many of the protagonists in today’s literature are central not because of their inner character or lack thereof but their outward fame or infamy.

Much of contemporary fiction and non-fiction, by contrast to the earlier work, seem to suggest that life is more arbitrary than we had imagined. They offer real examples of life, even the well-ordered life suddenly becoming a chaotic nightmare that no inner strength can control or outsmart. The events of the non-fiction novel, because they are real rather than imagined ones, threaten our peace of mind. At the same time that our national leaders are giving optimistic views of our historical economic, social, and technological progress, our literature often casts a pessimistic, dark, and foreboding light on our lives, suggesting our extreme vulnerability to irrational forces.

### **Study Guide for Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, 1965**

**Form:** Non-fiction novel

**Setting:** Kansas, especially Holcomb, and the mid-west, from the Clutter murder in November 1959 to the execution of Smith and Hickock in April 1965 (also includes flashbacks into characters’ pasts).

**Structure:** The work is divided into four titled sections, 75 to 100 pages each: The Last to See Them Alive, Persons Unknown, Answer, Corner. Within each section, the narrative switches back and forth to focus on the experiences of different characters. Summarize the content of each section (the order in which Capote recounts the events to readers); and analyze the effect of the alternating points of views. Discuss how the

author's structure of the story to some extent shapes the reader's experience and interpretation.

**Narrative Point of View:** Capote, who extensively researched the case, is the narrator; however, he does not include himself in the story. His point of view is mostly objective (told in a documentary, nonjudgmental manner), but it is also sympathetic without being sentimental. Note of interest: Harper Lee, who wrote *To Kill a Mockingbird*, knew Capote as a child and was his research assistant for this book.

**Main Characters:** The central characters are Perry Smith and Dick Hickock, along with the Clutter family: Herb and Bonnie Clutter, and their teenage children Nancy and Kenyon. Nevertheless, to enlarge the scope of the narrative, Capote also details the personalities of many secondary characters, such as Al Dewey, Susan Kidwell, Bobby Rupp, Mr. and Mrs. Hickock, Tex and Flo Smith, Willie-Jay, and Floyd Wells. What do you think is the significance of the secondary characters?

**Recommendation for Reading Strategy:** Read the book in two sittings, two sections at a time. Use the suggestions in "Structure" to help you to keep track of the order of events and the characters and later to analyze their significance.

### Study Questions

1. Discuss the importance of the setting (focus on Holcomb, Kansas).
2. Capote carefully depicts the personalities of secondary characters, such as Al Dewey, for example. Why do you think he does this and what do these detailed portraits add to book? Which of the secondary characters do you find most memorable and why?
3. Capote recounts the story in a certain order, beginning with the day of the murder, and proceeding to the discovery of the bodies, the investigation of the crime and capture of the criminals, and the trial and execution. At what point does Capote depict the murder scene? How does he work Perry's and Dick's backgrounds into the narrative? Think of alternative plot structures that Capote could have used, and analyze why you think Capote structures the events as he does?
4. Discuss the tone of the book (tone reveals the author's attitude toward his material) which is objective (or non-judgmental) but also sympathetic. If you were the writer would you have used the same tone? If not, what tone would you have adopted, and why?
5. *In Cold Blood* is documentary but also literary. For example, in the beginning of the book, as Capote describes the Kansas farmland, he writes: "The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them". Capote, in this brief passage, evokes the pastoral (which suggests the themes of rural life and paradise and fall) and he also evokes the high seriousness of the Greek tragedy (which suggests themes of the state, such as justice, and connects the crimes of individuals to the health or the state). Discuss the relationship between the specific crime and the health of

the state (meaning other citizens and our institutions).

6. Find other salient examples from the text in which Capote uses literary language, and discuss the effects. This exercise increases your appreciation of the text as a work of art, and also increases your sensitivity to and ability to analyze language.

### **Reference**

For further biographical and critical background on Capote and *In Cold Blood*, refer to:

- *Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood": A Critical Handbook*, ed. by Irving Malin (1968)
- *The Worlds of Truman Capote* by William L. Nance (1970)
- *Truman Capote: A Biography* by Gerald Clarke (1988)
- *Truman Capote's Southern Years* by Marianne M. Moates & Jennings Faulk Carter (1996)
- *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career* by George Plimpton (1997)
- *Critical Essays on Truman Capote*, ed. by Joseph J. Waldmeir (1999)
- *The Critical Response to Truman Capote* ed. by Joseph J. Waldmeir (1999)
- *The Southern Haunting of Truman Capote* by Marie Rudisill, James C. Simmons (2000)