In Cold Blood
A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences

Author: Truman Capote
Given Name: Truman Streckfus Persons
Born: September 30, 1924; New Orleans, Louisiana
Died: August 25, 1984; Los Angeles, California
Type of Work: Nonfiction novel/New Journalism
Time of Work: 1959-1965
Locale: Kansas, Nevada, California, Mexico, Florida, and Texas
First Published: 1966

Principal Personages
RICHARD (DICK) EUGENE HICKOCK, a twenty-eight-year-old extroverted mechanic and felon
PERRY EDWARD SMITH, a short, misshapen and introverted psychopath
HERBERT CLUTTER, a prosperous wheat and cattle farmer in Holcomb, Kansas
BONNIE CLUTTER, his neurasthenic wife
NANCY CLUTTER, their sixteen-year-old daughter
KENYON CLUTTER, their fifteen-year-old son
BOBBY RUPP, Nancy’s boyfriend
ALVIN DEWEY, the agent from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation in charge of the case
FLOYD WELLS, Hickock’s former prison cellmate
WILLIE JAY, Smith’s prison mentor

Form and Content
On November 16, 1959, the bloody corpses of Herbert, Bonnie, Nancy, and Kenyon Clutter were discovered in their Holcomb, Kansas, farmhouse. Herbert Clutter had
been a prominent and prosperous member of that rural community, and the
gruesome murders of the upstanding Methodist farmer, his wife, and two of their
four children shocked the Midwest. It was a crime without any apparent motive, and
it was not until January that the murderers, two parolees named Dick Hickock and
Perry Smith, were arrested.

Truman Capote, renowned for his Southern gothic fiction and for his eccentric
personality, read about the Clutter massacre in New York and determined to write
about it. Commissioned by The New Yorker and Random House to report on the
case, he was in Kansas within a few days of the murders, trying to learn as much as
he could about the victims, the crime, the criminals, and the larger social and legal
context into which the events fit. Capote stayed with the story for five and a half
years—through the apprehension of the killers, their trial, and their execution. He
conducted extensive interviews with a wide variety of people connected, however
remotely, with the case. By the time he began writing, he had accumulated six
thousand pages of notes.

The result was *In Cold Blood*, a book that Capote labeled with the oxymoron
"nonfiction novel" and to which he gave the subtitle *A True Account of a Multiple
Murder and Its Consequences*. *In Cold Blood* was published in January, 1966, less
than nine months after Smith and Hickock were hanged. The following year, it was
adapted for film by director Richard Brooks. Capote's book became an enormous
commercial and critical success, remaining on the best-seller list for more than a
year and inspiring the devotion of scholars and imitators, who hailed it as a classic in
a new hybrid genre of narrative (later labeled "New Journalism" by Tom Wolfe) that
joined the formal satisfactions of fiction with the urgency of actuality. It remains
Capote's major achievement as a writer.

*In Cold Blood* begins by setting the stage on the high, bare plains of western Kansas.
Almost in the manner of Greek tragedy, it crosscuts between the activities of the
Clutters and of the two parolees until they converge, inevitably and violently. The
book is organized into four sections: "The Last to See Them Alive" recounts the crime
itself; "Persons Unknown" juxtaposes the frustrated investigators and the extensive
travels of the murderers across the United States and into Mexico; "Answer" relates
how Smith and Hickock are finally apprehended; and "The Corner," which functions
as a narrative coda, summarizes the trial, imprisonment, and execution of the two
killers. While it offers the shape and textures of a nineteenth century naturalistic
novel, *In Cold Blood* presents itself with the authority of a "true account," susceptible
to verification by sources outside the author's fertile imagination.

**Analysis**

*In Cold Blood* is a romance of the ordinary, a narrative that proceeds from the
premise that truth is more compelling than fiction. Capote shows the Clutters to be
an exemplary American family—devout Methodists, members of the 4-H Club, happy,
productive citizens. He immerses his readers in their quotidian world by crowding his
text with details—facts about what Herbert has for breakfast, the configuration of the
house, the inventory of crops. Herbert is widely and justifiably respected as an
industrious and honest man, and his pretty daughter Nancy would seem to be the
perfect high school sweetheart. Perhaps the only element belying the Clutters'
unexceptional wholesomeness is the unaccountable depression from which Herbert's