

(Optional) Study Guide

In Cold Blood

Part 1: Section 1 – Central Characters

Vocabulary

abstemious – refraining from drinking alcohol
changeling – a child secretly exchanged for another
despondency – a feeling of being downcast; hopelessness
enigma – a mystery
ethereality – delicateness
ineffable – defying expression or description
keening – wailing
melancholy – gloomy
reticent – quiet or reluctant to speak
roguish – mischievous; deceitful
unmarred – pure

1. From what point of view is the novel written, and how does the type of narration affect how the book is read?

2. Where is Holcomb located?

3. Herb Clutter is a successful farmer in Holcomb, and he owns the River Valley Farm. What are some characteristics ascribed to him?

4. For what large event is the Clutter family planning that will soon take place at their farm?

5. What series of events in Herb Clutter's life led him to prosper as owner of River Valley Farm?

6. What is the name of Herb's wife, and what are the names of their children still living at home?

7. Despite his successful business and wonderful, loving family, what is the one thing that makes Herb Clutter uneasy?

8. Herb likes Bobby Rupp, Nancy's boyfriend, so why does Herb not want the two to become too attached to each other?

9. River Valley Farm contains several fruit trees. What misfortune happened to the trees that caused Bonnie to say, "My husband cares more for those trees than he does for his children"?

10. For what purpose do Perry and Dick meet at the Little Jewel Café?

11. How is Perry Smith's physical appearance described?

12. What sorts of activities does Nancy Clutter enjoy?

13. Nancy tells her friend Susan that she has started to smell cigarette smoke in her house; however, she cannot find where it is coming from, and she knows no one in her family smokes. What does Nancy's smelling of cigarette smoke foreshadow?

14. When Perry and Dick take their car to get it tuned for their long journey, the reader learns where they first met. Where did they first encounter each other?

15. Jolene Katz and Nancy make a pie together. Due to Nancy's busy schedule, she leaves shortly after the activity is completed. This leaves Jolene and Bonnie to talk alone. During this conversation, what does Bonnie reveal about her mood?

16. When did Bonnie's depression first surface, and does there appear any hope that her mood will improve?

17. Unlike his fellow fifteen-year-old peers, Kenyon is not much into sports or girls. What does he like to do?

Part 1: Section 2 – Prelude to the Crime

Vocabulary

coterie – an exclusive group

double indemnity – a life insurance policy that pays double if the holder dies accidentally

furtive – sly

indictment – an accusation or critical remark

opulent – wealthy or rich

piety – religious devotion

serpentine – snake-like

1. What surface traits do Dick and Perry share?

2. How many times has Dick been married, and what does he think of his ex-wives?

3. Both Dick and Perry have been in separate accidents involving motorized vehicles. Describe each of their accidents and the results of each.

4. Herb has enough property and money to be a part of the best country clubs in Garden City. Why does he choose to be a part of the 4-H club instead of more prestigious organizations?

5. After the 4-H meeting, Herb gives a ride home to Mrs. Ashida, a woman who recently joined the community. She says something to him as a compliment, but the statement could be viewed as foreshadowing events to come. What does she say and what does it foreshadow?

6. As Dick and Perry continue their drive across Kansas, Perry wants to stop and get nylons to cover their faces during the score. Why does Dick say the stockings will not be necessary?

7. What do Kenyon and his best friend, Bob Jones, do when they go out in the "Coyote Wagon?"

8. While continuing the drive in the car with Dick, Perry reflects that he did not originally come back to Kansas, violating parole, in order to be a part of the score. Why did Perry originally come back to Kansas?

9. When a Garden City representative of New York Life Insurance comes to River Valley Farm, what does Herb do?

10. Bobby Rupp describes his final evening with Nancy, which was spent watching television with her and her family. That evening, she was not wearing the ring that signified the two are going steady. Why was Nancy not wearing the ring?

11. In talking about his final night with Nancy, why is Bobby so specific about every detail, including which shows they watched, and especially the time he left?

Part 1: Section 3 – Reaction to the Crime

Vocabulary

arid – dry
ascertain – to learn with certainty
bespectacled – wearing eyeglasses
caustic – overly critical
doused – extinguished
gaunt – thin

1. When Dick and Perry stop for gas in Garden City, Perry lingers in the restroom. Dick thinks Perry is having second thoughts about the score. What euphemism does Dick use to describe nervousness and hesitancy?

2. When Dick first meets Perry he thinks he is a nice guy, but not a person capable of being involved in more serious scores. What crime does Perry say he committed that changes Dick's mind about Perry's toughness?

3. What is the real reason Perry takes so long in the gas station restroom?

4. Nancy uses different styles of handwriting, with different slants and curls to them. When her English teacher asks her why a paper has three different types of writing styles, what is Nancy's response?

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

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

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

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

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

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

11. Word reaches the mail messenger, Mother Truitt, and her daughter, Myrtle Clare, that ambulances are heading to the Clutter farm. Why does Myrtle Clare think there is nothing to be alarmed about?

12. Why does Myrtle Clare have little sympathy for Herb being murdered?

13. As news of the murders spreads, many of the locals gather at Hartman's Café. What thought makes Bess Hartman uneasy as she surveys those at the eatery?

14. When Bobby Rupp hears the news of Nancy's death, what does he do?

15. What does Mr. Hickock find unusual about Dick as the family watches basketball on television?

Part 2: Section 1 – The Investigation Begins

Vocabulary

annihilating – devastating
peculiarities – odd traits or habits
potentialities – potential abilities
prevarications – lies
promontory – a high point of land
solemnized – married

1. What do the death certificates state was the cause of death for all of the Clutters?

2. Alfred Stoecklein helps cleanup of the Clutter household following the murders. He claims that people have been talking about him and his wife. Why have the locals attach the Stoeckleins' names to the murders?

3. Who is Alvin Dewey?

4. What are the names of the three Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) agents who come to Garden City from Topeka?

5. Why does the lead investigator doubt that only one individual is responsible for the crime?

6. The majority of KBI agents also believes two people killed the family. What is the one doubt they have about this theory?

7. How do the residents of Holcomb and Garden City behave differently toward each other after the murder?

8. Perry reads a newspaper article about the homicide. He notices a grammatical error in the story. He points out to Dick that the sentence, "For this killer or killers," should read, "For this killer or *these* killers." What does this correction reveal about Perry's character?

9. During the same dinner conversation, Perry gets Dick to admit that he had been given false information about River Valley Farm. Dick claims that does not matter because "on the whole it was perfect," since there are no clues leading back to them. What does this exchange reveal about Dick's character?

10. Perry claims there is one person who can link them to the crime. Who is that person?

11. Perry thinks about the time when he lived in an orphanage and the nuns beat him for wetting his bed. What image in his dream gave him relief?

12. How does Dick use his charm to get money from retailers so that he and Perry can afford to continue their journey to Mexico?

13. What clears Bobby Rupp as a suspect?

14. What two signs of “comfort” at the scene of the crime lead Dewey to believe the killer or killers had some compassion?

15. Why do Beverly, the second of the Clutters’ surviving daughters, and her fiancé, Vere English, decide to wed in late November as opposed to the original date in December?

16. Bonnie’s brother, Howard Fox, writes a letter to the local newspaper asking something of the townspeople. What does he request?

17. Perry believes that he and Dick must have something wrong with them to do what they did to the Clutters. Dick says he does not think so; Dick thinks he is normal but that Perry might be crazy. What habits and behaviors of Perry does Dick think are strange?

18. One motif of this book is distrust. Dick continually asks Perry if he really killed the black man in Las Vegas. Perry continually responds, "Sure I did." The reader learns that Perry is lying, but he never shares the truth with Dick. How does this information touch on the motif of distrust?

19. In Mexico, an old man takes a picture of Perry that captures an expression "of unflawed fulfillment." What has Perry been doing that gives him such joy?

20. Mr. Helms continues to tend to River Valley Farm. One day, he sees a face through the window of the house. When the KBI arrive, they arrest the man. Why do they believe they may have found the killer?

Part 2: Section 2 – Back Story about Perry and His Family

Vocabulary

admonishments – strong criticisms
effeminate – having feminine qualities
lucid – easily understood
pragmatic – practical
purloined – stolen
septuagenarian – a person in his or her seventies

1. In Mexico, the funds Perry and Dick have accumulated run low, and Dick is forced to sell the car. Perry considers striking out on his own. Why does he decide to remain with Dick?

2. Since Dick and Perry have to walk or hitchhike, Perry boxes some belongings and mails them to himself in Las Vegas. What item does Perry pack that foreshadows the discovery of their connection to the crime?

3. Tex Smith, Perry's father, writes a letter to the parole board that details aspects of Perry's upbringing. In the beginning, family life for Perry and his siblings was happy and normal. What does Tex claim created a turn for the worse for the children?

4. According to Tex's letter, what does he say Perry did to become King of the Kids during his schoolboy days?

5. Of what military operation was Perry a part?

6. Perry is good at and enjoys working with his hands. However, his father writes that construction bosses will not hire him anymore. Why?

7. What does Tex say Perry does if he is treated unkindly?

8. How does Perry feel when he reads this letter?

9. During his childhood, Perry's parents formed a tandem called "Tex and Flo." What did "Tex and Flo" do?

10. What ethnicity is Perry's mother?

11. Why does Perry hate nuns and everything related to God and religion?

12. Why does Perry believe he was not promoted to rank of Corporal during his time in the Army, despite serving in the Korean War and earning a Bronze Star?

13. Why was Perry delayed in joining his father in Alaska?

14. What was the end result of the Trapper's Den Lodge, Perry and Tex's business venture?

15. Perry's first arrest came after he and a partner burglarized an office equipment store. How are they caught?

16. Perry's sister Barbara and Tex are his only remaining relatives. How did each of his other relatives die?

17. While in prison for stealing the office supplies, Perry received a letter from his sister. In this letter, who does she blame for Perry's current situation, and why?

18. Perry has also kept an essay written by his prison friend, Willie-Jay. Willie-Jay makes five points regarding Barbara's note. In brief, what are Willie-Jay's five observations?

19. Among the letters and keepsakes Perry has is a notebook full of complex words. What do these words reveal about Perry?

20. How is the investigation of the crime affecting Dewey's everyday life?

21. Where did Dewey want to build a house, and how has his plan been altered by the Clutter murders?

22. As Dick and Perry reenter the U.S., what do they wait for as they stand on the side of the road?

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

Vocabulary

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

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

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

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

4. Why does Wells finally speak out?

5. Dewey receives an envelope with pictures of the two suspects and takes the packet home. What comment does Dewey's wife, Marie, make about each individual upon seeing the photographs?

6. According to Mr. Hickock, what event in Dick's life turned him into a stranger to the Hickock family?

7. Who does Mrs. Hickock believe led her son into a more rebellious lifestyle?

8. Agent Harold Nye does not inform Hitchcock's parents of the real reasons for his visit. What reason does Nye give them for why the authorities are after their son?

9. Where does Mrs. Hickock state Dick and Perry went the weekend of the Clutter murder?

10. What is significant about the hunting gun in the Hickock's home?

11. Mr. Bell, a traveling salesman, is not allowed to pick up hitchhikers in his company car. Why, then, does he pick up Dick and Perry?

12. Dick and Perry had worked out a plan to rob and kill the next driver who picks them up. What is their code phrase to set the plan into motion?

13. Nye interviews a former landlady at a place where Perry stayed in Las Vegas. She says he is away, but she thinks he will be returning soon. Why does she think this?

14. Barbara Johnson is not bothered by the fact that Nye questions her about her brother, Perry, but what is she worried about during her conversation with the detective?

15. What is Barbara's response when Nye asks her if she has been contacted by Perry?

16. What happened the last time Barbara and Perry saw each other?

17. Dick and Perry find shelter from the rain in a barn. During the conversation, Perry thinks Dick has a "crazy-man stunt" in mind. What does Dick want to do?

18. Dick lights a match with the intention of smoking a cigarette. What happens when the match is illuminated?

Part 3: Section 2 – Just Before the Arrest

Vocabulary

querulous – whining
tarpaulin – made from waterproof canvas
thanatoid – death-like
urchin – a mischievous child

1. Why does Dewey keep the information gained from Floyd Wells a secret from the public?

2. What does Dewey believe the authorities do not have but will need to get a conviction?

3. Why are people prohibited from speaking of the case at Hartman's Café and the local post office?

4. More than anyone else, who does Dick wish he could talk to about the crime he and Perry committed?

5. Why is Perry nervous while waiting at the laundromat in Kansas City?

6. Why is Dick late in meeting with Perry?

7. Dewey has a daydream while in his office, in which he sees the two murderers sitting across the room from him in a restaurant. In this vision, who is the third person he sees sitting with the two killers?

8. How does Nye find out the new license plate number of Dick and Perry's car?

9. What information about Dick is revealed to the reader when he helps a young girl draw figures in the sand at Miami Beach?

10. On Christmas day, Bobby Rupp thinks of the happy times he spent with Nancy. He then mindlessly runs to the Clutter estate. When he arrives, he sees that the once beautiful orchard trees are dying, the apples are rotting, and cobwebs have started to form on the house. What do these images symbolize?

11. How does Perry prevent Dick from throwing the hitchhiking boy and his grandpa out of the car?

12. How is the relationship between the boy and his grandfather similar to that of Perry and his father?

13. How is the relationship between the boy and his grandfather different to that between Perry and his father?

14. Why does Dewey hug his wife, even though he is soaking wet and she is wearing her nicest clothes for a dinner gathering?

15. Just before Dick and Perry are arrested in Las Vegas, what is Dick planning to do?

Part 3: Section 3 – Interrogations and Confessions

Vocabulary

beckoned – called
expurgated – purged; cleansed
feloniously – involving a felony
festooning – hanging a string of items connected from one point to another
fusillade – a discharge
impertinent – improperly bold
methodical – systematic
recapitulation – a summary
reconnoitered – inspected
sundry – various

1. Nye reports that Dick smiled a lot during the interrogation. Based on previous incidents in the book, what might be Dick's reason for smiling all the time?

2. Dick has been married twice, and each time, the bride was sixteen. What do the brides' ages reveal to the reader about Dick?

3. What is suspicious about Dick's ability to recall every exact detail of his whereabouts during his interrogation?

4. How does Nye know that Dick is lying about his visit to Perry's sister in Fort Scott?

5. What reason does Perry give Dewey and Duntz about why he returned to Kansas when he knew it was a parole violation?

6. What do Dick and Perry think when they are in their individual cells reflecting about their separate interrogations.

7. What does Nye claim connects Dick and Perry to the crime?

8. What is Dick's response to the evidence connecting the two to the murders?

9. News reaches Holcomb via a radio broadcast that a confession has been made regarding the murders. What is the town's general reaction to the news?

10. What does Dewey say to Perry in the car ride back to Kansas that causes Perry to confess all the details of the crime?

11. According to Perry, how many people did Dick think might be in the Clutters' house on the night of the murder?

12. Prior to the break-in, how does Perry say he planned to handle the “witnesses” compared to Dick?

13. When Perry recounts that evening, he says that he and Dick found Herb Clutter sleeping in a downstairs bedroom. Dick prodded Clutter to show them where the safe was, but Herb said he did not have one. Why did Perry believe Herb?

14. Perry claims that Dick eventually came to believe that there was no safe in the house, but Dick persisted in staying. Why does Perry believe Dick wanted to stay despite the fact that the Clutters had no money on the premises?

15. Why does Dewey think that Herb believed Dick and Perry when they said they were there only to steal the money?

16. Perry carried the few stolen items—the binoculars and radio—out to the car. He also considered leaving. Why did he change his mind?

17. What information does Perry give the agents that causes Duntz to nod to his partner, Dewey?

18. When Nancy asked Dick why he was attacking the family, what did he respond?

19. Why was Nancy the only person in the house who did not have her mouth taped?

20. What caused Perry to initiate the murders?

21. Why did Perry tell Dick that Dick must be the one to kill Bonnie and Nancy?

22. What is the one key difference between Dick's confession and Perry's?

23. Dewey cannot find a “meaningful design” to the murders. What conclusion does he draw about the crime?

24. How much money did Perry and Dick get from robbing the Clutters?

25. When Dick and Perry are brought to the jailhouse in Garden City, how does the large crowd react as the two are led inside?

Part 4: Section 1 – In the Jailhouse, Waiting for the Prosecution to Begin

Vocabulary

arraignment – the act of being called to court to answer charges
dourness – gloominess
gamy – unwholesome
hooch – alcohol
laggardly – slowly hanging back
odious – detestable
pugnacious – quarrelsome
unpretentious – modest

1. Why is Josie Meier not bothered by the fact the jail cell for female inmates is adjoined to the kitchen in her apartment?

2. Why is Perry placed in the cell normally used to house females?

3. How is it ironic that Perry, given what the reader knows of his character, ends up in the female cell?

4. Once in jail, Perry changes his confession and admits that he committed all four murders. Why does he change his statement?

5. According to Perry, how did he and Dick feel immediately after murdering the Clutters?

6. How do Perry's and Dick's responses to the murders suggest what might have caused them to commit the act in the first place?

7. When does the Kansas Bureau of Investigation believe they have a solid case against Dick and Perry?

8. Why does a sheriff from Florida want Dick and Perry to take a polygraph test, and what are the results?

9. How has Perry's image of Dick changed after the murders?

10. Why does Perry want to talk with Dick?

11. Why does Don Cullivan, a former Army acquaintance of Perry, write to him in jail?

12. Dick is creating a "shiv" that he will use as a weapon to escape. What does he plan to do once he escapes?

13. Why does Dick's plan of escape not work?

14. Why does Perry lose interest in watching the cats outside of his cell window?

15. How is Perry's plan for escape different from Dick's?

16. What recurring image appears to Perry in a dream while he awaits trial?

17. Why do the defense attorneys for Dick and Perry not ask for the trial to be held somewhere other than Garden City?

18. Just before the trial, the Clutter estate is sold at an auction. What is the last thing that sells?

19. During the jury selection process, Perry writes an autobiographical statement that psychiatrist had requested from both of the defendants. In it, Perry recounts much of what has been stated about him earlier in the book. When he concludes his story, he states he would like to speak to the psychiatrist again. Why?

20. In Dick's autobiography, how does he describe his parents?

21. In his letter to the psychiatrist, Dick reveals that the real reason for going to the Clutter house was not to steal money. What does he say he really wanted to go there for?

22. What does Dick believe has caused him to act out in reckless ways, to steal, and to engage in pedophilic acts?

Part 4: Section 2 – The Trial

Vocabulary

auditors – listeners
contrition – sincere remorse
dirge – a song mourning the dead
languid – lifeless; lacking energy
ministrations – acts of care
pathological – caused by disease
staid – composed; fixed
stealthy – marked by caution
vicissitudes – changes or variations

1. The only member of the Clutter family to attend the trial is Herb's younger brother, Arthur. Why does Perry focus on him for a brief moment?

2. What does Perry's relative lack of response to Arthur reveal about his character?

3. What causes Hickock's father to believe that Judge Tate is prejudiced against the defendants?

4. Floyd Wells testifies, and the defense addresses his criminal past and his indirect role in the murder, telling Dick about the Clutter estate. Why does he still prove to be an effective witness for the prosecution?

5. Why is Dewey the most effective witness for the prosecution?

6. Why does Mrs. Hickock feel so isolated?

7. Why might the defense attorneys be so fatigued by the time the prosecution rests its case?

8. Don Cullivan and Perry have a meal together, courtesy of Mrs. Meier. During this dinner, Perry explains why he might have killed the Clutters. What specific reason does he give to Don?

9. Don wants to know if Perry feels any remorse about what he has done. What is Perry's response?

10. On the witness stand, what does Mr. Hickock claim turned his son from happy and content to distant?

11. How does Kansas's M'Naghten Rule limit the defense's case on behalf of Dick and Perry?

12. In Dr. Jones's report, which is not seen by the jury, what diagnosis does Dr. Jones give to Dick?

13. In his report, what does Dr. Jones claim is important for medical personnel to follow through on regarding Dick?

14. Does Dr. Jones believe Perry knew right from wrong at the time of the murder?

15. In Dr. Jones's report, unseen by the jury, what does he claim are two indicators that Perry has a mental disorder?

16. What diagnosis does Dr. Jones give of Perry's mental state?

17. Capote refers to an article printed in the July 1960 edition of *The American Journal of Psychiatry*. In the article, a study was made of four men who committed murder, and yet, were diagnosed, according to the M'Naghten Rule, as being sane. What commonalities did the four men have?

18. Of Dick and Perry, who more resembles the men in the study?

19. In their closing arguments, on what central theme do the defense attorneys focus?

20. What one-line statement does Perry say to Dick that causes them to laugh as they leave the courtroom?

21. What memento does Perry give Mrs. Meier as he is being transferred from the jail to the prison?

22. Which prison will house Dick and Perry until their execution?

23. What type of structure is “the Corner,” the nickname of the place where Dick and Perry will be hanged?

Part 4: Section 3 – In the Penitentiary and the Hangings

Vocabulary

commodious – spacious
malodorous – smelling badly
nonchalance – indifference
pinioned – restrained
unctuous – excessively pious
vivisectionist – a person who cuts into living animals for scientific research

1. Why was there no corporal punishment in Kansas from 1957-1960?

2. What commonalities do Perry and Dick share with Lowell Lee Andrews?

3. What reason might Capote have had for examining famous Kansas murderers who do not have any connection to the Clutter case?

4. What legal precedent did Andrews's attorneys try to establish in his case? Why?

5. What is ironic about Perry's dislike of Andrews correcting his grammar?

6. What does Dick think Perry's real motive is for going on a hunger strike?

7. Why does the letter from Perry's father cause him to stop starving himself?

8. What is the status of Dick's parents since he arrived at the penitentiary?

9. When George York and James Latham are brought into their cells on death row, Andrews tells a joke about the number of people they have all murdered. Why does Dick correct the joke?

10. Dick has been spending his time in prison writing letters of appeal to any lawyer who will listen. Eventually, a prominent attorney in Wichita, Russell Shultz, believes Dick's claim that a breach of justice has been committed. Why is Shultz's investigation initially biased?

11. What is the primary reason three federal judges reject Shultz's argument for a new trial?

12. The four remaining inmates on death row all watch Andrews's execution. After Andrews is hanged, where is he taken to be buried?

13. Why is Perry jealous of Andrews?

14. Why does Dick claim Perry does not have a single friend in the penitentiary?

15. What are Dick's thoughts regarding the death penalty?

16. What arguments do the defense attorneys make to bring Dick and Perry's case all the way to the Supreme Court? What is the outcome?

17. Why is it supposed that Dick is disappointed that no living members of the Clutter family appear at his hanging?

18. Despite the fact that those who are hanged sometimes take twenty minutes to die, why does one reporter believe this execution is still humane?

19. Why does Dewey feel more remorse at Perry's demise in comparison to that of Dick?

20. Even though Bobby Rupp and Susan Kidwell are minor figures, how do the small details about the two at the conclusion of the book show their character development is greater than that of Dick and Perry?
