

In Cold Blood Study Guide

In Cold Blood by Truman Capote

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

In Cold Blood Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1, The Last to See Them Alive.....	5
Chapter 2, Persons Unknown.....	9
Chapter 3, Answer.....	12
Chapter 4, The Corner (Section 1, from arrival in Kansas to the trial).....	15
Chapter 4, The Corner (Section 2, appeals and execution).....	18
Characters.....	21
Symbols and Symbolism.....	27
Settings.....	29
Themes and Motifs.....	31
Styles.....	33
Quotes.....	35



Plot Summary

In *Cold Blood* is the ninth published work by celebrated writer, Truman Capote. This work is Capote's attempt to create the nonfiction genre, a new direction in publishing in its time. In this book, Capote explores the true story of the murders of the Clutter family in rural Kansas. The Clutters were found in their home on the morning of November 15, 1959. They had been bound and shot. News of this murder spread throughout the community, causing fear and outrage, as the search for the killers unfolded. Capote follows this search, as well as the capture, confession, and trial of the two men responsible. *Cold Blood* is a first of its kind, true crime narrative that continues to be controversial even as it approaches the fiftieth year of its publication.

Herb Cutter was a well-known and much respected wheat farmer in rural Kansas. A college educated man, Cutter once held a position as the Finney County agricultural agent. However, as a born farmer, Cutter settled down to own his own farm/ranch, River Valley Ranch. Here, Cutter raised cattle and wheat, as well as four children, Eveanna, Beverly, Nancy, and Kenyon. Cutter also cared for his long ailing wife, Bonnie.

The last day anyone saw Herb Cutter alive was on November 14, 1959. He had spent that day working on his farm, attending a local 4-H meeting, and buying a large insurance policy to care for his farm in the event of his death. It was an ordinary day that his daughter wrote about in her diary with simple, direct statements.

The following morning, a family friend who made a habit of attending church with the Cutter family, arrived at the house to find it unusually silent. This friend, also called Nancy, went with her father to ask another friend who also attended church with the Cutters if something had happened to cause the family to sleep in. Together the two girls returned to the Cutter home to find their friend, sixteen year old Nancy Cutter, bound and shot. Upon the arrival of the police, the bodies of the remaining three Cutters still living at home were found. They were the bodies of Herb Cutter, Bonnie Cutter, and Kenyon Cutter.

Immediately upon the news of the murders, people in the small town of Holcomb began to fear their neighbors, convinced someone local could be the only possible suspect. A special unit of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation was formed specifically to investigate the case. In fact, Alvin Dewey became so obsessed with the case that it took a physical toll on him.

As Dewey and his team searched for clues as to who might have had motive to kill the Clutters, the killers fled first to Mexico and then to various points across the southern states, including Florida and Texas, before finally getting caught in Las Vegas with critical evidence tying them to the case. A tip from a former cell mate of killer, Dick Hickock, led to the pursuit of Hickock and his partner, Perry Smith. Upon arrest, Hickock made a full confession, pinning the murders on Smith. Smith refused to confess until he learned that Hickock had told police a story Smith himself had told to Hickock in confidence during their brief time as cellmates in prison. Smith then confessed to the

crime, matching Hickock's story closely until he claimed that Hickock killed Nancy and Bonnie. Smith would later try to retract this part of his confession.

Hickock and Smith were put on trial for the murders of the Clutter family in the spring of 1960. After their conviction, Hickock and Smith were taken to the Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth County, Kansas, to await their execution. The executions were delayed multiple times as Hickock wrote to, and finally convinced, a few lawyers that their trial was unconstitutional and to fight for a new one. Once all their appeals were denied, however, Hickock and Smith were hung on April 14, 1965.



Chapter 1, The Last to See Them Alive

Summary

Holcomb is a small village in southeast Kansas, just outside Garden City, Kansas. Holcomb consisted mostly of wheat farmers in 1959. No one had ever heard of Holcomb until the murders of the Clutter family on November 15, 1959.

Herb Clutter was a healthy, forty-eight year old man in November of 1959 as attested by the insurance physical he had shortly before his death. On the morning of November 14, 1959, Clutter woke later than usual on his farm, River Valley Farm, because he had stayed up late the night before waiting for his daughter to return from a movie. Clutter was upset with his sixteen year old daughter Nancy. Her long time beau, Bobby Rupp, had brought her home, in spite of the fact that Clutter had previously asked Nancy to stop seeing Bobby exclusively. Clutter felt that she was ignoring this advice. Upon getting up that morning, Clutter spoke with his only resident employee, Alfred Stoecklein, who informed him that one of his children was ill and he wanted to take the day off to take the child to the doctor. A kind employer, Clutter gave his approval.

At the same time Clutter was beginning his routine on River Valley Farm, Perry Smith was sitting in an Olathe, Kansas diner waiting for his friend, and former prison cellmate, Dick Hickock, to pick him up. Dick was running late, however, allowing Perry time to think about his situation and the fact he was told not to come back to Kansas after his release from prison.

Nancy Clutter was awakened that last morning by a phone call from a neighbor wanting to know if she could teach the neighbor's daughter to make a cherry pie. Already booked for the day with plans to help another student with her music lessons and a 4-H meeting with her father, Nancy sought permission from her father to skip the 4-H meeting. Nancy was like that, the kind of person who was so generous with her time that she was often busy night and day. That same morning, Nancy also spoke with her best friend, Susan Kidwell, the daughter of a local music teacher.

After Dick picked up Perry, they spent the morning overhauling Dick's elderly Chevrolet in preparation for a plan Dick had carefully put together for the two of them.

After helping the neighbor's daughter make a cherry pie, Nancy left her to her mother in order to help another student with her trumpet solo. Nancy's mother, Bonnie Clutter, was known to have mental problems that had left her hospitalized multiple times over the last decade. For this reason, she was often awkward around outsiders, leaving them feeling uneasy. It was also for this reason that Bonnie Clutter was known to sleep the days away, most often in her eldest daughter Eveanna's room.

The two young men, Dick and Perry, spent a few minutes cleaning up after working on the car, both fastidious young men who took pride in their appearance. Dick, twice



married and the father of three boys, was self-conscious of his appearance because of a car accident that left his facial features slightly out of balance. Perry, too, had been in an accident. His accident was on a after his release from prison. It left him with horrible scars on his legs and in almost constant pain. This was also the cause of something of an aspirin addiction.

Back in Garden City, Clutter attended a 4-H meeting with his fifteen year old son during which he recognized a neighbor of his from Holcomb, Mrs. Ashida, by suggesting she be the recipient of an award at their Achievement Banquet the following week. Clutter then gave Mrs. Ashida a ride home, during which she praised his community activities and suggested he could talk his way out of almost anything.

As the Clutters worked through their day, Dick and Perry began the drive to Holcomb, stopping once to buy tape and rope, as well as argue over the benefit of using stockings to hide their identities.

Kenyon, the youngest of the Clutter family and the only son, was just finishing a chest he had made for his sister Beverly's intended marriage in December. Afterward, Kenyon went outside to help Mr. Helm, the husband of the family's housekeeper, to weed his mother's garden. Mr. Helm would be one of the last to speak to Kenyon.

As Perry waited outside for Dick to buy black stockings at a Catholic hospital, he thought about another inmate at the prison, Willie-Jay. Willie-Jay was an older man Perry came to respect during his time in prison because of his maturity and his intelligence. It was in part because of Willie-Jay that Perry came back to Kansas, in hopes of seeing him upon his release from prison. Unfortunately, Perry missed Willie-Jay by a matter of hours.

At River Valley Farm, Clutter spent several hours in conversation with Bob Johnson, his local insurance representative, about a life insurance policy Clutter had been considering buying for some time. During that meeting, Clutter finally bought the policy, handing Johnson a check just before he left. Later that evening, Bobby Rupp came to River Valley Farm to watch television with Nancy, Kenyon, and Herb Clutter. Rupp remembered in a subsequent interrogation the programs they watched and how Nancy walked him out after the news. The last entry in Nancy's diary, written that night, would confirm Rupp's story in short, direct statements.

Dick and Perry stopped in Garden City for gas. The attendant would remember them because something about Dick left him with a bad feeling. At the same time, Perry, apparently ill, locked himself in the bathroom for a considerable amount of time.

Nancy Ewalt arrived at River Valley Farm at seven the following morning in order to attend church with the Clutters as she did every Sunday. However, Nancy and her father were surprised to find no one around at the Clutter house. Nancy's father drove her to Susan Kidwell's apartment, hoping Susan, who also attended church with the Clutters, might know what was going on. Neither Susan, nor her mother, knew anything. For this reason, Susan returned to River Valley Farm with Nancy. Susan and Nancy



entered the house alone and made their way through the kitchen to Nancy's bedroom on the second floor where they found her dead. Mr. Ewalt entered the house to use the phone, but he discovered that the phone lines had been cut. The Ewalts and Susan returned to Susan's apartment to call the sheriff. Another teacher, Mr. Hendricks, was alerted. He returned to the farm with Mr. Ewalt to meet the sheriff. Mr. Ewalt and Mr. Hendricks accompanied Sheriff Robinson into the house where they found Nancy and Bonnie, each in their separate bedrooms, both bound and shot. A deputy, Wendle Meier, entered the house and found the body of Kenyon Clutter in the basement playroom. Herb Clutter's body was then discovered in the basement furnace room.

Word quickly spread of the murders even as the local sheriff began his investigation of the crime scene. Bobby Rupp was devastated by the news, as were many others in town who loved and respected members of the Clutter family.

Analysis

In this first chapter of the book, Capote begins his narrative with an authorial voice that gives the reader many facts about the setting of the book before a single character is introduced. In doing this, Capote begins his story with a sense of small town well-being that is soon to be shattered by his warning that the events about to take place would eventually take the lives of six human beings. By doing this, Capote not only injects some tension into his narrative, but he also appears to express sympathy for both the victims of this story and the perpetrators.

As the chapter begins to unfold, the reader learns a great deal about the Clutter family. A conservative, church-going family, the Clutters were generous and kind in their dealings with neighbors and friends. The Clutters had their own problems, however, such as Mr. Clutter's dislike of his daughter's serious relationship at such a young age and Mrs. Bonnie Clutter's struggles with depression. In this way, the Clutters were much like any other family of their time, a hardworking family with their own unique struggles.

At the same time, Capote introduces the reader to two young men who appear totally unconnected to the straight-laced Clutters. Dick Hickock was a young man of average intelligence who grew up with two loving parents. Although smart enough to go to college, Dick was denied a college education because of a lack of funds. So, he went to work as a car painter. Dick married a young girl and had two children before a car accident and an affair led to divorce. Dick fell into a life of crime, passing bad checks and committing petty theft, causing him to spend a few years in jail. During this time, Dick's second wife divorced him.

Perry Smith, like Dick, was an intelligent young man who spent time in jail for petty crimes. Perry, however, had a very different childhood from Dick's. Perry's parents were alcoholics who divorced when he was young. Perry spent time in group homes before going to live with his father full time, becoming more of a servant to his father than a growing child. After a falling out with his father, Perry got into trouble while traveling with



a former army buddy, sentenced to five to ten years in prison for theft. It was during his time in prison that Perry met Dick.

Capote shows the journey of Perry and Dick to Holcomb, a journey marked by several stops, including a stop to buy tape and rope as well as a stop in Garden City to buy gas. This suggests to the reader that Perry and Dick are the Clutter's killers, but the reader is not shown the actual murders or told exactly what happened at this point in the novel. Instead, the reader sees Dick's frustration with Perry as Perry struggles with anxiety and chronic pain as well as Dick's clear leadership in his planning of whatever mischief the two men plan to get into that momentous night.

The discovery of the murdered Clutters in such a small town and in such a violent way leaves the community reeling. Capote captures the fear, but he also captures the strength of character of the local people as well as their need to know the who and why of the murders. It is this need that will propel the book throughout its entirety.

Discussion Question 1

Who are the Clutters? Where do they live? What is their lifestyle? How do they spend their final day of life? Why is this significant to the book?

Discussion Question 2

Who is Perry Smith? Why is he in Olathe, Kansas? Why has he been told to stay out of Kansas? Who is Dick Hickock? What is the relationship between Perry and Dick? Why is this important?

Discussion Question 3

Who is the first to discover the murders of the Clutter family? How did they come to discover the murders? What clues are found that first morning in the murders? Why are these clues to play a significant part in the discovery of the identity of the killer?

Vocabulary

Indemnity, honorable, attitude, telegraph, reunion, burial, popular, account, accommodate, fraction, gossip, motive, reaction, amazement, personal, ambulances, steampipe, cord, managed, basement, impression, statement, countenance, bespectacled, entrances, perfection, circumstances, rejoined, utility, properly.

Chapter 2, Persons Unknown

Summary

The Monday after the murders, several friends of Herb Clutter converged on the house to clean the mess the murders left behind, including burning some of the materials not salvageable. At the same time, the Kansas Bureau of Investigation assigned Alvin Adams Dewey, a former sheriff of Finney County and agent of western Kansas as head of the investigative team looking into the Clutter murders. Eighteen men were assigned to the case, including Special Agents Harold Nye, Roy Church, and Clarence Duntz. Dewey almost immediately held a press conference in which he addressed some of the concerns of the community. However, Dewey kept his theories to himself, especially since he was still working on them.

As Dewey began the investigation, he found himself often studying the pictures taken at the crime scene, especially footprints found and revealed by the photos in a piece of cardboard underneath the body of Mr. Clutter. Dewey also studied Nancy's diary, which revealed to him that she suspected someone might have poisoned her cat sometime before the murders. This seemed to add weight to the idea that the murders were committed by someone known to the family, someone local. Dewey's team quickly discovered several local men who might have had a grudge against Clutter big enough to commit murder. Dewey's team also began looking into Bobby Rupp, the last to see the family alive and someone who might have, due to Mr. Clutter's unhappiness with Rupp's relationship with Nancy, a motive to kill.

Fear in the community grew into a frenzy, compelling Arthur Clutter, Herb Clutter's brother, to make the statement that the killer must be someone living in the area. However, the real killers, Dick and Perry, were sitting at that moment in a diner in Kansas City, reading the headlines in the local newspapers. Perry expressed a bad feeling about the investigation, but Dick insisted that the investigation was not even considering someone outside the community.

As Holcomb grieved the Clutters, Perry and Dick fleeced several stores in Kansas City passing bad checks to fund their getaway to Mexico. The only thing to give the men pause as they prepared their trip was Dick's concern that his ailing father would try to cover the cost of the bad checks when he became aware of them.

In Holcomb, Dewey and his family struggled with phone calls night and day from people giving false confessions and information that might or might not be pertinent to the investigation. Working day and night, Dewey went over the evidence in the case, wondering why nothing more was stolen from the home than a radio and some cash from Mr. Clutter's wallet. He also wondered why a gold watch was hidden in the toe of one of Nancy Clutter's shoes. Dewey also struggled with the mattress box on which Mr. Clutter's body was found, the pillow under Kenyon's head, and the blankets pulled up to Nancy Clutter's chin. These things suggested compassion on the part of the killer,



leaving Dewey convinced that there must have been two killers, one kind enough to make the Clutters' comfortable and another cold enough to commit such vicious murder.

Dick and Perry fled Kansas City on November 21, 1959, making their way by car to Mexico City. On the way, Perry spent a lot of time in retrospection, thinking of the story he told Dick about killing a black man in Vegas just to experience it. He also spent time recalling the final moments of Nancy Clutter's life. Perry was quiet, unable to eat during those weeks, while Dick was full of energy. Dick had no problem with eating at every meal.

While Dick and Perry partied in Mexico City with people they had met there, the community of Holcomb continued to change in the aftermath of the murders. Several of the Clutters' neighbors chose to move away out of fear for their safety, while others began locking their doors for the first time in years.

One December afternoon, Paul Helm was working in Bonnie Clutter's garden when he saw someone standing in the window of Bonnie's bedroom. Helm called the sheriff, and a drifter named Jonathan Daniel Adrian was arrested. It was later determined, however, that Adrian had nothing to do with the murders, but he had the bad luck of breaking into the wrong house in possession of a gun similar to that used in the murders.

Dick and Perry discovered that Mexico was not all they thought it would be. As Perry prepared to leave Mexico, he sorted through his things, taking only the things that mattered most to him, which included a letter his father wrote to the prison warden to help in his release and a letter from his sister that his friend, Willie-Jay, analyzed for him. Perry boxed up his other belongings, leaving some with a bartender in Mexico. He mailed the remaining items, including the boots he and Dick wore the night of the murders, to general delivery in Las Vegas.

As Dick and Perry moved up the coast of California on foot, having sold their car, Dewey continued to comb the evidence in hope of finding something he had overlooked.

Analysis

In this chapter, Capote expresses to the reader the profound changes that took place in Holcomb and the outlying community in the aftermath of the murders of the Clutter family. The people of Holcomb were all pretty much convinced that the killer had to have been someone local who knew Herb Clutter and had a grudge against him. Holcomb was so remote a place and so far out of the mainstream that it seemed unlikely that some stranger would be able to do such a thing. For this reason, people began moving away and locking their doors, something they had not considered doing before. The murders of the Clutters would forever alter the community of Holcomb.

As the people of Holcomb dealt with the aftermath of the Clutter murders, Dick and Perry fled to Mexico where Perry had hoped they could find their fortune in treasure. Unfortunately, they discovered that living in Mexico was no easier than anywhere else



without money. For this reason, they decided to return to the United States where they began to hitchhike their way across California.

The investigation into the Clutter murders was important on two levels. First, it was important to find the killer and restore a sense of security to the community. Second, it was important to find the killer in order to keep him from killing again. Dewey became obsessed with the case, becoming physically impacted by the stress of the case as he came to know the Clutters better in death than he knew them in life. Capote paints a picture of Dewey as a cop who took his job deeply seriously, a man who would have put his own life in danger in order to bring justice to this small community.

Discussion Question 1

Why do the people of Holcomb become convinced that the killer of the Clutters is a local person? Why is this an important distinction both in the thoughts of the townspeople and in the investigation?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Dick and Perry flee to Mexico? What do they plan to do there? How do they fund their travels?

Discussion Question 3

Why does the author express how thin Dewey becomes during the investigation? Why does this case become so personal to Dewey? What does this suggest to the reader about the outcome of this case?

Vocabulary

Harmonica, evidently, precedes, acquaintances, pillage, desire, constituted, miscellany, memorizing, indebted, correspondence, continued, truthfully, frustration, compromise, conventionalism, hypocrisy, isolationism, failures, jealousy, registering, affection.



Chapter 3, Answer

Summary

In the late 1940s, Floyd Wells was a field hand who worked nearly a year for Herb Clutter before deciding to move on, not because he was unhappy with the work, but because of a natural wanderlust. Ten years later, Wells was in prison sharing a cell with Dick Hickock. Wells talked about the Clutters frequently because he recalled that time in his life fondly. When Dick took an interest, Wells did not at first realize it was with dark intentions. Later, however, after hearing of the deaths of the Clutter family, Wells would put it together and realize it was Dick who committed the murders. Wells hesitated to tell anyone due to the danger snitching could cause him in jail, but a friend helped arrange for him to meet with the warden without revealing the reason to the general population.

Upon learning of the information Wells gave to the prison warden, Dewey sent Special Agent Harold Nye to investigate Dick Hickock. Nye paid a visit to the home of Dick's parents, learning that Dick had taken an overnight trip the night the Clutters were murdered, telling his parents he had gone to Fort Scott to help his friend, Perry Smith, recover some money his sister was holding from him. While in the home, Nye saw a shotgun he ascertained belonged to Dick that was the same as the weapon suspected to have been used against the Clutters.

Nye continued his investigation in Las Vegas where he interviewed the manager of a rundown boarding house where Perry Smith was known to stay while in the city. While there, the manager showed Nye a box of belongings Perry had left behind. From there, Nye went to San Francisco where he visited the sister of Perry Smith who maintained that she had not seen her brother in more than three years. She went on to say that she had never lived in Fort Scott, Kansas, and that she had no intention of ever seeing her brother again. She was too afraid of him.

As Dewey began to close in on Perry and Dick, the killers themselves made their back to Kansas City in a stolen car where Dick again passed bad checks, this time to men he once considered friends. Dewey and his men became aware that Dick and Perry were in Kansas City, but were too late to catch them. Instead, Dick and Perry escaped to Florida where they sat on a beach in Miami Beach reading about the Walker murder, a murder very close in details to the Clutter murders. Perry even suggested that perhaps some nut had tried to recreate the Clutter murders.

After leaving Florida, Perry and Dick made their way to Texas where they picked up a boy and his grandfather. The boy taught Perry and Dick to salvage glass bottles and sell them for change. Perry and Dick then continued on to Las Vegas where they were arrested for parole violations outside the boarding house Perry often frequented. Dewey and his team drove immediately to Las Vegas to interrogate the men. Nye and Church interrogated Dick while Dewey and Duntz interviewed Perry. At first, Nye and Church allow Dick to believe he had only been picked up on a parole violation, asking him



questions about his whereabouts over the past six weeks. Slowly the men move closer and closer to the weekend of the Clutter murders, finally revealing to Dick the lies in his story. The following day, when Nye told Dick there was a witness to the murders, Dick cracked. He gave a confession to participating in the murder of the Clutter family, but he denied that he had committed any of the murders himself.

After Dick's confession, the KBI agents transported them back to Kansas by car. Dick rode with Nye and Church in one car while Perry rode in another car with Dewey and Duntz. During the drive, Dewey quietly tried to goad Perry into a confession by telling him all Dick had said. When Dewey told Perry about Dick telling them of the black man Perry claimed to have killed in Vegas, Dick knew the confession was true. For this reason, Perry confessed as well. The two confessions were similar except in the fact that Perry claimed that it was Dick who shot Bonnie and Nancy.

When Dick and Perry were delivered to the jail in Garden City, a crowd awaited in the cold, but was silent as the prisoners were moved into their cells.

Analysis

In this chapter, the author increases the tension by revealing a former cellmate of Dick's who was, in the end, his connection to the Clutters. The community knew that there must be some connection between the Clutters and their killers. Finally, the author reveals that there was, indeed, a connection. Wells, a cellmate of Dick's in his final weeks in prison, once worked for Hugh Clutter and told Dick of this rich wheat farmer who had a safe in his office in which he often kept as much as ten thousand dollars. It was this, Dick would later confess, that inspired him to drive to Holcomb and rob the Clutters.

A further investigation into Dick and Perry would lead to their arrest in the final days of December, on a date close to Nancy Clutter's birthday. Dick would confess first, but he would claim that he did not take part in any of the killings despite the fact that the robbery was his idea and that he had stressed to Perry as they prepared to go to Holcomb that they could leave no witnesses behind. Later, Perry would also confess after finally being convinced that Dick's confession was real. Perry would claim that he did most of the work in the robbery, tying up the family members and killing Herb Clutter first. However, Perry insisted that it was Dick who killed the two women, Bonnie and Nancy.

The author spends a lot of time on the character of Perry Smith. Perry was a sad young man, a man who had had a dark childhood, whose two siblings had committed suicide, and whose remaining sibling wanted nothing to do with him in light of his criminal activities. Perry had a mother who was an alcoholic who tried to poison him and his siblings against their father and eventually abandoned them to group homes. Perry then had a relationship with his father. He was the only one of four siblings who did, but it was a volatile relationship that left Perry scarred. The contrast between Perry and Dick is stark in some ways, while less noticeable in other ways. Dick had loving parents, a



good home, a wife, and children. Perry had none of these things. Yet they both ended up in prison for petty theft, and they both participated in the murders of the Clutter family.

The author is unclear why he spends so much time on his narration of Perry Smith. Perry seems the more sympathetic because of this amount of narration, but he turns out to be just as guilty of the crime as Dick. It seems contrary to the picture the author has drawn of these characters to have Dick collapse under questioning first since he seemed the more ruthless of the pair, the leader. However, the reader begins to suspect it was Perry who was more of a leader, at least under pressure.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Floyd Wells? What role does he play in the investigation into the Clutter murders? What might have happened to the killers if Wells had not confessed what he knew?

Discussion Question 2

How are Perry Smith and Dick Hickock caught? Who interrogates them? What is learned in these interrogations?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Perry Smith confess to murdering the Clutters during the trip to Kansas? What does Perry claim was his part in the killings? What does Perry claim was Dick's role in the killings? How does this differ from Dick's story?

Vocabulary

Anticipated, visitors, photographed, beckoned, miraculous, assassin, pleadings, ambition, impersonal, expurgated, version, curious, tearjerker, orphanage, plotted, casual, lunatic, fragmentary, indications, erratic, ironic, compassion, conjectured, resumes, reconnoitered, premonition, destiny.



Chapter 4, The Corner (Section 1, from arrival in Kansas to the trial)

Summary

Dick and Perry were taken to the Finney County jail where Dick was placed in general population, but Perry was placed in the women's cell inside the apartment of the undersheriff, Wendle Meier and his wife Josephine. Mrs. Meier spoke to Perry on occasion because of the nearness to her kitchen, even offering to make him his favorite dish of Spanish rice. During his confinement, Perry kept a simple journal, noting some of the events that took place while he and Dick awaited trial. Noted in the journal was a visit from Dewey who came to ask Perry to sign a transcript of his confession. Perry refused, however, because Dewey refused to allow him to change the portion of the confession in which he claimed Dick killed Nancy and Bonnie. Perry changed his story, insisting he did not want Dick's mother to believe he had committed any crime beyond robbery.

Dick and Perry were assigned local lawyers to defend their case. Neither lawyer was pleased with the assignment, but promised to dedicate themselves to the task. Perry's lawyer was an older man, Arthur Fleming, while Dick's was a younger man, Harrison Smith. A short time after their arrest, Dick and Perry were asked to take lie detector tests in regards to the Florida murders of the Walkers. They passed.

Over the months during which Dick and Perry awaited trial, Dick's parents came frequently to visit him despite the fact that his father was struggling with terminal cancer. Perry received no visitors. However, he did receive a letter from a former acquaintance in the Army who sought to befriend him again in his time of turmoil.

During this time, both Dick and Perry thought of escaping. Dick was caught with a shiv he had hoped to use in his escape while Perry attempted to solicit the help of a couple of teens who seemed to find him interesting. Neither attempt went very far.

In preparation for the case, Dick's and Perry's lawyers tried to arrange for an examination of their clients at the psychiatric hospital in Larned. This request was denied in favor of having general MDs in Holcomb examining the men. Instead, the lawyers had one of the doctors from Larned brought in to examine the men in their cells and testify to what he found.

A day before the start of the trial, an auction was held at River Valley Farm to sell all their belongings, including farm equipment and Nancy's beloved horse, Babe, before the property was leased by an Oklahoma rancher.

As jury selection began, Perry and Dick spent the day in court writing out their life stories for the Larned psychiatrist, Dr. Jones. Perry's story was the most detailed of the



two, focusing on violence in his early childhood as he witnessed fights between his parents and later when he was beaten in the group home by a nun for wetting the bed. Dick's focused more on the generosity of his parents in his childhood and his own achievements in both sports and academia.

When the trial finally began, the prosecution opened with Nancy Ewalt and Susan Kidwell. They followed this with Clarence Ewalt, Sheriff Robinson, and the coroner, Dr. Robert Fenton. When Richard Rohleder, the Chief Investigator of the Garden City Police Department, took the stand, the pictures he had taken at the scene were shown to the jurors. The prosecution then ended the day with Floyd Wells. While not surprised by Wells' testimony, Dick was clearly angry. The lawyers tried to suggest that Wells was only testifying because of a deal from the prosecution, but the prosecution quickly got the judge to stop that line of questioning. By Friday, the prosecution wound up their case with testimony from the KBI agents. Dewey's testimony was especially rough for the defense. It was during this testimony that Dick Hickock's mother became emotionally overwrought and had to leave the courtroom.

Donald Cullivan, Perry's former Army buddy and new penpal, arrived in Holcomb during the trial in order to give character testimony for Perry. Cullivan was a kind, religious man who baffled the people of Holcomb by his support of Perry. Cullivan even admitted that his own wife did not understand his choices, but he felt he must support his old friend. Cullivan's testimony, however, did little to help Perry as the prosecution put an end to it before it even got started. The same happened when the Reverend Post, minister from the prison Perry served time at, testified. When Dr. Jones testified for Perry, again the prosecution used legal precedent to shut him down before he could elaborate on his conclusions that Perry was sane, but not sane enough to have made a moral decision in regards to the murders. The same happened when Dr. Jones testified in Dick's behalf.

Closing arguments in the case were impassioned. Logan Green ended the closing arguments with a simple, but heartfelt speech in favor of the death penalty. The jury was out only forty minutes before returning with a guilty plea.

Analysis

In this section of Chapter 4, the author takes the reader through the trial of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith. Both men had confessed, therefore the prosecution had a tight case against them. Thanks to the confession, not only did the prosecution have the boots the men wore the night of the crime, the boots whose prints were captured in the photographs of the cardboard under Mr. Clutter's body, but they also had the remnants of the rope the men had buried the night of the murders as well as the radio and binoculars they stole from the house and sold in Mexico.

The defense put on a good case. They did not attempt to deny guilt in the murders. Instead, they claimed insanity. This defense, however, was shot down at every turn as the prosecution used legal precedent to stop each of the defenses' witnesses from discussing information notmissible in court. For this reason, the defense had almost



no case at all. The author, through giving the reader information denied to the jury, seems to be wondering what might have happened if the evidence had been presented in court. Would the verdict have been different? Would Dick and Perry have been sentenced to death? It seems no one will ever really know.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Perry placed in a different cell than Dick? What are police afraid might happen if they speak to one another?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Perry try to change his confession? In what way does he want to change it? For what reason? What does this suggest about the truth?

Discussion Question 3

What defense does Perry and Dick's lawyers use in court? Why do they not attempt to claim full innocence? Are they innocent? Was justice served by their sentence?

Vocabulary

Courtroom, penetrated, insanity, conviction, punishment, reproduction, interrupted, rabble-rousing, brutal, defendants, enormous, verdict, imprisonment, dignitaries, memory, theological, debate, assignment, intention, corpse, citizenry, fortunate, admirable, penalty, humbleness, amounted, defendants, summation.



Chapter 4, The Corner (Section 2, appeals and execution)

Summary

A week after the verdicts, Dick and Perry are taken to the Kansas State Penitentiary for Men in Leavenworth County, Kansas. They are placed on Death Row, which is in a separate building in the prison complex. The building houses the solitary cells on the first floor and Death Row on the second. When they arrive, Dick and Perry join murderers Earl Wilson and Bobby Joe Spencer, both of whom would be released soon after Dick and Perry's arrival after their sentences were commuted by Governor Docking, a governor notoriously against the death penalty. Spencer, however, would soon return.

Dick and Perry would also share Death Row with notorious killer Lowell Lee Andrews, an eighteen year old boy who killed his entire family in order to inherit his father's modest estate to support his fantasies of being a master criminal. Andrews and Dick would quickly become friends, while Perry felt intimidated by Andrews' intelligence and habit of correcting Perry's grammar, a habit Perry often indulged himself.

Soon after arriving in prison, Perry went on a hunger strike, determined to kill himself before the state could. For weeks he lingered in the prison hospital until the warden brought him a postcard from his father seeking a visit. Perry then decided he would rather make the state fight to kill him.

Two years passed. During that time, several execution dates for Dick and Perry arrived and passed. Dick spent much of that time writing letters to lawyers, trying to find someone who would take on their case and fight the appeals. Dick continued to deny his guilt, swearing up and down that he never killed a single one of the Clutters and did not deserve to be on Death Row. However, when a lawyer finally took an interest in the case and began to file appeals, he did not focus on Dick's innocence, but instead on the legal counsel who defended both Dick and Perry. At one point, everyone involved in the case was given a hearing to look into the possibility that the defendants were unfairly tried by people who were personal friends of the Clutters. Supposedly, those people denied the defendants a change of venue. However, no wrong doing was ever established in the case on the part of the judge, the prosecution, or the defense attorneys.

In 1962, Perry and Dick, as well as the other residents of Death Row, watched from their windows as Andrews' was hung. Three more years passed as Dick and Perry continued to fight in the courts their own execution. In the end, however, their appeals were all exhausted. On April 14, 1965, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith were put to death. Their deaths were witnessed by KBI agents Dewey, Nye, Church, and Duntz.



A month before the executions of Dick and Perry, Dewey went to Valley View cemetery to visit the grave of his father. While there, he ran into Susan Kidwell visiting the grave of Nancy Clutter. They spoke for a moment. Susan told Dewey that she was doing well in college. Susan also told Dewey that Bobby Rupp had married a beautiful young woman.

Analysis

This final section of Chapter 4 brings the story of Dick and Perry to a conclusion. The two men went to prison. Dick handled it well, devoting himself to learning more about the law so he could find a way to fight his execution. Dick had the support of his family. His mother came to visit him regularly even after the death of his father. Perry, on the other hand, fell into a depression after his arrival on Death Row and began a hunger strike that nearly killed him. Perry did not have the support of family. In fact, Perry never saw his father or sister again.

Dick and Perry lived another five years after their conviction while they awaited the results of the appeals process. While other prisoners on Death Row had found success in the sympathy of a governor who did not believe in the death penalty, Dick and Perry were not as lucky. Dick would solicit multiple lawyers who would fight their case all the way to the Supreme Court on several occasions. However, there was nothing fundamentally wrong with their case. Not only that, but the weight of their confessions clearly had to have played a role in not only their convictions, but their inability to find support in the appeals process. In the end, Dick and Perry would be executed for their crime. Dick, however, would profess his innocence until the day of his death, swearing that while he took part in the robbery, he did not take part in the murders.

Capote tells a story in this book that is both compelling and controversial. Still today, there are critics who claim that Capote took too many liberties with his story telling, making up events in order to give the story more of a novel-like feel. However, Capote's story is based in fact. The Clutters were murdered, viciously murdered, for less than fifty dollars. No matter what sympathy, or what excuses, one might have for the killers, that fact remains.

Discussion Question 1

What is The Corner? Why is it called the Corner? What happens there? Do Dick and Perry fear this place?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Perry fast when he is first taken to the state penitentiary? What is his goal? What makes him change his mind?



Discussion Question 3

Who witnesses the deaths of Perry and Dick? Whom did Dick hope would be there? Were they?

Vocabulary

Pronounce, shrouded, execution, enfeebled, document, disconcerting, consciously, conversation, oddity, heralded, produced, occasional, proverbial, circumstances, petitioners, misguided, protection, railroaded, continued, conviction, recipient, salesman, garrotes, notions, ravine, obliging, meanness.



Characters

Herbert William Clutter

Herb Clutter was a wealthy wheat farmer in rural Kansas. Mr. Clutter owned River Valley Farm, a farm where he raised both cattle and wheat. Clutter was well known in his community not only for his good works through his church and the local 4-H club, but also because he once held the position of local agricultural agent. Clutter would sometimes employ as many as eighteen men on his farm/ranch. However, at the time of his death, Clutter employed only two men, one of whom lived on the property in a caretaker's house near the main house.

Clutter was the father of four children. Clutter's two eldest daughters no longer lived at home. Eveanna, the eldest, was married and living in Illinois while his second eldest daughter, Beverly, was away at college and planning her own wedding in less than a month's time. At home were a sixteen year old daughter Nancy and Clutter's only son, Kenyon, who was fifteen.

On the day before his death, Clutter took out a substantial life insurance policy, worried that his severely depressed wife, Bonnie, would not be able to handle the farm alone upon his death. However, medical exams required by the insurance company found the forty-eight year old man to be in perfect health.

On the night of his death, Perry Smith later revealed, Clutter was awakened by Perry Smith and Dick Hickock after they had searched the home for a safe reported to be kept in Clutter's office. Dick wanted Clutter to show him the safe, but Clutter insisted he did not have a safe. According to Perry's confession, Clutter was calm and helpful, assuming that if he helped the two men they would let him and his family go. Even as Perry tied Clutter up in the furnace room of his home, Clutter remained calm. Perry claimed he never had any intention of killing Clutter, but something caused him to snap and he cut Clutter's throat. As Perry watched Clutter struggle with the wound, he decided to shoot him in the head with Dick's shotgun to put him out of his misery. Perry then killed the rest of the family to protect himself and Dick from their testimony in Clutter's death.

Bonnie Fox Clutter

Bonnie Clutter was Hugh Clutter's wife. Bonnie was a quiet woman who suffered terrible headaches and depression. For the past decade, Bonnie had become more and more of a recluse, spending much of her time in bed, sleeping the day away. Bonnie was often in and out of hospitals. In fact, Bonnie had recently been released from a hospital where the doctors claimed a problem with her spine was the cause of her pain and depression. This had given Bonnie hope, causing her to come out of her depression



temporarily the Friday night before her family was murdered. That night Bonnie dressed up and attended a school play featuring her daughter in one of the lead roles.

The day before her death, Bonnie spent some time in the kitchen of her home, entertaining a neighbor's daughter while she waited for her mother to come pick her up. Afterward, Bonnie returned to bed where she was often most comfortable in recent years. That night, Bonnie would wake to the sounds of two men in her home. Bonnie was tied up in her bed and was found the following morning with a shotgun wound on the back of her head.

Nancy Clutter

Nancy Clutter was Herb and Bonnie Clutter's sixteen year old daughter, the third daughter in a family of four children. Nancy was a kind, gentle young girl who always made time for other people in the neighborhood who needed help as well as for her own scholastic pursuits. From the time she was allowed to date, Nancy had been seeing a neighbor boy, Bobby Rupp. However, Nancy's father had recently taken exception to the relationship, afraid Nancy was becoming too serious with an unsuitable boy at too young an age. Nancy respected her father enough to want to do as he asked, but loved Bobby enough to refuse to break up with him immediately.

The day before she died, Nancy spent the morning helping a neighbor's daughter bake a cherry pie and the afternoon helping another young girl with a musical solo. That night Nancy invited her boyfriend, Bobby, over to watch television with the family rather than test her father's resolve over the relationship by going out with Bobby. Afterward, Nancy wrote about the day in short, direct sentences in her diary. Sometime after making that diary entry, Nancy became aware of the presence of two men in the house. Nancy hid a gold watch in the toe of one of her shoes. Perry Smith later claimed that Dick Hickock sat alone with Nancy in her room, speaking to her in a way that led Perry to believe Dick had a sexual interest in Nancy. For this reason, Perry sent Dick away to search for the safe Floyd Wells claimed Mr. Clutter had in his office while he, Perry, spent time telling Nancy his life story. Later, after tucking Nancy into her bed, Perry would take her life with a shotgun.

Kenyon Clutter

Kenyon Clutter was the youngest child and only son of Hugh and Bonnie Clutter. Kenyon was fifteen, a gentle young man who spent his final day of life working on a hope chest for his older sister, Beverly, who was to be married that December, and weeding his mother's beloved garden with the housekeeper's husband, Paul Helm. The morning of November 15, 1959, Kenyon's body was found by Deputy Sheriff Wendle Meier on a couch in the basement of the Clutter home. It was later confirmed in Perry Smith's confession that Perry tied Kenyon up there and placed a pillow under his head when Kenyon began to cough. Perry killed Kenyon with a single shotgun blast to the head.



Perry Edward Smith

Perry Smith was the son of a couple who worked as rodeo performers. The couple was happy until they were both injured and forced to retire. For a time, the family traveled around the country, picking up odd jobs here and there. Perry's mother became an alcoholic, eventually leaving Perry's father with the children. Perry's mother told the children that their father was a horrible person, turning them away from him. Perry became involved in petty crimes as a young child, moving in and out of group homes as a result. While in these group homes, Perry was often abused by those paid to care for him because of a bladder problem that caused him to frequently wet the bed.

As a pre-teen, Perry went to live with his long estranged father. Perry's relationship with his father was often volatile. Perry would leave his father's company from time to time. Once when Perry separated from his father, he went into the Army. While there, Perry made the acquaintance of many people, one of whom he teamed up with several years later to rob an office supply store. It was this crime that landed Perry in prison in Kansas. During his time in prison, Perry met Dick Hickock.

After getting paroled, Perry was warned to stay out of Kansas. Perry stuck to this for some months, but two things happened that made him change his plans. First, Perry learned that a friend of his from prison, Willie-Jay, was being released. Perry hoped to arrive in Kansas City at the same time as Willie-Jay so they could reunite. Second, Perry had received a letter from a former cellmate, Dick Hickock, telling him that Dick had a job in Kansas that he needed Perry's help with. When Perry missed Willie-Jay at the bus station, he decided to look up Dick.

Dick convinced Perry to go along with a robbery he had planned against a wheat farmer in Holcomb. Dick planned the robbery, even coming up with the cover story of visiting Perry's sister in Fort Scott. Afterward, Perry convinced Dick to go with him to Mexico to become treasure hunters. They never actually hunted treasure, but spent what little money they had on girls and alcohol before returning to the United States to find quicker ways to make money. Several weeks later, Perry and Dick were arrested in Las Vegas on parole violation only to discover the police had a witness tying them to the murder of the Clutter family.

Dick confessed to murder of the Clutters after hearing some details of Dick's conversation with KBI agents. Perry told Agent Dewey that he killed Mr. Clutter and Kenyon while Dick killed Bonnie and Nancy. Later, however, Perry tried to retract this portion of his confession, claiming he actually killed them all. Perry was convicted alongside Dick and sentenced to death. Upon arriving at Death Row, Perry tried to kill himself by refusing to eat. However, a postcard from his father encouraged him to stop. Perry ended up dying quietly by execution on April 14, 1965.



Richard Eugene Hickock

Richard Eugene Hickock, or Dick, grew up in Kansas on his parents' small farm. Dick was a good student, but missed out on college because of a lack of money. Dick married a young girl and had two children with her. After a car accident that left Dick with a head injury, Dick turned to a life of crime. Dick also became involved with another girl, causing her to become pregnant. Dick married that girl, but she divorced him when he went to jail for passing bad checks.

While in prison, Dick met a man, Floyd Wells, who told him about a wealthy wheat farmer who had a safe where he often kept upwards of ten thousand dollars. This information led Dick to imagine how simple his life would be if he could steal the contents of this safe. For this reason, Dick asked his friend, and former cellmate, Perry Smith to come to Kansas and help him commit this robbery.

Dick and Perry went to the home of Herb Clutter on November 15, 1959, and killed Herb, his wife Bonnie, and their children Nancy and Kenyon. Afterward, Dick and Perry went on the run, going first to Mexico, then California, Kansas, Florida, Texas, and finally Nevada where they were arrested in Las Vegas. Dick quickly confessed to the murders of the Clutters, but claimed that Perry was the one who actually committed the murders. After the trial, Dick studied the law to find a way to get off of Death Row, but would never find a foolproof plan. Up to the moment he was executed, Dick proclaimed his innocence in the murders of the Clutter family.

Special Agent Alvin Dewey

Special Agent Alvin Dewey was a long time agent with the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, as well as former Finney County Sheriff, when he was made the chief investigator in the Clutter murder case. Dewey quickly immersed himself in the case, becoming so obsessed that he began to suffer physically as he searched for the killer. Dewey got to know the Clutters better in death than he believed they knew themselves in life.

Upon learning of Floyd Watts' confession in prison as to telling Dick Hickock about the Clutters, Dewey sent special agent Nye to investigate the two former convicts. Circumstantial evidence quickly built up against Hickock and Smith, leaving Dewey determined to find them and arrest them. When the arrest was finally made, Dewey interrogated Smith himself while Nye and another agent interrogated Hickock. Upon Hickock's confession, Dewey began carefully encouraging Smith to confess as well. When Smith finally did confess, his confession mirrored Hickock closely except for one important fact. Hickock put the murders themselves at Smith's door while Smith claimed they both committed the murders.

At trial, it was Dewey's testimony that had the most weight against Hickock and Smith. Later, Dewey would attend the execution of both Hickock and Smith.



Special Agent Ron Nye

Special Agent Nye was a member of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation team that was appointed to investigate the Clutter murders. It was Nye who did a great deal of the background investigation into the suspects, Richard Hickock and Perry Smith. Nye interviewed Dick's parents, during which he first learned of Dick and Perry's supposed trip to Fort Scott the night of the murders. It was also during this interview in which Nye spotted Dick's shotgun, the same type and caliber used in the murders.

Agent Nye also interviewed Perry Smith's sister, learning about his dark childhood and her fear of him. Agent Nye also investigated Perry Smith's hometown of Las Vegas, an investigation that helped lead to the capture of Perry and Dick in late December, 1959. Nye was one of four KBI agents who attended the execution of Perry and Dick.

Bobby Rupp

Bobby Rupp was Nancy Clutter's boyfriend. Nancy was only sixteen and had only been dating a few years. In that time, Bobby was the only boy Nancy dated. For this reason, Mr. Clutter had recently been attempting to encourage Nancy to break off her relationship with Bobby and begin dating other boys, but Nancy had thus far refused.

On the night of November 14, 1959, Bobby Rupp called Nancy Clutter and asked her on a date. Instead, Nancy invited him to the house to watch television with her, her brother, and her father. Bobby spent several hours at the Clutter home, watching several shows on the television and the news before Nancy walked him out.

Bobby Rupp would be the first suspect when the bodies of Herb, Bonnie, Kenyon, and Nancy Clutter were found on November 15, 1959. However, after several interviews Bobby was cleared of suspicion in the murders. He would later marry another young woman.

Nancy Ewalt

Nancy Ewalt was a classmate of Nancy Clutter. Nancy Ewalt's family did not attend church, so each Sunday her father would drop her off at River Valley Farm so that she might attend with the Clutters. On November 15, 1959, when Nancy Ewalt arrived at the Clutter home, no one answered her knock on the door. Nancy Ewalt tried knocking on all four of the entrances into the home, but none of her knocks were answered. For this reason, Nancy Ewalt returned to her father's car. They discussed the situation and decided to go to the apartment of Susan Kidwell and her mother to see if Susan might know what was happening with the Clutters.

Susan was as surprised as the Ewalts at the Clutters' failure to be awake and ready for church. For this reason, she returned to River Valley Farm with Nancy Ewalt. Together



they went into the house and into Nancy Clutter's room only to find their friend dead. The girls alerted Mr. Ewalt who returned to the Kidwell apartment to call the local sheriff.

Susan Kidwell

Susan Kidwell and Nancy Clutter were best friends. Susan moved to Holcomb as a young child with her newly single mother. Nancy was one of the first to befriend her. They grew very close. Susan was like a sister to Nancy. Susan would be one of the last people to speak to Nancy the day before her death.

On the morning of November 15, 1959, Susan Kidwell woke early in order to be ready to go to church when the Clutters came to pick her up, as they did routinely each Sunday. However, instead of the Clutters, Nancy Ewalt and her father came to Susan's apartment to ask if something had happened at the Clutter home the night before that would explain why they had not answered Nancy Ewalt's many knocks at their door. Unable to explain this oddity away, Susan returned to River Valley Farm with Nancy Ewalt only to find Nancy Clutter, bound and shot, in her bed.

Susan and Nancy had planned to go away to college together. They were to attend the University of Kansas together. Susan went on to college alone, somehow finding a measure of happiness in doing alone what the two of them once planned to do together.



Symbols and Symbolism

Shotgun

Agent Nye finds a shotgun with carvings on the grip at the home of Dick Hickock's parents while investigating the claims by Floyd Wells that Dick Hickock planned to rob the Clutter family. This shotgun later was assumed to be the murder weapon.

Rope

Dick and Perry stopped at a store on the way to Holcomb to buy rope which would be used to tie up the Clutter family. This rope was later found in the Clutter home and remnants found buried in a place indicated in Perry Smith's confession. This rope was used in the trial against Dick and Perry.

Tape

Dick and Perry brought both tape and rope to the home of the Clutter family on the night they murdered them.

Radio

After the Clutter murder, the housekeeper, Mrs. Helm, indicated to police that a radio was missing from Kenyon's room. This radio was later located in Mexico where Perry and Dick had sold it.

Binoculars

In Perry's confession, he indicated to police that he stole a pair of binoculars from Herb Clutter's home office. These binoculars were located in Mexico where Perry and Dick had sold them.

Purse

Upon entering the Clutter house on November 15, 1959, friends of Nancy Clutter, Nancy Ewalt and Susan Kidwell, found Nancy Clutter's purse spilled across the kitchen floor. Moments later, they found the dead body of their friend, Nancy, bound and shot, in her bed upstairs.



Cardboard Mattress Box

Before tying Herb Clutter up in his basement furnace room, Perry Smith pulled a cardboard box for a mattress over so that Clutter would not have to lie on the cold concrete floor. On this cardboard, police later were able to identify two distinct boot prints.

Pillow

Someone placed a pillow under Kenyon Clutter's head after tying him up the night he was murdered. Dewey, the KBI agent in charge of the investigation, thought this might indicate a person with passion, someone who might have known and cared about the Clutter family. Dewey later learns in Perry Smith's confession that Perry did this because Kenyon was coughing and he felt sorry for him.

Boots

Before leaving Mexico, Perry boxed up the majority of his belongings, leaving some with a bartender in Mexico and mailing the other items to the post office in Las Vegas. In the former box, Perry had mailed the boots both he and Dick were wearing the night of the murders. The police would find this box in Perry and Dick's car the day they were arrested, giving them concrete evidence against the pair.

Car

Dick and Perry stole a car from a barn in Iowa during their travels through the United States in the weeks after the Clutter murders. The two men were still driving this car when they were arrested in Las Vegas in late December, 1959.



Settings

River Valley Farm

River Valley Farm was the farm/ranch the Clutter family owned. This farm/ranch was where Mr. Clutter raised both cattle and wheat. Nancy Clutter also had a horse, Babe, that she loved very much that was stabled there. The farm was a large, successful one, due in large part to the new and innovative techniques Herb Clutter learned in college. Clutter was also a kind employer who would often give his employees bonuses.

Holcomb

Holcomb is a small community in southwest Kansas. Holcomb was a tiny community at the time the Clutter family lived there, a place that had been untouched by such tragedy until the night of the Clutter family murders. After the murders, people moved away or began locking their doors, something they had never done before. The Clutter murders forever altered this small community.

Garden City

Garden City is a larger city near Holcomb. Garden City were the majority of the work on the Clutter investigation took place and where the trial was held. Garden City was also impacted by the murders not only by the influx of press during the investigation and trial, but also by the deaths of a family who played a prominent role in the society of the city. Garden City would also be forever altered by the murders of the Clutter family.

Mexico

Perry Smith had always dreamed of becoming a treasure hunter and finding his fortune in Mexico. For this reason, he talked Dick Hickock into going to Mexico after the murders of the Clutter family, but they quickly realized that living in Mexico was just as expensive as anywhere in the states. For this reason, they soon returned to the United States to continue their flight from the police.

Las Vegas

Perry Smith was born in Las Vegas and often called the area home. For this reason, when they learned about Smith and Hickock's possible involvement in the murders, the KBI sent an agent there to investigate Smith's past. This investigation would prove valuable when they later found Smith and Hickock outside a boarding house where Perry Smith often stayed on his visits to the area. It was also in Las Vegas that Dewey

and his agents initially interviewed Smith and Hickock and where Hickock made his confession.

Themes and Motifs

Greed

Dick Hickock was a man who liked to come by money easily. For this reason, Dick became a thief, stealing money through petty thefts and by passing bad checks. Eventually Dick went to prison for his crimes. This did not deter his criminal behavior, but gave him the knowledge to take on bigger and better crimes. From his fellow criminals, Dick learned techniques he might not have learned elsewhere. Dick also learned about a wealthy wheat farmer in Holcomb, Kansas who was said to keep up to ten thousand dollars in a safe in his home office.

Dick spent the final months of his prison time planning the biggest theft of his life. Dick wanted to go to the home of Herb Clutter and steal the contents of his safe. To do this, however, Dick needed help. For this reason, Dick contacted his former cellmate, Perry Smith, and asked him to come to Kansas to help with the robbery. As they began to execute the plan, Dick told Perry on several occasions that they could leave no witnesses. When Perry suggested they wear stockings over their faces to hide their identities, Dick insisted that there were no stockings dark enough to hide the asymmetrical balance of his face that was a result of a car accident. For this reason, he refused to use anything to hide his face.

When Perry later confessed to the murders of the Clutter family, he claimed that Dick woke Herb Clutter intentionally because they could not find the safe. Herb Clutter insisted there was no safe, so Dick insisted that they wake the rest of the family to find what money they could. However, Herb Clutter, who was notorious for never having any cash on his person, had only thirty bucks to offer the thieves. In total, Dick and Perry got about forty bucks from the Clutter family. It was greed that brought them to the Clutter home, but somehow they failed to leave with more than roughly ten dollars a life.

Criminal Behavior

This book takes the reader through the final days of the Clutter family, the aftermath of their deaths, the adventures of their killers, and the trial that led to the execution of said killers. The book does not gloss over the tragic deaths of the Clutter family, a family who by all accounts were kind, generous people, at the hands of career criminals. Though murder was not something either Perry or Dick had committed before, it was the one crime that would make them notorious.

During Dick Hickock and Perry Smith's trial, the defense attorneys had little to work with based on the fact that both men had confessed to the crime. For this reason, the attorneys attempted to use psychiatry to prove that their clients were not responsible for their actions. To claim the men were insane was not a viable option based on legal precedent, so they attempted to bring in a psychiatrist who specialized in a relatively



new field, criminal psychology. However, using legal precedent, the prosecution was able to squash much of what this psychologist had to say.

By publishing the psychiatrist's opinions on both Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, the author attempts to suggest that both men might have had reason other than conscious choice for their criminal behavior. The author seems to take particular interest in Perry Smith's story, suggesting that his abusive childhood was as much to blame for Perry's actions on the night of November 15, 1959, as his own conscious choices. Despite Perry's confession of killing all four of the Clutter family members, the author finds compassion for him and seems to ask the reader, did Perry not suffer enough in his childhood. For this reason, criminal behavior is a theme of the book on several levels.

Death Penalty

This book is about the real life murders of the Clutter family in rural Kansas in 1959. The family, asleep in their own beds, were rudely awakened by a couple of thieves, tied up, and shot in their own home. These deaths not only took the lives of kind, religious people, but it changed the lives of every person in the community where they lived. This once safe little village, a place where almost no one ever locked their doors, became a village of frightened people who no longer felt safe among their neighbors. These murders impacted more than one family, it impacted an entire community.

The arrest and trial of the killers did little to help relieve this fear. Perry Smith and Dick Hickock brought something to this community, a peace of the real world that up to that point had not been a reality in Holcomb. That did not stop the community for wanting some kind of punishment for these men. When the prosecutor asked for the ultimate punishment, the death penalty, the jury had no qualms in giving it to them.

Perry Smith and Dick Hickock went immediately to Death Row after their conviction. There they would live in cells near other notorious killers in the state, including Lowell Lee Andrews. Together, Perry and Dick would watch as Andrews was led to The Corner and hung for murdering his entire family. It was also there where Perry and Dick waited to learn their own fate as their case moved through the appeals process.

In the end, five years after their conviction and nearly six after the murders of the Clutter family, Dick and Perry were put to death by hanging. For this reason, the death penalty is an important part of this book.

Styles

Point of View

Perspective

Truman Capote writes his book from several separate perspectives. The first perspective, that which opens the book, is that of the author's perspective. The author writes in his own voice, describing the tiny village of Holcomb and the impact the murders, and subsequent trial and death of the killers, had on the community. The author then moves into the perspective of the Clutters, telling the reader some background of the family members as well as their activities on the final day of their life. The author also includes a narrative of the killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock as they prepared, on that same, fateful day, to travel to Holcomb. The rest of the novel not only follows the killers as they travel throughout Mexico and the United States, but also the actions of the investigators searching for the Clutters' killers.

Capote's perspective is that of a writer who got to know the townspeople, the investigators, and the killers in the events that unfolded in the days after the murders. Capote traveled to Holcomb in the days after the murders, before the killers were found, and began his research into the crime. For this reason, Capote made friendships in Holcomb, therefore his tone is not completely impartial. Capote also got to know the killers after their arrest, trial, and stay on death row. This comes through in the writing as Capote not only tells their story, but reveals conversations he had with them on Death Row. The reader gets a sense of Capote's connection with Perry Smith as Capote uses more space in discussing Smith in his book than most of the other important players. However, Capote does manage to keep his perspective fairly even, never suggesting his own opinions in more than the addition of information not available to juries or press at the time of the trial.

Language and Meaning

Tone

The tone of this novel is somber, but it lacks the dryness of a newspaper type reporting. Capote wanted to create a new literary genre, a non-fiction novel, and in doing this he wrote a book that is both a reporting of a true crime, but also a work filled with creativity and symbolism, a book that gives life to an otherwise simple reporting of events.

The tone of this book works well with the book because it takes seriously its subject, but not so seriously that it fails to do more than report simple facts. Capote structures his book in such a way that the reader feels a connection not only to the victims of the true crime, but feels a connection to the two men who committed the crime. The book is novel-like in the fact that it makes the reader care about what happens to all the players,

including the convicted killers. For this reason, the tone works well with the writer's intentions within the book.

Structure

The novel is written in four chapters. Each chapter is divided into smaller sections, alerting the reader whenever there is a change in the focus of the writing, such as a shift from the Clutter family to the two men who would eventually be convicted of their murders. The four chapters also divide the separate events in the true story, the last moments of the Clutters lives and the discovery of their deaths, the flight the killers take to avoid capture, their eventual capture, and their trial and stay on Death Row.

This book is Capote's attempt at creating a non-fiction novel, a way of telling a true story in a compelling way. Capote was a creative man who took journalism seriously and he wanted to create a genre in which he could use both his strongest skills. For this reason, this book includes subtle imagery that contrasts the victims with the killers, focuses on a young man with a bad childhood who would become a convicted killer, and uses truth to tell a compelling story.



Quotes

Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans - in fact, few Kansans - had ever heard of Holcomb.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph 5)

Importance: This statement is part of the introduction to the book. Capote tries to capture the innocence of Holcomb in the time before the Clutter murders in order to show the profound impact the murders had on the village as well as a large section of America.

In regard to his family, Mr. Clutter had just one serious cause for disquiet - his wife's health.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph 8)

Importance: This quote underscores the normal life of the Clutter family. It also begins to explain why Clutter's wife was found in a separate bedroom after the murders and what her relationship was like with her family in the years leading up to the murders.

His tiny feet, encased in short black boots with steel buckles, would have neatly fitted into a delicate lady's dancing slippers; when he stood up, he was no taller than a twelve-year-old child, and suddenly looked, strutting on stunted legs that seemed grotesquely inadequate to the grown-up bulk they supported, not like a well-built truck driver but like a retired jockey, overblown and muscle-bound.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph 19)

Importance: This quote is part of the description of Perry Smith, one of the convicted criminals who would eventually confess and be executed for the murder of the Clutter family. The author places this description directly after a description of Herb Clutter in an attempt to contrast the two and, perhaps, to give some humanity to the dark character of the killer.

Out in rural Kansas, boys start driving cars very young; Kenyon was eleven when his father allowed him to buy, with money he had earned raising sheep, an old truck with a Model A engine - the Coyote Wagon, he and Bob called it.

-- Author (Chapter 1 paragraph 134)

Importance: This quote gives a snippet of what it was like to be a teenage boy in rural Kansas. It also gives insight into the personality of the Clutter's youngest, fifteen year old Kenyon.

For, feeling it their duty, a Christian task, these men had volunteered to clean certain of the fourteen rooms in the main house at River Valley Farm: rooms in which four members of the Clutter family had been murdered by, as their death certificates declared, 'a person or persons unknown.

-- Author (Chapter 2 paragraph 2)



Importance: This quote not only shows the generosity of the friends of the Clutter family, but it also introduces the theme of the second chapter, the search for the killers.

Another reason, the simplest, the ugliest, was that this hitherto peaceful congregation of neighbors and old friends had suddenly to endure the unique experience of distrusting each other; understandably, they believed that the murderer was among themselves, and, to the last man, endorsed an opinion advanced by Arthur Clutter, a brother of the deceased, who, while talking to journalists in the lobby of a Garden City hotel on November 17, had said, 'When this is cleared up, I'll wager whoever did it was someone within ten miles of where we now stand.

-- Author (Chapter 2 paragraph 32)

Importance: This quote establishes the sense of fear and uncertainty that took over the mindset of the people of the community in the aftermath of the Clutter murders.

The four coffins, which quite filled the small, flower-crowded parlor, were to be sealed at the funeral services - very understandably, for despite the care taken with the appearance of the victims, the effect achieved was disquieting.

-- Author (Chapter 2 paragraph 59)

Importance: This quote expresses the atmosphere of the funeral and the terrible aftermath that continued to unfold for weeks and months after the murders.

The business of the mattress box was one of the things that most tantalized Dewey. Why had the murderers taken the trouble to move the box from the far end of the basement room and lay it on the floor in front of the furnace, unless the intention had been to make Mr. Clutter more comfortable - to provide him, while he contemplated the approaching knife, with a couch less rigid than cold cement?

-- Author (Chapter 2 paragraph 88)

Importance: From the beginning, the investigators were confused by the attempts to make the victims comfortable - by placing a box under Mr. Clutter, giving Kenyon a pillow, and covering Nancy with her bed's blankets. It was these things, more than anything else, that convinced Dewey that two killers were involved, one who was compassionate and the other who was coldblooded. The mattress box would also prove to be one of the most important pieces of evidence against the two killers as photographs of it revealed boot prints they eventually connected to Hickock and Smith.

Wells was stunned. As he was eventually to describe his reaction, he 'didn't hardly believe it.' Yet he had good reason to, for not only had he known the murdered family, he knew very well who had murdered them.

-- Author (Chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote describes the man, Floyd Wells, who first turned investigators on to Smith and Hickock. Wells had been a cellmate of Hickock's in a Kansas prison



and had told him about the Clutter family and well as a safe he mistakenly recalled in Mr. Clutter's home office.

Strong character, high courage, hard work - it seemed that none of these were determining factors in the fates of Tex John's children. They shared a doom against which virtue was no defense.

-- Barbara Johnson (Chapter 3 paragraph 134)

Importance: This quote is attributed to Perry Smith's sister, Barbara Johnson. Ms. Johnson was thinking of her three siblings at the time, of the two who had committed suicide and of Perry, who she had just learned was being sought by the police for parole violation. Mrs. Johnson openly admitted to the police she feared her brother and wished no contact with him.

Friday 15 January. Mrs. Meier playing radio in her kitchen and I heard man say the county attorney will seek Death Penalty. 'The rich never hand. Only the poor and friendless.

-- Perry Smith (Chapter 4 paragraph 15)

Importance: This is a quote from a journal Perry Smith kept at the Finney County jail. This shows Perry's reaction to learning the prosecution would seek the death penalty against him and Dick Hickock.

And so it happened that in the daylight hours of that Wednesday morning, Alvin Dewey, breakfasting in the coffee shop of a Topeka hotel, read, on the first page of the Kansas City Star, a headline he had long awaited: Did on Rope for Bloody Crime. The story, written by an Associated Press reporter, began: 'Richard Eugene Hickock and Perry Edward Smith, partners in crime, died on the gallows at the state prison early today for one of the bloodiest murders in Kansas criminal annals. Hickock, 33 years old, died first, at 12:41 a.m.; Smith, 36, died at 1:19...

-- Author (Chapter 4 paragraph 277)

Importance: With this quote, the author introduces the final story of Hickock and Smith's lives, the description of their executions.