

# In Cold Blood



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TRUMAN CAPOTE

Truman Capote's life was one of dizzying highs and devastating lows. Born in New Orleans to a teenage mother, Capote was sent at a very young age to live with his aunts and cousins in Monroeville, Alabama. There, he became friends with Harper Lee (author of [To Kill a Mockingbird](#)), and their friendship lasted for the remainder of Capote's life. Openly homosexual at a time when essentially no one else was, and a theatrical person to boot, Capote cut quite a figure with the publication of his first book, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* (1948). 1966's *In Cold Blood* is considered by many to be his crowning achievement. After the towering success of *In Cold Blood*, Truman spent the rest of his life working on an autobiographical "tell-all" book called *Answered Prayers*, which was never completed. Capote died of liver cancer (a complication of alcoholism) in 1984.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Soon after the Clutter family was murdered, the New York Times ran a tiny article on the homicides, which Capote happened to read. Overcome with curiosity – largely regarding what Capote would refer to as the "ordinariness" of the scene of the crime – he traveled to Kansas with Harper Lee soon after the Clutters' funeral in order to investigate. Capote was essentially with the case from beginning to end. He cultivated a close relationship with Dick Hickok and Perry Smith (Perry in particular); the moral ambiguity of this relationship (given that Capote essentially gained the killers' trust, only to betray them in his book) went on to be explored in a number of books and films.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although *In Cold Blood* is often credited with pioneering the novelization of the true crime genre, it's far from the first work of literature to use real life crime as its focus. Edward Pearson's *Studies in Murder* (1924) is considered to be among the first American true crime books. Inspector Dew's *I Caught Crippen* (1938) and Jack Webb's *The Badge* (1958) are other notable examples. *Closing Time: The True Story of the Goodbar Murder* (1977) by Lacey Fosburgh received warm praise from Capote at the time of its publication (and was notably one of the few books by a contemporary he ever praised).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *In Cold Blood*

- **When Written:** 1959-1964
- **Where Written:** USA
- **When Published:** 1966
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Novel/True Crime
- **Setting:** Holcomb, Kansas
- **Climax:** Dick Hickok and Perry Smith are captured in Las Vegas
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Party Animal:** In November 1966, Capote threw The Black and White Ball, which became one of the most infamous parties of the sixties.

**Picture This:** Much of the uproar over Capote's 1948 debut *Other Voices, Other Rooms* had less to do with the contents of the book and more to do with his author photograph. Taken by Harold Halma, the photograph depicts a young Capote on a chaise lounge, shooting the camera an outrageous come-hither stare.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The year is 1959 and the setting is River Valley Farm, located in Holcomb Kansas (a suburb of Garden City). The residents of that farm, the Clutters, are a prosperous farming and ranching family who have seemingly achieved the American Dream. Herb, the father, is a devout Methodist whose work ethic has made him a wealthy and popular man. Bonnie, Herb's wife, suffers from nervousness, and it's speculated that her marriage to Herb is troubled. Nancy and Kenyon are their well adjusted, hardworking teenage children. One night in mid-November, four gunshots ring out across Holcomb, signaling the deaths of four members of the Clutter family.

The murderers are Perry Smith and Richard "Dick" Hickok, two recently paroled men who have been led to believe that Herb Clutter is in possession of a large amount of cash. Perry is a dreamy, artistic man scarred by a motorcycle accident and his traumatic childhood. Dick is a "normal" guy with a shoddy work ethic who has a history of writing bad checks. While robbing the Clutters, Dick and Perry are dismayed to find that the Clutters have virtually no cash on hand. They kill the Clutters anyway, shooting each in the head at point-blank range with a 12-gauge shotgun. Dick and Perry flee to Kansas City, where they start writing bad checks. They take their ill-gotten gains and flee to Mexico, where Perry dreams of becoming a treasure

hunter.

As news of the murders spreads, the citizens of Holcomb and Garden City are filled with terror and disbelief. The Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) is put on the case, though there is little evidence to help them find the killers (all they have are two footprints). The case is finally cracked when Dick's former cellmate, Floyd Wells (who was once an employee of Herb Clutter's), reveals that Dick had divulged to him his plan for robbing and killing the Clutters. Armed with this lead, the KBI launches a nationwide manhunt for Dick and Perry.

Meanwhile, Dick and Perry, having gone broke in Mexico, have returned to the United States and are plotting to write more bad checks. They return to Kansas City, where they write enough bad checks to fund a trip to Florida. Tensions rise and fall between Perry and Dick. Perry is upset with Dick's spendthrift ways, and is disgusted with his penchant for raping young girls. Dick, on the other hand, is frustrated with Perry's "womanly" behavior and far-fetched dreams of treasure hunting. After going broke in Florida, the two make their way to Las Vegas, where months back Perry had mailed some of his belongings from Mexico (including the boots he and Dick had worn the night of the murders). They are arrested in Las Vegas, just as they stop to collect the final box of belongings from a rooming house.

A trial is held in Garden City. Dick and Perry are ultimately sentenced to death, and they are sent to **Death Row** at Kansas State Penitentiary. They remain on Death Row for years, given that Dick insists that their trial was unfair and applies for several appeals. Perry briefly goes on a hunger strike, during which time he's accosted by visions of **a golden parrot** (an image he seems to connect with Jesus); he decides to eat again when he receives a postcard from his father that fills him with rage. Dick and Perry are hanged on April 14th, 1965. The primary investigator in the Clutter case, Alvin Dewey (a personal friend of the Clutters) is present for the hanging. The hanging doesn't bring him closure. Instead, he finds solace in a chance meeting he had with Nancy's best friend, Susan Kidwell, whom he runs into at the Clutter's grave plot. Susan fills Alvin with hope for the future – she seems to represent a renewed age of innocence for Holcomb and Garden City.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Perry Edward Smith** – Son of John "Tex" Smith and Julia "Flo" Buckskin. Murdered the Clutter family with the aid of Dick Hickok. A sensitive, artistic type who entertains fantastic dreams of treasure hunting and working as an entertainer in a night club, Perry is seemingly driven to a life of crime by his traumatic childhood. He is handsome and "actorish," but a motorcycle accident has disfigured the lower half of his body.

He is in chronic pain due to the accident and is addicted to aspirin. He may be a paranoid schizophrenic. He is half-Cherokee.

**Richard Eugene "Dick" Hickok** – Son of Mr. and Mrs. Hickok. Murdered the Clutter family with the aid of Perry Smith. The son of modest farmers, Dick was a high school sports star who couldn't afford to go to college; his unrealized dreams may have turned him to a life of crime. Dick has been married twice and has three sons from his first marriage. His pedophilic tendencies lead him to prey on pubescent girls. An automobile accident has disfigured his face and has left him prone to fainting spells and headaches.

**Herb Clutter** – Proprietor of River Valley Farm, husband to Bonnie Clutter, and father of Eveanna Jarchow, Beverly English, Nancy Clutter, and Kenyon Clutter. Murdered by Perry Smith and Dick Hickok. Herb is a devout Methodist, a hard worker, and a valued citizen of Holcomb, Kansas. A university-educated man, he pulled himself up by the bootstraps to become a prosperous farmer and rancher. By all appearances normal, Herb seems to harbor some secret unhappiness. His marriage is by all accounts troubled.

**Bonnie Clutter** – Wife of Herb Clutter, mother of Eveanna Jarchow, Beverly English, Nancy Clutter, and Kenyon Clutter. Murdered by Perry Smith and Dick Hickok. Bonnie is a "nervous" woman who has a history of post-partum depression and other mental illnesses, all of which were treated with little to no success. Her mental illnesses appear to make difficult her relationships with her husband and children.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Nancy Clutter** – Daughter of Herb Clutter and Bonnie Clutter, sister of Eveanna Jarchow, Beverly English, and Kenyon Clutter. Girlfriend to Bobby Rupp, best friends with Susan Kidwell. Murdered by Perry Smith and Dick Hickok. Nancy is 16 years old and "the town darling."

**Kenyon Clutter** – Son of Herb Clutter and Bonnie Clutter, brother of Eveanna Jarchow, Beverly English, and Nancy Clutter. Murdered by Perry Smith and Dick Hickok. Kenyon is 15 years old and is an athletic, introverted boy.

**Eveanna (Clutter) Jarchow** – Daughter of Herb and Bonnie, sister of Beverly, Nancy, and Kenyon.

**Beverly (Clutter) English** – Daughter to Herb and Bonnie, sister of Eveanna, Nancy, and Kenyon.

**Susan Kidwell** – Nancy Clutter's best friend and the daughter of Wilma Kidwell. Accompanied by Nancy Ewalt, she discovers Nancy's dead body.

**Bobby Rupp** – Nancy Clutter's boyfriend. Initially a suspect in the Clutter murder case.

**Alvin Dewey** – Husband to Marie Dewey and personal friend of the Clutters. Primary investigator in the Clutter murder

case. Works for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI).

**Special Agent Harold Nye** – A primary investigator in the Clutter murder case. Works for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI).

**Special Agent Roy Church** – Investigator in the Clutter murder case. Works for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI).

**Special Agent Clarence Duntz** – Investigator in the Clutter murder case. Works for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI).

**Floyd Wells** – Former employee of River Valley Farm. Inmate at Kansas State Penitentiary and former cellmate of Dick Hickok's. Primary informant responsible for cracking the Clutter murder case.

**Mr. Hickok** – Dick Hickok's father, husband of Mrs. Hickok. A hardworking farmer who lives in Olathe, Kansas.

**Mrs. Hickok** – Dick Hickok's mother, wife of Mr. Hickok.

**Mrs. Bess Hartman** – Proprietor of Hartman's Café in Holcomb.

**Josephine Meier** – Undersheriff Meier's wife. She forms a friendship with Perry Smith while he's held in the Garden City county jail.

**Willie-Jay** – The man Perry Smith considers to be his truest friend. When Perry knows him, he is an inmate at Kansas State Penitentiary and serves as the prison chaplain's clerk. Most likely homosexual. Deeply religious.

**Don Cullivan** – Perry's old Army buddy, who visits Perry while he's incarcerated for the Clutter murders. Deeply religious.

**Undersheriff Meier** – Josephine Meier's husband. Undersheriff of Garden City.

**Cookie** – The nurse Perry Smith had a love affair with during his hospitalization for a motorcycle accident. Perry, who bears a tattoo of her name on his arm, refers to Cookie as the girl he "almost married."

**Teddy** – The Clutter family dog. Gun-shy.

**Babe** – The Clutter family horse.

**Alfred Stoecklein** – River Valley Farm's "sole resident employee."

**John "Tex" Smith** – Father of Perry Smith, Jimmy Smith, Fern Smith, and Barbara Johnson. Husband of Flo Buckskin. A former rodeo man who becomes a vagabond in his later years.

**Julia "Flo" Buckskin** – Mother of Perry Smith, Jimmy Smith, Fern Smith, and Barbara Johnson. Wife of Tex Smith. A former rodeo rider who succumbs to alcoholism in her later years. She is of Cherokee descent.

**Barbara (Smith) Johnson** – Daughter of John "Tex" Smith and Julia "Flo" Buckskin. Sister of Perry Smith, Jimmy Smith, and Fern Smith. Seems to have escaped the Smith family curse, but is haunted by her past.

**Bob Johnson** – Insurance agent for the Garden City branch of the New York Life Insurance Company. Sells Herb Clutter a life insurance policy the day Herb is murdered.

**Mrs. Hideo Ashida** – Neighbor to the Clutters. Particularly friendly with Herb Clutter.

**Clarence Ewalt** – A friend of the Clutter family.

**Nancy Ewalt** – A friend of Nancy Clutter who attends church with the Clutters every Sunday.

**Paul Helm** – The husband of Mrs. Helm. He has a close bond with the Clutter family.

**Mrs. Helm** – Paul Helm's wife. Housekeeper for the Clutter family.

**Wilma Kidwell** – Susan Kidwell's mother and a music teacher at the local school.

**Jolene Katz** – A young girl local to Holcomb. Nancy Clutter teaches her how to bake a pie.

**Mrs. Myrt Clare** – Daughter of Mother Truitt. Holcomb's Postmistress.

**Vere English** – Married to Beverly English.

**Howard Fox** – Brother of Bonnie Clutter.

**Fern "Joy" Smith** – Daughter of John "Tex" Smith and Julia "Flo" Buckskin. Sister of Perry Smith, Jimmy Smith, and Barbara Johnson. Fell out of a window under mysterious circumstances and died.

**Jimmy Smith** – Son of John "Tex" Smith and Julia "Flo" Buckskin. Brother of Fern Smith, Barbara Johnson, and Perry Smith. Committed suicide soon after his wife (supposedly) did the same.

**Lester McCoy** – Resident of Holcomb who moves due to the Clutter family's murder.

**Marie Dewey** – Alvin Dewey's wife.

**Logan Green** – Primary attorney for the prosecution in the Clutter murder trial.

**Lowell Lee Andrews** – Death Row inmate. An obese young man who, as a teenager, killed his immediate family in cold blood.

**George Ronald York** – Death Row inmate.

**James Douglas Latham** – Death Row inmate.

**Bonnie Jean Ashida** – Mrs. Hideo Ashida's daughter, killed in a car accident.

**Judge Tate** – Judge that presided over the Clutter murder trial, who later died of pneumonia.

**Larry Hendricks** – An English teacher from Holcomb who accompanies the police in their initial investigation of the Clutter home.

**Mother Truitt** – A mail carrier, who's real name is Sadie Truitt. She is the mother of Mrs. Myrt Clare.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

**DREAMS FAILED, DREAMS ACHIEVED**

In *Epic of America* (1931), James Truslow Adams wrote that the American Dream is "...a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." The notion of striving for dreams – the American Dream in particular – is central to *In Cold Blood*. Characters struggle with how to achieve their dreams, they scrutinize who has and hasn't achieved their dreams, and they struggle with whether their own dreams can ever become reality, and feel resentment when their dreams turn out to be beyond their reach.

The murder central to the plot – the murder of the Clutter family – seems to be the result of murderers Perry Smith and Dick Hickock's inability to respectively achieve the American Dream. On the one hand, Perry – crippled by a motorcycle accident, haunted by memories of a childhood wracked by poverty and abuse – is never able to achieve the American Dream of a middle-class existence, in spite of being an intelligent and hard-working individual. It's perhaps because the achievement of this dream is so far beyond his reach that he ends up turning to a life of crime, with the ultimate goal of using his ill-gotten gains to escape to a life of treasure hunting in Mexico. Dick, on the other hand, in spite of a relatively stable lower-middle-class childhood, is frustrated by the normal means by which he might achieve the American Dream. In an effort to take a short cut to the life he dreams of, he turns to a life of crime – primarily through "hanging paper" (writing bad checks) and, ultimately, hatching a plan with Perry to rob the Clutters.

In contrast to Perry and Dick, the Clutters represent (to us, to their fellow townspeople, and to Perry/Dick) the ideal achievement of the American Dream. Herb Clutter is a self-made man who pulled himself up by the bootstraps to become a well-to-do farmer and rancher. He's married, he has four children, he owns his own land, and he's engaged with his community. However, in spite of their success, all is not perfect with the Clutters. Bonnie and Herb's marriage is troubled (Bonnie is mentally ill, and the couple hasn't shared the same bed in years). This may be why Herb, like Perry and Dick, harbors dreams beyond what he currently has – in an

uncharacteristically impractical move, he plants an orchard of fruit trees along the banks of the river that runs through his property, in a way creating his own version of Eden.

**CHRISTIANITY**

The notion of Christianity as a force of redemption and salvation is explored in numerous ways throughout the book. It's emphasized from the beginning that Garden City is a strongly religious (and specifically Christian) town. The Clutters are a Methodist family, and their Methodist frugality and temperance seem to be tied in with their apparent achievement of the American Dream.

Although Perry outwardly shuns Christianity – Catholicism in particular, given that he was at one point living in an orphanage run by abusive nuns – mysticism, the divine, and Christian culture are nonetheless very important to him. Since childhood, Perry has been subject to visions of a golden parrot – a huge, cross-shaped bird that descends upon him in times of crisis. Perry is convinced that this vision (which is most likely a symptom of paranoid schizophrenia) is divine – an avenging angel, or possibly even Jesus. Perry forms an unlikely friendship with the prison chaplain's clerk, Willie-Jay – a relationship that becomes very influential in his life.

Christians and Christian principles surface throughout the book as possible antidotes to killing and violence – the death penalty is opposed by a number of Christians (including Herb's brother), and Christianity is often presented (especially by Willie-Jay) as a possible means for turning Dick and Perry from a life of crime. Christianity isn't always presented in a positive light, however. Bonnie, for example, descends further into guilt and depression after briefly leaving her husband to live a new life in a different city; she "had liked it too well, so much that it seemed to her unchristian..."

**EVIL**

Primarily explored through the seemingly motiveless and random killing of the Clutters, *In Cold Blood* grapples with the question of what is and isn't evil. Characters – especially criminals – often hold conflicting and ambiguous attitudes toward evil. Perry, for example, seems to be of the opinion that his killing of the Clutters wasn't necessarily an evil act. When asked by his staunchly Christian army buddy Don Cullivan whether he felt any shame or guilt for the murders, Perry simply shrugs. "Soldiers don't lose much sleep," he says. "They murder, and get medals for doing it. The good people of Kansas want to murder me – and some hangman will be glad to get the work." On the other hand, Perry has strong disapproval for what he calls "pervertiness" – he feels that Dick's pedophilic tendencies are evil, and he goes so far as to prevent the rape of young Nancy

Clutter before she's shot in the head.

The question of who is capable of carrying out evil acts is also dealt with, primarily through a biographical and psychological exploration of Perry and Dick. In reading Perry's psychological profile, one ultimately might question whether or not his crimes were actually evil, given that he seems psychologically predisposed toward certain acts of violence. To further complicate matters, Perry comes off as a highly sympathetic character, calling into question whether he himself is evil. After the final verdict, a young Oklahoman reporter remarks, "Perry Smith. My God. He's had such a rotten life -"

The banality of evil – that is, the idea that evil is often committed as a matter of course, sometimes as part of someone's job – is also explored. The hanging of Perry and Dick, for example, is clearly an act of state sanctioned murder – but does this mean the hangman is committing an evil act?



### NORMAL VS. ABNORMAL

Dick constantly asserts that he's "a normal," even though he has deeply abnormal physical features (his face is crooked thanks to a car accident) and even though he's capable of committing various crimes – up to and including murder. The question of what's considered normal and abnormal is repeated throughout the book.

For example, what is a normal marriage/family? In spite of being the perfect couple, Herb and Bonnie have a troubled marriage. Dick and Perry, on the other hand, could be said to have a happy marriage – they even go on a veritable honeymoon in Mexico after murdering the Clutters. The book also questions what a normal person might look like. Herb, the proverbial everyman, is of average build and has fine, even features. On the other hand Perry, albeit handsome, is often referred to as having feminine facial features, and has stunted and warped legs thanks to a motorcycle accident. *In Cold Blood* also questions the notion of normal mental health. Bonnie, in spite of having a supposedly perfect life, suffers from bouts of "nervousness" that often result in her hospitalization. By the end of the book, Perry is pronounced mentally ill; Dick, in contrast, is pronounced sane, in spite of his inhumane actions.

The book also grapples with sexual norms. What is normal sexuality? What kind of person possesses normal sexuality? And what is normal masculinity? Perry – sexually inexperienced, never married – is staunchly against "pervertiness" – homosexuality, pedophilia, and rape. Conversely, Dick – married twice, father of three children, and the epitome of what Perry considers masculine – is a pedophile and a rapist. On a metatextual level, one could also argue that the close relationship between Dick, Perry, and the book's author, Truman Capote (who was openly homosexual throughout his life), further complicates these questions of sexual norms.



### INNOCENCE VS. EXPERIENCE

Prior to the massacre of the Clutter family, Holcomb, Kansas (a small town adjacent to the county seat of Garden City) is portrayed as a kind of Eden before the fall – a quiet, innocent town where nothing of note happens. (Of course, it's later revealed in the book that the region had its share of horrifying crimes long before the Clutters were murdered, but it's a time that's only remembered by the town's elderly citizens.) Following the murder of the Clutters, the town becomes a hotbed for suspicion and fear – Holcomb – and, by extension, Garden City – has become a place where terrible things can happen.

Each character in the story goes through a fall from innocence. In Perry, for example, this is dealt with through a discussion of nature vs. nurture – how much of his murderous nature is natural, and how much of it was beaten into him through a lifetime of hard knocks, starvation, and sadness? Perry is ultimately a sympathetic character due to his natural (or seemingly natural) good qualities – he loves music and art, abhors sexual perversion, and loves animals. His fall from grace is essentially thrust upon him, via his abusive, alcoholic parents. This fall from grace is also characterized in his wilted, mangled lower body, which came about as a result of a crime-related motorcycle accident – something that could be seen as a literal fall from grace.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### THE GOLDEN PARROT

In times of trouble, Perry Smith is often visited by visions of a **golden parrot** that swoops down and avenges him. Perry doesn't consider himself to be a religious man, but he nonetheless ascribes a kind of divine power to the golden parrot. Toward the end of the book, while he's in a hunger-induced delirium, Perry mutters to himself that the parrot is Jesus. Whatever the parrot is, it is a powerful symbol of Christianity, vengeance, and the divine, and it recurs throughout the story.



### TWO GRAY CATS

During his stint in the Garden City county jail, Perry Smith notices **two gray cats** prowling around the town square. The cats come out every night and pick dead birds from the grilles of automobiles. Perry realizes that his life is a lot like theirs, given that he lives on the outskirts of society and picks at whatever scraps he can find. The two cats could be seen as being analogous to Dick Hickok and Perry.



## DEATH ROW

Kansas State Penitentiary's **Death Row** is housed in a coffin-shaped building, which clearly (and somewhat ham-handedly) symbolizes the end of the line for Perry Smith and Dick Hickok. The cells in Death Row look out on the shed that houses that gallows, known by the inmates as The Corner.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *In Cold Blood* published in 1994.

### Part 1 Quotes

☞ At the time, not a soul in sleeping Holcomb heard them – four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives.

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith, Richard Eugene “Dick” Hickok, Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter, Nancy Clutter, Kenyon Clutter

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 5

#### Explanation and Analysis

*In Cold Blood* opens by describing a serene and pastoral town in which salt-of-the-earth Kansans raise families and livestock in a religious and warm community. Capote sets up this image of paradise only to dash it with the description of the shotgun blasts. In a way, this opening mirrors the experience of reading the whole book; Capote repeatedly presents readers with idyllic scenes of American life and traditionally successful characters only to tell us afterwards that everything is darker and more complicated than it initially appears.

This quotation also sets in motion the unspooling of the plot. By revealing that four shotgun blasts ended six lives, Capote tells readers from the start that the two killers are doomed as well. This foreshadowing (or prolepsis, as it would be more accurately described) makes the dreams and aspirations that the two killers express throughout the remainder of the book seem hopeless and even tragic. In this way, Capote has primed the readers for one of the major themes of the book: that the American dream seems always out of reach.

☞ Always certain of what he wanted from the world, Mr. Clutter had in large measure obtained it...[H]e wore a plain gold band, which was the symbol...of his marriage to the person he had wished to marry...She had given him four children – a trio of daughters and a son.

**Related Characters:** Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter, Nancy Clutter, Kenyon Clutter, Eveanna (Clutter) Jarchow, Beverly (Clutter) English

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 6

#### Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is an example, like the opening of the book, of Capote building up a character only to later dash the reader's expectations. In this description, Herb Clutter seems to embody the achievement of the American dream. He knew what he wanted and he got it; he's married, and he has lovely children and a successful farm. In this moment, readers get the sense that Herb must have been idyllically fulfilled by his rich life. Because we already know that he was murdered, this description seems tragic, but we don't know yet that it is also misleading. In the pages that follow, Capote reveals that Herb had his dissatisfactions; his marriage, for one, was not as perfect and fulfilling as it initially appeared. Capote's project in this book is, in large part, to instruct readers that appearances do not always--or even often--correspond to reality. The life and death of Herb Clutter is one of the most potent examples of this that the book provides.

☞ [T]he dream of drifting downward through strange waters, of plunging toward a green sea-dusk, sliding past the scaly, savage-eyed protectors of a ship's hulk that loomed ahead, a Spanish galleon – a drowned cargo of diamonds and pearls, heaping caskets of gold.

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 17

#### Explanation and Analysis

More than any other character in the book, Perry represents the elusive nature of the American dream. While Perry's dreams are always eccentric (he does not embody mainstream American masculinity, and his dreams are not

quite resonant with the classic American dream), his fantasizing about the wealth and excitement of treasure hunting in Mexico places him within the bounds of the classic American quest for the stability and status that come with money. Indeed, Perry's fantasizing about Mexico reveals that he believes he will have a comfortable life there (rather than the scrappy and impoverished one he has lived in the States), and that he will feel independent. This shows the similarities between his values and traditional American middle class values.

However, the same passage reveals one stark difference between Perry and the majority of middle class Americans; Perry plans to achieve his dreams through criminal means. Perry is not entirely unsympathetic, though. In this passage, Perry reveals that his motivation for robbing the Clutter family is to get enough money to allow him to escape to what he believes will be a fulfilling life in Mexico (he doesn't fantasize about more crime), and, furthermore, readers learn that Dick is the ringleader of this operation. Clearly, then, Perry is not simply interested in crime for its own sake.

●● A cinch...I promise you, honey, we'll blast hair all over them walls.

**Related Characters:** Richard Eugene "Dick" Hickok (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

This is a crucial passage, as it establishes for certain that Dick and Perry's plan is not only robbery, but also murder. In other words, these two men are committing the premeditated murder of a family they have never met--this is murder "in cold blood," which gives the title to Capote's book. This passage is even more chilling for the casual and even celebratory way that Dick talks about the planned murder, which raises the question of evil. While Perry is presented as a sympathetic and conflicted character, Dick seems here to entirely lack a conscience.

It is also worth noting the language that Dick uses to address Perry. *In Cold Blood* devotes itself to exploring ideas of masculinity and all kinds of male bonds, from conspiratorial to aspirational to intimate. Certainly, Dick's using the word "honey" points to an unusual intimacy between the two men. The term also feminizes Perry, a

theme that continues throughout the book.

●● Little things really belong to you...They don't have to be left behind. You can carry them in a shoebox.

**Related Characters:** Bonnie Clutter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 27

### Explanation and Analysis

This is a moment in which readers are allowed, finally, to see beyond the perfect Clutter facade. Bonnie Clutter is revealed to be a strange and unhappy woman who speaks of her fatigue and her feeling of irrelevance, since she believes her children don't need her anymore. Capote then allows readers a glimpse into her past—from her happy childhood through her adult life, which has been riddled by mental health troubles. In this heartbreaking statement, Bonnie is alluding to the fact that she can take her beloved small objects with her to the hospital when she goes. Bonnie's history shows us that, while she seems to be someone who has achieved the American dream, she is in a way still seen as "abnormal" because of her mental illness, and she still longs for more from life--she wishes she had completed nursing school, and she loved her job as a file clerk, though she left it because she thought it unchristian to enjoy being away from her husband. This hints at the emptiness of the American dream, that even when someone seems to have achieved it he or she is still likely to want something different or better.

●● Nancy's door was open. The curtains hadn't been drawn, and the room was full of sunlight. I don't remember screaming...I only remember Nancy's Teddy bear staring at me. And Nancy. And running...

**Related Characters:** Susan Kidwell (speaker), Nancy Clutter

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 60

### Explanation and Analysis

This scene is, in every way, a fall from innocence. On a literal level, Nancy's two friends fall from innocence because they

are the ones to find their friend's murdered body. This idea is magnified because it is a light-filled Sunday morning, and the girls are on their way to Church—a completely unexpected and even perverse time for this to happen. More symbolically, this is a fall from innocence for the entire town of Holcomb. The girls are able to enter the house and find Nancy in the first place because, as Capote points out, nobody there locks their doors. Though we later learn that other grisly crimes have occurred in the area, nobody seems to remember them. Residents believe they live somewhere safe and idyllic, and the murder of the Clutters makes people distraught and suspicious—it irrevocably changes the town.

This scene also presents readers with another barrier to the American dream. While much of the book is consumed with its living characters failing to achieve the lives that they aspire to, in this scene we see that Nancy Clutter—perhaps the character we believe is most likely to be fulfilled—cannot achieve her dreams because her life was violently taken from her. This contributes to the pervasive sense of doom that hangs over the whole book.

☹☹ "I'm scared, Myrt."  
"Of what? When your time comes, it comes. And tears won't save you."

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Myrt Clare (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 69

### Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most startling passages in the book, because it is the first indication that the Holcomb community itself might be internally divided or cynical. Myrt reacts to the news of the Clutter murders coldly, and her words seem to indicate that she feels Herb Clutter had it coming because his ambition, it seems to her, came at the expense of the community. She also immediately casts suspicions on community members, calling them "rattlesnakes." In a book that has gone to great pains to present the Holcomb community as innocent and good, this is a jarring reminder that everything is more complex than it seems.

The fatalism of this exchange is also an interesting counterpoint to the theme of characters chasing unrealizable dreams. Myrt seems to be the only character who truly embraces fate; this passage indicates that she

frowns on the kind of ambition that denies a person's natural fate, even if that fate is mediocrity or death. If Perry represents one extreme—chasing wildly unrealizable dreams without recognizing their impossibility—Myrt represents the other. Capote seems to frown on both.

## Part 2 Quotes

☹☹ How was it possible that such effort, such plain virtue, could overnight be reduced to this – smoke, thinning as it rose and was received by the big, annihilating sky?

**Related Characters:** Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter, Nancy Clutter, Kenyon Clutter

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 79

### Explanation and Analysis

In this moving passage, Herb Clutter's friends have come to his farm to clean the crime scene and burn all the items that were ruined by blood. Here, Andy Erhart, who watched Herb work his way up from humble origins to professional and familial success, feels hopeless before the bonfire because of what it symbolizes to him. To Erhart (who is, in some sense, a proxy for the reader), Herb did everything right—he worked hard and achieved his goals. Erhart doesn't understand, then, how it could all be taken from Herb so quickly and senselessly. To Erhart, the bonfire is a physical manifestation of the slippery nature of the American dream. While it might seem permanent once you have achieved it, the bonfire reminds us that the American dream is a house built on sand. As so much of the American dream rests on the accrual of material possessions, the literal burning of those possessions is a potent symbol of the destruction that has occurred.

☹☹ ...once a thing is set to happen, all you can do is hope it won't. Or will – depending. As long as you live, there's always something waiting, and even if it's bad, and you know it's bad, what can you do?

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 92

### Explanation and Analysis

Perry says this in response to Dick asking him why, if he had a premonition that something bad would happen, did he continue with their plan. His response reveals that Perry is, perhaps, less secular and innocent than he seemed at first. As readers have been acquainted with a Perry who is possessed by his fantastic dreams of treasure hunting in Mexico, the fatalism of this passage comes as a shock. While Perry had once seemed a little innocent in his unrealizable aspirations, we now see that Perry may actually understand the hopelessness of his position more than we think.

His response also seems almost religious, even though Perry is somebody who disavows religion. Perry claims, to some extent, to have had no agency in the murders, as he feels that he was possessed by a fate that was determined outside of himself. Not only does Perry show his belief in fate here, but he also reveals that he thinks of himself as some sort of mystic--he cites a history of premonitions. This passage adds considerable depth to Perry's character, and also casts doubt on Perry's sense of good and evil, as he chooses to cite fate rather than reckoning with his own choices.

☞ It was after one of these beatings, one [Perry] could never forget...that the parrot appeared, arrived while he slept, a bird "taller than Jesus, yellow like a sunflower," a warrior-angel who blinded the nuns with its beak, fed upon their eyes, slaughtered them as they "pleaded for mercy," then so gently lifted him, enfolded him, winged him away to "paradise."

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

While Perry's previous admission of his beliefs in fate and premonition seemed eccentric, this passage tips from eccentric to, depending on your perspective, a kind of religious ecstasy or an indication of possible mental illness. Perry here describes a cherished vision, one that has returned to him throughout his life, of a parrot who saves him from his own wrongdoing and the cruelty of others. The parrot, which Perry compares to Jesus, has a similar function -- to take Perry to paradise despite his sins.

This gives crucial insight into Perry's perspective on himself. Through the parrot, readers glimpse the litany of cruelties Perry has experienced at the hands of others, and we see that, while Perry does not always consider his actions to be good or righteous, he does feel that he is less cruel than other people, which excuses some bad behavior.

Furthermore, he expects salvation not from his own deeds, but from the parrot. This logic sheds light on Perry's seemingly impossible hope for a fulfilling and stable life, and also his idea that he can achieve this without behaving wholly honorably. The parrot points to a complicated psychological disposition in which Perry's past and his (possibly pathological) beliefs in salvation and fate combine to make murder possible.

☞ Nancy wore her dress of cherry-red velvet, her brother a bright plaid shirt; the parents were more sedately attired, Mr. Clutter in navy-blue flannel, his wife in navy-blue crepe; and -- and it was this, especially, that lent the scene an awful aura -- the head of each was completely encased in cotton, a swollen cocoon twice the size of an ordinary blown-up balloon, and the cotton, because it had been sprayed with a glossy substance, twinkled like Christmas-tree snow.

**Related Characters:** Nancy Clutter, Kenyon Clutter, Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

In this eerie passage, Nancy's friend and boyfriend are viewing the bodies of the Clutter family at the funeral home. Their appearance is described in an almost absurdist way--they are each carefully dressed in beautiful clothes, but their heads (where each was shot) are encased in huge swabs of cotton that "twinkled like...snow."

Here, Capote is drawing out an image that points to the contradictions and absurdities of the American dream. There is something aspirational in the fancy clothes that the Clutters wear, but, as their cotton-encased heads show, they have nothing left to aspire to. In a way, this isn't so different from the way Capote views the relationship of the living to the American dream--that it is essentially unachievable. The image also plays with Capote's theme of normality. The Clutters seem like completely normal, successful Americans if we were to judge by their outfits, but their grotesquely encased heads indicate that

something deeply abnormal is happening. Capote is always doing this--throughout the book he points to the fact that no matter how normal or idyllic a person or situation seems, it is always more complicated.

☞ No fooling Dick...This is authentic. I've got a map. I've got the whole history. It was buried there back in 1821 – Peruvian bullion, jewelry. Sixty million dollars – that's what they say it's worth. Even if we didn't find all of it, even if we only found some of it – Are you with me, Dick?

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith (speaker), Richard Eugene “Dick” Hickok

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

While Perry's discussion of inescapable fate makes readers feel, to some extent, that Perry understands his own doom, he is still prone to flights of fancy about the life he and Dick could have in Mexico. Here, after a day of writing hot checks, Perry is explaining to a skeptical Dick how they will make money once they leave the country. His explanation sounds delusional at best--his plans include treasure maps, fishing boats, and diving for sunken treasure. It is through the contrast between passages like this (that show the scale and intensity of Perry's longing) and the brutality of the Clutter murders that Capote critiques the American dream. Not only does the dream inspire rabid dissatisfaction and grandiose hopes, but it makes it possible to commit acts of extreme violence in the name of aspiration. Clearly, Perry just wants to have a nice life for himself, but he doesn't seem to recognize that, in the pursuit of this, he has taken four lives from others.

☞ Now, what kind of person would do that – tie up two women...and then draw up the bedcovers, tuck them in, like sweet dreams and good night?

**Related Characters:** Alvin Dewey (speaker), Perry Edward Smith, Richard Eugene “Dick” Hickok

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

Here, Alvin contemplates the specifics of the murder scene, saying that he is most tantalized by the trouble that the killers went to to make sure the Clutters were comfortable. Alvin seems unable to understand how a cold-blooded murderer could be in the process of killing and simultaneously beholden to the impulses towards kindness that would make him tuck Nancy and Bonnie in, or put a pillow under Kenyon's head. With this passage, Capote continues to explore the complex nature of evil. Evil, Capote seems to say, is not monolithic--an almost scarier proposition than the idea of somebody being purely evil, since it makes us ask to what extent one has to follow evil impulses to do evil, and, conversely, how much kindness is required to save us from evil.

In these considerations, the passage also makes a commentary on our perceptions about what is normal. It seems that Alvin does not believe that these impulses towards kindness are "normal" behavior for a killer, though kindness would be "normal" behavior for the middle-class Christians in his community. Alvin's inability to categorize "normal" and "abnormal" people is, he seems to say, more difficult to process than the fact of the murders itself.

☞ Deal me out, baby. I'm a normal.

**Related Characters:** Richard Eugene “Dick” Hickok (speaker), Perry Edward Smith

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 111

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes in an exchange between Perry and Dick in which Perry raises the possibility that there is something wrong with the two of them, since they were able and willing to kill the Clutters. Dick responds confidently that he is normal, though Capote reveals that Dick is strongly convinced that Perry is not. Dick cites Perry's childishness, his stormy emotions, and his obsession with treasure hunting as examples that Perry is not "normal," but Dick's relentless defining of normalcy also reveals to us Dick's own preoccupation with being normal himself. Normalcy is a virtue that Dick seems to cherish and one that he believes (with pride) that he has, despite Perry's very good evidence to the contrary. In a sense, Dick's quest for normalcy is his version of Perry's treasure hunting dream--both are aspirations that guide their actions, and both are delusional

in that, because of who these men are and the circumstances they're in, neither one of them can ever achieve their dream.

☞ But I'm afraid of [Perry]. I always have been. He can seem so warmhearted and sympathetic. Gentle. He cries so easily.... Oh, he can fool you. He can make you feel so sorry for him –

**Related Characters:** Barbara (Smith) Johnson (speaker), Perry Edward Smith

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 182

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is spoken by Perry's sister, who is a source of torment for him--at this point in the book he has expressed his hatred for her patronizing attitude and her lack of sympathy for his plight, as well as his wish that she had been in the Clutter home the night of the murders. While this passage, spoken by Barbara, seems, perhaps, less sympathetic to Perry than the reader might expect, her sentiment does not seem unjustified. For her, Perry's evil lies in the dichotomy between his outward appearance of sweetness and his inward tendencies toward violence. Barbara seems to view this as pathological manipulation, and it forces us as readers to step back and wonder if we have been similarly manipulated by Capote's attention to Perry's inner conflicts, dreams, and passions, which seem to soften his cruelty.

Barbara also presents a challenge to the fatalistic hypothesis that Perry is the way he is because his childhood was so bad--Barbara herself had a similar childhood, and she has achieved a life that she, and most others, would consider normal. This is an important counterpoint to Perry's own idea that he is not totally responsible for his actions, since he is controlled by fate and the past.

☞ Things hadn't changed much. Perry was twenty-odd years older and a hundred pounds heavier, and yet his material situation had improved not at all. He was still...an urchin dependent, so to say, on stolen coins.

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 193

### Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most damning passages for the American dream in the whole book. Perry, who is much beholden to his fanciful dreams, here realizes that his life has actually been marked by a lack of progress of any kind. He is, at this point, still supporting himself by petty theft, just as he did as a kid. It's a complicated passage because he remembers those childhood thefts fondly--it even cheers him up to think about them--but he also notes cynically that his lack of progress seems incredible for someone of his intelligence and talent. As readers, we're left not knowing what to believe--since he seems to enjoy theft, is he in his current position because his aspirations are actually much less extravagant than he seems to believe? Or has he been unable to achieve his tremendous potential because of fate and circumstance? Regardless, this passage once again critiques the empty promise of progress and success in America.

☞ Dick was sick of [Perry] – his harmonica, his aches and ills, his superstitions, the weepy, womanly eyes, the nagging, whispering voice. Suspicious, self-righteous, spiteful, he was like a wife that must be got rid of.

**Related Characters:** Richard Eugene “Dick” Hickok, Perry Edward Smith

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 214

### Explanation and Analysis

Just before their arrest in Las Vegas, Dick reveals that he has tired of Perry and that he plans to ditch him without saying goodbye. Significantly, Perry's characteristics that most grate on Dick are the ones that Dick sees as being most abnormal--it's worth noting, too, that to Dick, the most abnormal thing a man can be is feminine. So Dick, in his relentless protection of his own normalcy, wants to get rid of Perry. While Capote has brought attention throughout the book to Perry's femininity, this passage is significant because Dick has never before been so disgusted with Perry and, correspondingly, has never described Perry in such concerted feminine terms. He brings attention to Perry's womanly eyes, his feminine voice, and his nagging, before explicitly comparing Perry to a wife. In prior passages, Dick has seemed to enjoy aspects of feminizing

Perry--in a traditionally masculine way, Dick is the leader of the two of them, and he calls Perry pet names like "honey" and "baby." However, as their relationship splinters, Dick uses Perry's femininity as a scapegoat for the deeper problems of trust and cruelty that plague their relationship.

☛ Perry Smith killed the Clutters.... It was Perry. I couldn't stop him. He killed them all.

**Related Characters:** Richard Eugene "Dick" Hickok (speaker), Perry Edward Smith, Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter, Nancy Clutter, Kenyon Clutter

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 230

### Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the book, Dick is portrayed as the more cold-blooded of the two killers due to his lack of remorse and kindness. When presented with an evidence photograph of a bloody footprint and told of all the murder charges he is facing, Dick does not keep to his word that he and Perry will tell the same story to police interrogators, and instead he blames the killings on Perry. This further cements the reader's negative opinion of Dick, as he is essentially attempting to sacrifice his friend, who he dragged into the killings in the first place, in order to spare his own future. While Perry represents a nuanced and even banal vision of evil (he commits an evil act because Dick tells him to, and feels some remorse after), Dick is a much more polar version of evil. Dick is shown as cruel, manipulative, and lacking empathy in a way that almost points to psychological pathology.

☛ Nonetheless, [Alvin] found it possible to look at the man beside him without anger...for Perry Smith's life had been no bed of roses but pitiful, an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another.

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith, Alvin Dewey

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 246

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes at the end of Alvin hearing Perry's full

confession to the Clutter murders. Capote devotes pages to Perry giving an account in excruciating detail of how he and Dick killed the four Clutters, and then Alvin proclaims that he has a certain sympathy for Perry, and he's not angry, though he does not feel inclined towards forgiveness or mercy either. Alvin, perhaps, has the most nuanced perspective on Perry of all. Unlike Perry's sister, he does not think of Perry as pure evil; unlike Dick, he does not think of Perry as weak and abnormal; and unlike Perry himself, he does not chalk the man's actions up to fate and rotten circumstance. While Alvin acknowledges that Perry has been, for his whole life, in the maddening position of chasing a dream that is actually a "mirage," he still believes that Perry is responsible for his own choices, indicating that he believes that evil is something not inherent to a person, but something within his or her control.

## Part 4 Quotes

☛ The cats, for example: the two thin gray toms who appeared with every twilight and prowled the Square, stopping to examine the cars parked around its periphery – behavior puzzling to [Perry] until Mrs. Meier explained that the cats were hunting for dead birds caught in the vehicles' engine grilles. Thereafter it pained him to watch their maneuvers: "Because most of my life I've done what they're doing. The equivalent."

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith, Josephine Meier

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 264

### Explanation and Analysis

The two gray tomcats are obvious symbols of Dick and Perry themselves. From his cell, Perry watches them and at first feels perplexed by their behavior. This harkens back to Capote's concern with normality and abnormality, as Perry clearly finds the cats' behavior to be abnormal—until Mrs. Meier explains that they're hunting for dead birds in car grilles. At this point Perry seems heartbroken by watching them, because he sees himself in the cats: surviving by foraging for what's cast off by the world, living on the margins of society, and benefiting from violence and death. In comparing his own behavioral patterns to the behavior of the cats, Perry seems to embrace the same fatalism that led him to conclude that his behavior was largely outside of his

control. He is pitying himself here by comparing himself to animals who are not taken care of and have little hope for a better life.

☞ As the auction progressed, and Mr. Clutter's worldly domain dwindled, gradually vanished, Paul Helm, remembering the burial of the murdered family said, "It's like a second funeral."

**Related Characters:** Herb Clutter, Paul Helm

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 270

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote approaches the fragility and emptiness of the American dream in two ways. First, it is similar to the previous quote in which Herb's friends are burning their bloodstained belongings and are reminded of how quickly a hard-won life of success can be taken away. In this way, the quote speaks to the fragility of the kind of life that people tend to consider enduring and stable. In another way, this quote addresses the materialism of the American dream. Capote is concerned in this book with the disconnect between appearance and reality, and one of the main ways in which people project success and status in America is through their belongings. In saying that the auction of the Clutters' belongings was like "a second funeral," Paul Helm is equating their belongings to their personhood in a way that seems perverse. This quote speaks to the ways in which devoting a life to material acquisition (as encouraged by the American dream) can devalue individuality and personhood.

☞ Soldiers don't lose much sleep. They murder, and get medals for doing it. The good people of Kansas want to murder me – and some hangman will be glad to get the work. It's easy to kill – a lot easier than passing a bad check. Just remember: I only knew the Clutters maybe an hour. If I'd really known them, I guess I'd feel different. I don't think I could live with myself. But the way it was, it was like picking targets off in a shooting gallery.

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith (speaker), Herb Clutter, Bonnie Clutter, Nancy Clutter, Kenyon Clutter

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 291

### Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the story, Perry is beginning to unravel psychologically, so his words cannot be considered reliable. However, in a sense, this passage seems to be one of the most honest in the book. It would have been easy for Perry to play up his moral conflict (evident in his efforts to make the Clutters comfortable before their deaths, his questioning whether he and Dick are normal if they're capable of an act like that, or his thinking of Nancy Clutter on her birthday) and earn the sympathy of his Christian friend, but instead he presents himself in a pretty unforgiving light. This is another example of Perry's brand of evil being complex--Perry admits that he would have felt remorse if he'd known the Clutters, but says he is not sorry since he didn't know them, which seems sociopathic. However, this assertion is contradicted by the fact that by the time this quote occurs we've just found out that Perry tried to take the blame for the murders to spare Dick's family shame, indicating that Perry does have some empathy for people he doesn't know. Perry also makes a moral comparison between the Clutter murder and the acts of soldiers and executioners, and questions whether one can make a meaningful distinction between them. Essentially, this quote indicates that Perry cannot understand the depths of his own moral confusion, and he seems weary of trying.

☞ Well, what's there to say about capital punishment? I'm not against it. Revenge is all it is, but what's wrong with revenge? ...I believe in hanging. Just so long as I'm not the one being hanged.

**Related Characters:** Richard Eugene "Dick" Hickok (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 336

### Explanation and Analysis

Dick has also unraveled psychologically, as he seems to believe that he is actually innocent of the murders. He has

also, by this point, spent a lot of time learning the law to try to contest his fate. This behavior, along with the quote at hand, shows that Dick's brand of evil, unlike Perry's, is entirely self-interested and manipulative, to a potentially pathological extent. Perry is interested in finding a consistent moral logic that explains his behavior and the behavior of those around him (i.e. that he is guilty of murder in the same way that the state is guilty of murder in war and through capital punishment), which shows that Perry still sees himself as embedded in a society that is operating together by, largely, the same rules. Dick, though, has no such interest--he is only concerned with himself, even to the extent that he is willing to assert something so bizarre and contradictory as his support for the death penalty on the grounds that nothing is wrong with revenge, unless it is he who is being hanged.

☝ I think...it's a helluva thing to take a life in this manner. I don't believe in capital punishment, morally or legally. Maybe I had something to contribute, something – It would be meaningless to apologize for what I did. Even inappropriate. But I do. I apologize.

**Related Characters:** Perry Edward Smith (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 340

### Explanation and Analysis

Perry's last words further show the complexity of evil. Perry did something evil, and the humility of his apology shows that even he would likely admit that at this point. However, he does not believe that this makes him wholly bad, and he does not believe that the taking of one life (or even four) justifies the taking of another. Despite Perry's flaws, he emerges from this story seeming reasonably human and sympathetic. It's profound that Perry acknowledges that even if he is sorry for what he has done, it is meaningless to say the words in the face of the lives he has taken.

This passage is also Perry's final appeal to his beloved dreams. Throughout the book Perry has been full of dreams--he is always aspiring to a better life than the one he has, but his visions for the future have, up until now, been largely concerned with personal wealth and adventure. That at the moment of his death Perry's dream for the future is to contribute to society opens the possibility that Perry has grown.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART 1: THE LAST TO SEE THEM ALIVE

Mid-November, 1959. The setting: Holcomb, Kansas – a tiny town of 270 inhabitants situated at the crossroads between the fertile plains of the Midwest and the dusty ranges of the High West. The town has several principal landmarks: the post office, Hartman's Café (run by Mrs Hartman), Holcomb School, the Teacherage (where the several of the town's teachers live), and the Holcomb School. Normally a sleepy, quiet town, the silence is broken in the early hours of the morning by "four shotgun blasts that, all told, ended six human lives."

Flashback to two days earlier. We're introduced to Herb Clutter – the "master" of River Valley Farm. Herb is middle-aged, but "in first-rate condition" thanks to his work ethic and Methodist temperance. Herb is a successful man and a prominent citizen of both Holcomb and nearby Garden City. He is the father of four children: Eveanna (the mother of a 10-month-old boy), Beverly (a nursing student who will soon be married), Nancy (16, "the town darling"), and Kenyon (15, a studious but athletic boy).

Herb's wife, Bonnie Clutter, is introduced. She is a "nervous" woman who throughout her life has suffered from "little spells." She has recently gotten word from a doctor that a spinal surgery might relieve her depression, and there is new hope in the household as a result. In an effort to prove that change is coming, Bonnie dons a new dress, fixes her hair, and puts in an appearance at Nancy's school play.

Nancy begs to be allowed to stay out late after the play, and her father – softened by his daughter's success in the play, as well as his wife's good spirits – gives her permission. Herb gives Nancy a scolding later that night, given that she returns home two hours late, driven by her boyfriend Bobby Rupp. Bobby and Nancy have been dating for three years, and Herb is concerned that their relationship is far too serious. He encourages Nancy to break things off with Bobby, given that the Rups are Roman Catholics – to Herb's mind, Catholics and Methodists simply cannot marry.

*Prior to the murder of the Clutter family, Holcomb is characterized by its innocence (there are few crimes, the town is family-oriented, etc.). Holcomb is also seemingly a place where farmers and ranchers can, through hard work, achieve the American Dream. The sudden shattering of this dream is dramatized by the quick cut to the shotgun blasts and the description of their carnage.*



*Through his hard work, Herb appears (to us and to those around him) to have achieved the American Dream; he is a successful businessman, he has a wife and children, and he's well liked among his peers. He's also a staunch Methodist, and Herb seems to connect his religious faith with his worldly success.*



*In terms of mental health, Bonnie stands in stark contrast to Herb. Her mental health problems have made her act in ways that, according to those around her, seem abnormal. Bonnie's mental health issues complicate the Clutters' "achievement" of the American Dream. Even though the Clutters seem successful, they privately harbor their own problems.*



*According to Herb's religious beliefs the relationship between Nancy and Bobby is not normal, even though no one else in the town seems to have a problem with their relationship, which signals that on a societal level they're not doing anything wrong. What's normal and what isn't can be complicated. Being "religious" isn't so simple either, as different religions can be so different (at least in Herb's view) that they can't mix.*



Herb ends up sleeping in, given that he went to bed far too late. He wakes up alone – his wife is sleeping upstairs, in Eveanna’s former bedroom. It is revealed that Herb and Bonnie haven’t slept in the same bed for several years. The house he lives in – which he designed himself- is large and well appointed. Mr. Clutter drinks a glass of milk (no coffee – he disapproves of all stimulants, and of alcohol as well) and heads to the livestock corral accompanied by the family dog, Teddy.

*Herb and Bonnie’s sleeping arrangement is emblematic of their troubled, “abnormal” marriage. It’s also illustrative of the failed dream of their marriage – they seem like they have achieved the dream of a successful marriage, but, secretly, the dream has failed. Herb’s Methodist temperance continues to shine through in his actions – his disapproval of coffee is clearly tied to his Methodist beliefs, and his light appetite might be tied to these beliefs as well.*



Herb’s backstory is touched upon in this scene, detailing how he worked his way up from an assistant to the Finney County agricultural agent to a full-fledged county agent. Herb ultimately dreamed of running his own farm, so he quit his job in order to start River Valley Farm. Naysayers dismissed Herb’s “university notions” of running a farm, but his experiments were ultimately a success – “partly because, in the beginning years, [Herb] labored eighteen hours a day.”

*To the casual onlooker, it might well seem that Herb has achieved the American Dream: he’s a self-made man who has the privilege to pursue his happiness. Herb’s extremely hard work seems to have paid off, given that his farm is prosperous, he’s a landowner, and he has a family. Interestingly, Herb’s “abnormal” notions of running a farm ultimately resulted in his success.*



Herb greets the farm’s “sole resident employee,” Alfred Stoecklein. Alfred begs off work, given that his baby is sick. Mr. Clutter grants him a day off, and offers to help Alfred in any way he can. Herb then wanders down to the river, where he has planted a small orchard of fruit trees – “his attempt to contrive...a patch of the paradise, the green, apple-scented Eden, he envisioned.” He walks by the river and recalls the happy early days of his marriage, when he used to picnic there with Bonnie and the children.

*Herb’s Christian generosity is showcased in his benevolent attitude toward Alfred. Given that he cherishes his fruit orchard to a surprising degree, it seems that Herb harbors private fantasies. He longs for something that his current life doesn’t give him – marital happiness, perhaps, given that he fantasizes about the early days of his marriage. This could also be seen as an example of a fall from innocence, given that Herb is contrasting the innocent early days of his marriage with the troubled, “experienced” marriage he now has.*



Five pheasant hunters from Oklahoma appear, and they approach Herb. Teddy runs at them but, gun-shy, he quickly puts his head down and tucks his tail between his legs when he spots their rifles. The hunters offer to pay a fee to hunt on the farm. Herb gives them leave to hunt for free. “I’m not as poor as I look. Go ahead, get all you can,” he says.

*Herb’s generosity toward the pheasant hunters is another example of his Christian values. It’s also a sign that he’s achieved the American Dream – he’s so prosperous, he can afford to lose a few pheasants. The arrival of the hunters and Herb’s words to them also foreshadows the family’s murder.*



Perry Smith is sitting in the Little Jewel Café in Olathe, Kansas. He's drinking a root beer, smoking a cigarette, and studying a map of Mexico. He recently arrived in Olathe with all his worldly belongings: a cardboard suitcase, a guitar, and two boxes filled to the brim with letters, souvenirs, and books. He's waiting at the café for his partner in crime, Dick Hickock, to arrive, so they can discuss the plans for a robbery (a "score"). Perry muses over the map, fantasizing about becoming a treasure hunter in the tropics. Perry pays his bill and rises to leave, revealing his short stature. He stands outside to wait for Dick. While he waits, he idly dreams about becoming a musician at a nightclub in Vegas, a notion that Dick has dismissed in the past. (Perry admires this about Dick, thinking him to be practical and "totally masculine.") His reveries are abruptly shattered when Dick pulls up in a car.

Nancy Clutter receives a phone call from Mrs. Clarence Katz, who wants Nancy to help her daughter, Jolene Katz, learn how to make a cherry pie. Nancy, a "champion cherry-pie maker," would love to help Jolene out, but her schedule is overbooked. She goes to her father's office to see if she can get out of her 4-H meeting, scheduled for that day. While in his office, she notices a peculiar smell of tobacco. Herb gives her leave to skip 4-H, and Nancy tells a relieved Mrs. Katz that she can teach Jolene how to bake a pie.

Nancy goes to her room and changes her clothes, putting on her favorite gold watch. Her best friend Susan Kidwell calls on the phone. Nancy reveals to her that she's worried about Herb – she suspects that he's been smoking cigarettes. She also mentions that Herb has once again asked her to break things off with Bobby. Nancy feels awful about disobeying her father. "I just want to be his daughter and do as he wishes," she says. She then muses that the source of her father's grouchiness has nothing to do with Bobby. Sue, who knows Nancy very well, asks if Bonnie's the source of the trouble. Nancy brushes this suggestion off, but secretly wonders whether Sue might be right.

Perry gets into Dick's car – a black 1949 Chevrolet. Dick is still wearing his blue mechanic's jumpsuit. He checks the back seat to see if his guitar is still there, and spots a twelve-gauge shotgun, along with a flashlight, a fishing knife, a pair of leather gloves, and hunting vest packed with shotgun shells. Perry asks if the vest is for the robbery, and Dick confirms that it's part of the plan. "A cinch," said Dick. "I promise you, honey, we'll blast hair all over them walls." Perry corrects his grammar – he's a stickler for grammar.

*Perry fantasizes about the life he could have in Mexico. His unfulfilled dream tantalizes him, and it strengthens his resolve to work with Dick. Perry dwells in a world of unfulfilled fantasies - fantasies of becoming a treasure hunter, fantasies of becoming a performer at a nightclub, etc. He considers Dick's seemingly down-to-earth nature—Dick's dismissal of his (Perry's) dreams— to be an example of Dick's "normal" masculinity.*



*Nancy seems to be well on her way to achieving the American Dream much in the way her father did – her hard work has made her an important figure in the community, even at the tender age of 17.*



*Nancy's conversation with Sue reveals her anxieties about her parents' mental health. Nancy is alarmed by Herb's strange behavior; she worries that her father harbors his own mental health struggles, given that he might be smoking, as smoking would also signal a weakening of his Methodist temperance. Although to outsiders the Clutters may seem like they've achieved the American Dream, this scene offers yet another example of how their family dynamics are actually much more complicated (as are everyone's!).*



*This is the first instance of Dick referring to Perry as "honey." It seems that their time in prison has given them a bond of intimacy that is akin to a kind of familial (or marital) bond (calling into question the normality of their admittedly odd union). The use of the word "honey" in the context of a conversation about killing an innocent family also brings up the concept of evil – Dick is using awfully casual language to discuss a heinous act. Dick's unrealized dream of how the Clutter robbery will occur is evident here as well. Perry's penchant for grammar stems from his dream of being perceived as an intellectual.*



They drive to Dick's place of work, Bob Sands' Body Shop, and tune up the Chevy. Dick reveals that he was late because his father was at home – newly released from prison, he's currently living with his parents (one condition of his parole). Dick doesn't want his parents to catch on to his lie: he's told them that he's going on an overnight trip to Fort Scott with Perry in order to collect money from Perry's sister. They finish tuning up the car at noon.

A cherry pie sits cooling on the counter at the Clutters' house. Jolene is overjoyed, and Nancy is pleased that she was able to help. Jolene wants to eat the pie right away, offering pieces to Bonnie and Nancy. They refuse – Nancy has to go help tutor another neighborhood girl, and Bonnie has one of her headaches. Nancy has to leave, so Bonnie agrees to keep Jolene company until her mother comes to pick her up. Jolene feels nervous in the presence of "strange" Mrs. Clutter. They chat about Nancy, and Jolene mentions that the home economics teacher at school has spoken highly of her: "Nancy Clutter is always in a hurry, but she always has time. And that's one definition of a lady." Mrs. Clutter agrees, wanly, saying, "All my children are efficient. They don't need me."

Bonnie takes Jolene into the dining room, where she keeps an assortment of miniatures on display. She mentions that Herb travels "a great deal," and that he always brings back "tiny things" from his travels. She unfolds a tiny paper fan from San Francisco and shows it to Jolene. "'Little things really belong to you,' she said. 'They don't have to be left behind. You can carry them in a shoebox.'" Fragments of Bonnie's past are revealed – her history of postpartum depression, the various failed treatments for "nervousness." One of these treatments involved Bonnie moving away to a new city and starting a new life. She loved it, but returned home out of guilt; she felt it was "unchristian." In spite of her many failed treatments, Bonnie trusts that God would have mercy on her. Her mother arrives, and Bonnie gives Jolene the fan.

Bonnie, alone in the house, decides to go to back to bed – "the bed she so rarely abandoned that poor Mrs. Helm had to battle for the chance to change its linen twice a week." She retreats to her room upstairs, which is sparsely furnished. The windows are always shut. Bonnie thinks back on her time as a mother, and feels that she has let her family down. She changes into a nightgown, gets into bed, and begins reading the Bible.

*Dick's ties to his family are in conflict with the "familial" bond he shares with Perry. In other words, his "normal" family is at odds with the "abnormal" familial bond he shares with Perry.*



*"Normal" Nancy is in stark contrast to "strange" Bonnie in this scene. Jolene's comment also highlights what the world perceives as Nancy's "normal" femininity. Bonnie's mental health issues are also on display in this scene. Her depression has led her to believe that her children don't need her – in spite of the fact that they're clearly still children, and that they therefore still need parental guidance and support, no matter how grown-up they might seem.*



*It's implied, in this scene, that Bonnie has taken these small objects with her during various hospital stays. Bonnie's tiny, perfect objects are emblematic, perhaps, of her own unfulfilled dreams – her desire to have something really belong to her, something that won't leave her behind. The constraints of Christianity are evident in this scene as well. Even though Bonnie's mental health improved when she was living on her own, her Christian belief that she was being unfaithful to her husband just by being away from him ultimately led her to abandon happiness. This also suggests that Bonnie's trouble is with Herb—that in some way he stifles her.*



*Eveanna's bedroom, where Bonnie sleeps, is emblematic of the failure of Bonnie and Herb's marriage – it's a place that, for Bonnie, harbors memories of failed dreams (the dream of being a "normal" mother, the dream of being mentally healthy, etc.) Even though her Christian beliefs have hindered her in the past, she finds comfort in reading the Bible.*



Having finished tuning up the Chevy, Dick and Perry spend the next hour “sprucing up” in the body shop’s bathroom. Both men are rather vain, and they take care with their respective appearances. Both men strip down to their briefs, revealing a motley assortment of tattoos. It’s revealed that Dick’s face is slightly crooked due to a car accident. Unclothed, Perry’s own disfigurement is on full display – his legs and lower body are twisted and scarred due to a serious motorcycle accident. The accident left him with chronic pain, and is addicted to aspirin as a result. Dick decides they’ve spent enough time primping. (“O.K., beauty. Put away the comb,” Dick said.) They dress and go to the car.

Herb and Kenyon attend the 4-H Club meeting in Garden City, a town of eleven thousand people that boasts a golf course, a number of churches, a small zoo, and the “World’s Largest FREE Swimpool.” Herb gives the Mrs. Hideo Ashida and her children a ride home, and during the drive Mrs. Ashida mentions that she and her husband might be moving away. Herb is alarmed. Mrs. Ashida explains that her husband thinks their lives might be better in Nebraska. She then asks Herb for advice regarding a Christmas present for her husband – should she give him three gold teeth? Herb approves. Mrs. Ashida makes the comment that she can’t imagine Herb ever being frightened of anything.

Dick and Perry reach the large town of Emporia, Kansas in order to pick up supplies for the robbery. While in a department store, Perry argues that the duo should wear women’s stockings over their faces in order to hide their identities – and, ostensibly, so they can avoid having to murder anyone. When it’s determined that they can’t get black stockings at the store, Dick reassures Perry that nothing can go wrong with their plan.

Kenyon, alone in the basement den, is at work on a hope chest as a wedding present for his sister Beverly. Although quite tall and athletic, Kenyon is an introverted boy, and not yet interested in girls. Kenyon goes outside to work on his mother’s flower garden, where he finds Paul Helm. Mr. Helm inquires about a car in the driveway; Kenyon speculates that it belongs to Mr. Johnson, the insurance agent. Nancy, soaking wet from a dip in the river, comes riding up on Babe. Mr. Helm takes his leave; it is the last time he will see the Clutter children alive.

*Dick and Perry’s physical “abnormalities” are illustrated in this scene. Tattooed, scarred, and twisted, their bodies are in stark contrast to the Clutter family’s “normal” appearance. In a manner that can be considered both jocular and intimate, Dick calls Perry “beauty” (once again drawing attention to their abnormally intimate relationship). Their primping could also be seen as an attempt to capture some semblance of normality before committing their crime, and possibly as an attempt to chase after the dream of a normal appearance.*



*Garden City’s innocence is illustrated in this scene: it’s a gentle place with little crime. It’s also a prosperous place where the American Dream seems to thrive, a religious place (given the number of Christian churches), and a place that could be considered highly “normal.” Herb seems to have a strong emotional attachment to Mrs. Ashida, given how startled he is that she might leave town. Mrs. Ashida is impressed by Herb’s apparent “normal” masculinity – to her, he seems powerful and fearless.*



*Perry, who is often referred to as “feminine,” has no qualms with wearing women’s stockings on his face. Dick, on the other hand, has problems with it! This could be seen as an example of Dick asserting his “normal” masculinity. Dick’s fantasy of how the robbery will go is also evident in this scene.*



*Kenyon’s “abnormal” tendencies (his introversion, his apathy toward girls, etc.) stand in contrast to his sister’s gregarious, “normal” nature. This the last Paul Helm sees of the two children – when he thinks back on this moment, he sees it as a moment of innocence before the fall.*



Dick and Perry, still on the hunt for black pantyhose, are parked outside of a Catholic hospital on the outskirts of town. Dick goes in to check and see if there's any black hose for sale, and Perry waits in the car, citing a superstitious belief that nuns are bad luck. While in the car, Perry reflects on his real reason for returning to Kansas – the hope that he might be reunited with Willie-Jay, the prison chaplain's clerk who, in prison, had been Perry's "real and only friend." Willie-Jay had tried in vain to convert Perry to Christianity, and had also warned Perry to beware of his violent temper. Dick, meanwhile, dismissed Willie-Jay as a "faggot." Once paroled, Perry discovered that Willie-Jay had disappeared (it's implied that Willie-Jay wants to start a new life, free of ties to his former life as a prisoner), leaving Perry no choice but to join up with Dick. Perry is shaken from his musings when Dick returns to the car empty handed.

Bob Johnson, the Garden City Representative of the New York Life Insurance Company, watches Mr. Clutter write a check for a new life insurance policy. Mr. Johnson jokes about Herb's infamous habit of never carrying cash. Herb boasts about his daughter's impending marriage, and comments on his immense luck. He speculates that his fortune will only increase in the years to come. Mr. Johnson places Herb's check in his pocket and departs.

Dick and Perry drive through the night. Perry gazes out at the flat landscape and reflects on how he hates Kansas; seaports are more his speed. Perry starts talking about Mexico – he reasons that he and Dick could rent a boat and go on a trip to Japan. He begins reminiscing about Japan (he was stationed there as a merchant marine), but Dick cuts him off – he seems preoccupied.

The next scene is told from the point of view of Bobby Rupp, during his testimony at the police station following the murder of the Clutters. Bobby recounts his relationship with Nancy. "Always, as long as I can remember, she was pretty and popular." Bobby recalls his last night with the Clutters (the night of the murder), and says he left their house at 10:30 that evening.

Dick and Perry have a veritable feast at a diner in Great Bend. They take off for Holcomb, and several hours later they stop at gas station on the outskirts of Garden City - Hurd's Phillips 66. Perry, suddenly wracked with pain in his legs, locks himself in the restroom. He takes some aspirin and inspects the rubber gloves he purchased. Dick waits impatiently in the car.

*Perry's conflicted feelings toward religion are on full display in this scene. On the one hand, he refuses to go into the Catholic hospital on the grounds that nuns are bad luck. On the other hand, his closest friend in prison, Willie-Jay, was a strongly religious man, and in many ways Perry seemed to want to emulate his piousness. His friendship with Willie-Jay can be viewed as another failed dream – once out of prison, the two could never be friends, given that Willie-Jay wants a fresh start free of his criminal past. Willie-Jay's "flawed" or "abnormal" masculinity (i.e. his homosexuality) contrasts with Dick's staunch heterosexuality. (In many ways, Dick is the anti-Willie-Jay.)*



*Herb reflects on how he's achieved what many consider to be the American Dream, and he supposes that others in his family (his two grown daughters in particular) are achieving it as well. This scene, in addition to being tragically ironic, also offers a sense of innocence before the fall, given that the signing of the insurance policy is an innocent act in an innocent time, and that this is the last Mr. Johnson will see of Mr. Clutter.*



*Perry views the Clutter robbery as a means to achieve his own version of the American Dream: treasure-hunting in Mexico. Dick's impatience with Perry's fantasies first becomes apparent in this scene.*



*Bobby's testimony reveals how normal and successful the Clutters seemed to outsiders. Nancy herself always exuded an air of normality – a trait that those around her found attractive. Bobby's last night with the Clutters is remembered as an innocent time before evil entered their lives.*



*Perry's dreams of Mexico are shattered by reality: his legs are crippled and cause him chronic pain, and the gloves remind him that he's about to commit murder – an evil act that will, for him, prove to be yet another step in his fall from innocence.*



While in the car, Dick worries that Perry has changed his mind about the “score” – something Dick hadn’t expected. Perry had once told Dick that he had killed a black man with a bicycle chain, “simply ‘for the hell of it,’” and Dick had thereafter been convinced that Perry was “that rarity, ‘a natural killer.’” After this revelation, Dick resolved to exploit Perry, and in doing so pretended to go along with his treasure hunting fantasies. Dick longs for a “regular life, with a business of his own, a house, a horse to ride, a new car, and ‘plenty of blonde chicken.’” Perry finally emerges, and they depart. They arrive at the Clutters’ house late that night.

The next morning, Clarence Ewalt drives his daughter Nancy Ewalt, a friend of Nancy Clutters’, to River Valley Farm, so she can go to church with their family. Nancy Ewalt rings the doorbell and there’s no answer. Sensing that something is amiss, she and her father drive to the Teacherage, to see if Susan Kidwell knows what’s going on. After trying to call the Clutters on the phone, Mr. Ewalt, Nancy Ewalt, Susan, and her mother, Wilma, decide to go to the Clutters’ house to investigate. Susan and Nancy are sent into the house and they discover Nancy Clutter’s dead body. They run out of the house, screaming.

The police, accompanied by Mr. Ewalt and Larry Hendricks, investigate the house. Upstairs, they discover Nancy’s body – she’s been shot in the head at point-blank range, but strangely enough she’s also been tucked into bed. They then discover Bonnie’s body in Eveanna’s room. Her hands have been tied in front of her, “so that she looked as though she were praying,” and her mouth has been taped shut. She, too, has been shot in the head. Kenyon and Herb are found in the basement, in separate rooms. Both are tied, have their mouths taped, and have been shot in the head. Mr. Clutter, however, also had his throat cut, and Kenyon had his head propped up with pillows. The only clue is a bloodstained footprint.

Holcomb’s mail carrier, Mother Truitt spies ambulances at River Valley Farm while she’s waiting for the mail to come in by train. She rushes back to the post office, where her daughter, Mrs. Myrt Clare, works as the town’s postmistress. Mrs. Clare makes a phone call and discovers that the Clutters have been murdered. Mother Truitt reacts with grief and horror. Her daughter is cavalier about the killings, saying, “When your time comes, it comes. And tears won’t save you.”

*Like Perry, Dick feels that he has failed to achieve the American Dream. Unlike Perry, his fantasies of life after the “score” are far more akin to the American Dream that the Clutters seem to have achieved. But even though Dick’s dreams might seem more “normal” than Perry’s, for him these dreams are just as unattainable. The notion of Perry as a “natural killer” – one who can commit evil acts without shame – is also introduced.*



*This moment signals Holcomb’s “fall from innocence”, though it will be noted later that Holcomb is only innocent in its own sense of itself, as horrible crimes have happened in the town before. This fall from innocence is highlighted by the fact that the discovery of Nancy’s dead body is made by two (innocent) teenage girls rather than old (experienced) Mr. Ewalt. Those two girls are also on their way to church.*



*The Clutters have been brutally murdered, but it seems that care has been taken to make them comfortable before they were killed. This apparent contradiction complicates the idea of what an evil act is – it seems evil acts can, at least in this case, involve tenderness. The fall from innocence continues in this scene. Bonnie’s prayerful stance seems to imply that she was praying to God when she was killed. This could be seen as a subtle critique of her faith.*



*As word begins to spread through the town, those who are more “innocent” seem to react more strongly to the news. Oddly enough, old Mother Truitt is more shocked than her tough-minded daughter. Mrs. Clare seems to operate in a world where evil acts are commonplace, even banal.*



News of the Clutter family's murder ripples through the town, with most of Holcomb's inhabitants reacting with shock, terror, and disbelief. The hub for news about the murders is Hartman's Café, where the owner, Mrs. Bess Hartman, has been shaken to the core. Insurance agent Bob Johnson, dumbfounded by the Clutter murders, decides to honor Herb's life insurance policy, even though he hasn't yet deposited Herb's check. Eveanna Jarchow and Beverly Clutter, along with the rest of the Clutter's extended family, head to Garden City. Mr. Ewalt informs Bobby Rupp of the murders, and Susan comforts Bobby.

*Holcomb's innocence is shattered, given that evil has entered their midst. Bob Johnson shows that he's a moral (and Christian) man by honoring Herb's insurance policy (something he could have easily not done, given that Herb's check hadn't been deposited yet). Bobby Rupp's dreams of love and possibly marriage are shattered with the news of Nancy's death.*



Perry sleeps in a motel room in Olathe, Kansas. His boots are soaking in the washbasin; the water is tinted with blood. Nearby, Dick, famished, is wolfing down Sunday dinner with his family. Instead of joining his family in front of the TV, he falls asleep straight after finishing his meal.

*The murder of the Clutters seems all the more heinous (and somehow more evil) given how nonchalant Perry and Dick act in the aftermath.*



## PART 2: PERSONS UNKNOWN

Four of Herb's closest friends go to the Clutter home in order to clean up. As they burn the Clutter's bloodstained belongings, one of his friends reflects on his friendship with Herb. "Everything Herb had, he earned – with the help of God," he says. Watching the smoke rise, he is taken aback by how suddenly the Clutters' fortune was swept away.

*Herb's friend reflects on how Herb seemed to have achieved the American Dream, and is shocked to see how fragile that dream really was. In spite of this, he still believes that Herb's life was just as successful as it seemed, and that God was on his side.*



Kansas Bureau of Investigation (KBI) agent Alvin Adams Dewey is put on the Clutter case. He's an experienced investigator and was a personal friend of the Clutters. The other primary investigators in the case are Special Agents Harold Nye, Roy Church, and Clarence Duntz. At a press conference, Alvin reveals the basic facts of the case, and reveals that neither Bonnie nor Nancy had been "sexually molested." The agents follow a number of leads, but have little luck scraping together clues, discovering a motive, or finding a suspect. One of the only things they learn is this: "Of all the people in the world, the Clutters were the least likely to be murdered."

*The idea that the Clutters were the "least likely to be murdered" highlights how strong and stable they seemed (given that they had seemingly achieved the American Dream), how innocent Holcomb was prior to the murders, and also offers insight into the townspeople's thoughts on what's normal (the murder of the oh-so-normal Clutters has, in a way, made it "normal" to be murdered!).*



With the exception of Mrs. Clare and a few stray citizens, all of Holcomb is in a panic over the Clutter murders. The hardware store is having trouble keeping locks and bolts in stock, and many of the houses in town leave their lights burning through the night.

*The town is no longer an innocent place – the townspeople don't know who to trust, given that the murderer might be one of their own.*



Perry and Dick sit in a café in Kansas City. Perry obsessively reads a front-page article in the *Kansas City Star* on the Clutter murders. Perry, who has had a history of “hunches,” has a serious hunch that something bad will happen. Dick shrugs this off and orders another burger. Perry presses that they could get caught, bringing up a potential “connection” named Floyd. Dick implies that he’d kill Floyd if he were to squeal.

Dick questions Perry’s premonitions. Perry shrugs. “[O]nce a thing is set up to happen, all you can do is hope it won’t,” he says. He then recounts a recurring dream in which he tries to pick diamonds from a stinking tree, but knows that the minute he reaches for a diamond a snake will fall from the tree and attack him. Knowing this, he still reaches for a diamond, only to be attacked by the snake. Fearing ridicule, he refrains from telling Dick about the dream’s end, in which he is saved from the snake by a **golden parrot** “taller than Jesus, yellow like a sunflower,” and then is allowed to ascend to Paradise. The vision of the parrot has visited Perry throughout his life, always in times of need. Having listened to Perry’s telling of the dream, Dick replies, “I’m a normal. I only dream about blonde chicken.”

The day before the Clutter family’s funeral, Susan and Bobby agree to go to Garden City in order to “see Nancy.” They go to the funeral home and are shocked to see the Clutters dressed in their formal clothes with each of their heads “completely encased in cotton, a swollen cocoon...[that], because it had been sprayed with a glossy substance, twinkled like Christmas-tree snow.”

Kansas City. Perry and Dick have been busy – Dick has been writing bad checks all over Kansas City, under the premise that Perry is getting married (they buy and subsequently pawn a suit, a ring, etc.). All this talk of marriage has Perry thinking about his own dashed dreams of marriage – he has always dreamed of meeting a girl who was a “nicely groomed, gently spoken” college graduate. (The only girl he was close to marrying was Cookie, the nurse who tended to him after his motorcycle accident.) Perry envies Dick’s two marriages – things “a man ought to have.”

After a day of pawning, Dick and Perry have made quite a bit of money. Perry is excited – finally, his dream of Mexico will become a reality. Dick, however, seems downcast. Dick worries that his family will have to suffer the consequences of his crimes. Perry reasons that the duo will be able to pay off the bad checks once they reach Mexico, where they will become rich treasure hunters.

*In spite of the fact that he shuns religion, Perry seems to harbor a somewhat religious belief that evil acts beget consequences. Perry has a hunch that he simply cannot escape the murders – he and Dick will have to pay someday.*



*On one level, Perry’s dream seems to be a retelling of the Biblical story of the Fall of Man, putting Perry in the role of Eve (!), given that he’s the one who is drawn into temptation and plucks diamonds from the tree. The dream seems to parallel his waking fantasies – he may suffer ill fortune while hunting for treasure, but ultimately (Perry hopes) he will be exalted or saved, in this case by the golden parrot. In response to Perry’s dream, Dick asserts that his own dreams are “normal,” even though they may be just as unattainable.*



*From the neck down, the Clutters are “normally” attired in their fancy church-going clothes. From the neck up, however, they’re essentially mummified. These “normal” people with “normal” bodies have now been made monstrous, abnormal, and unnatural.*



*Perry ponders what’s normal and abnormal in this scene – why has he never had a “normal” romantic life, like Dick? Of course, it will be revealed later, that Dick is a pedophile rapist, so once again what looks normal at first glance is revealed to not be. Perry’s unachieved (or unachievable) dream of meeting a nice, college-educated girl weighs on him, and he wonders why the only relationship he’s had has been “abnormal” (a fleeting affair with a nurse).*



*Perry is excited that he now has the chance to live his dream of treasure hunting in Mexico, but Dick worries that leaving the country will quash his dream of ever leading a “normal” life (one that includes being a dutiful, law-abiding son).*



It's three in the morning at the Dewey household and the phone is ringing off the hook; the Deweys have been flooded with shoddy leads and false confessions. Alvin, awake, ruminates on new developments in the investigation, and wonders why the murderer(s) took the time to treat the Clutters with simultaneous tenderness and violence. (Why put Kenyon on a mattress box, with pillows under his head? Why tie Nancy up, only to tuck her into bed?)

Having loaded the Chevy with stolen goods and all of Perry's worldly belongings, Perry and Dick cross into Oklahoma. Perry is relieved, but Dick is uneasy – in escaping to Mexico, he is leaving behind his sons, his ex-wives, and his immediate family. He hasn't said goodbye to any of them, for fear that it would arouse suspicion.

Only days after the funeral, Beverly weds Vere English in a lavish celebration. They chose to marry early, given that all of their relatives were already in town for the funeral. The day the last of the Clutter clan left Garden City, Bonnie's brother Howard Fox ran a letter in the Garden City Telegram asking that the locals not seek the death penalty for the murderers. "[L]et us forgive as God would have us do," he writes.

Dick and Perry are having a roadside picnic in Mexico. Perry speculates that there must be something wrong with them, given that they murdered the Clutters. "Deal me out, baby," Dick says. "I'm a normal." Dick secretly scorns Perry's habit of bed-wetting, his dreams of treasure hunting, and even his new sunglasses (which Dick refers to as "flit stuff"). Dick brings up the murder Perry had supposedly committed years ago. "But a nigger," Perry says. "That's different." Perry is convinced that something bad will happen as a result of their crimes.

As they drive away, Perry reflects on their conversation. Memories of the murder haunt him. He wonders if he was fated to live a doomed life, given that his mother had been an alcoholic, his sister Fern had been killed in a freak accident, and his older brother Jimmy had committed suicide. It is revealed that Perry lied about killing the black man – he'd only said he'd done it in order to impress Dick. Perry is shaken from his thoughts when Dick gleefully swerves to hit a dog.

Weeks go by, but rumors still abound in Holcomb, particularly in Hartman's Café. Two of the café's "stadiest customers," Lester McCoy and Mrs. Hideo Ashida, announce that they're leaving town. McCoy cites his family's unease following the murders. Mrs. Ashida claims her husband had wanted to leave for a while, and she'd always convinced him to stay; after the death of the Clutters, she stopped fighting him.

*The Clutter case has caused Alvin to reassess his ideas about how an evil person commits evil acts. How, he wonders, can a person who does an evil thing (murder) also simultaneously act with tenderness?*



*Dick continues to dream of a "normal" family life, and he worries that leaving the country will deprive him of this. His worries about his family stand in stark contrast to his apathy toward the Clutters.*



*Beverly and Vere's premature wedding seems to be an effort to assert that their dreams of success have not been shattered and that they can still be "normal." In spite of this, the timing of their wedding is highly abnormal, given the circumstances! Howard's letter is the first of many appeals to Christian mercy as an antidote to revenge.*



*Dick's stubborn dream of being "normal" is tested by Perry's insistence that they must be "abnormal," given that they killed the Clutters in cold blood. Perry's dreams and appearance offend Dick's "normal" "masculine" sensibilities. Perry thinks killing a black man is somehow not as evil as killing a white family, perhaps because in the United States a white family is held up as the epitome of normality.*



*Perry feels doomed to a life of ill fortune, given that his family is "abnormal." This runs parallel to his "hunch" that something bad will happen. It seems Perry lied about murdering a black man in order to appear more masculine to Dick. Dick's nonchalant killing of the dog parallels his attitude toward the Clutters.*



*Holcomb's innocence continues to crumble, and it leads some townspeople to move elsewhere. Mrs. Ashida's motivations for leaving may be a bit more complex, given that she seemed to have a deep personal connection to Mr. Clutter.*



Dick and Perry are aboard a small boat off the coast of Acapulco. A young Mexican man and a “rich middle-aged German” accompany them. Their money is almost gone. Dick has already gotten himself tangled up with two women and has mentioned that the Chevy will have to be sold. Perry lands a gigantic sailfish, an act that makes him feel “as though at last...a tall **yellow bird** had hauled him to heaven.”

*Perry's dreams of paradise in Mexico are sullied by money troubles. He's surrounded by sexual “abnormality,” which was certainly not part of his dream! (The German man is homosexual.) In spite of this, he still clings to his dreams, and he takes the sailfish as a sign that they might yet come true.*



Dick and Perry are in a motel room in Mexico City. Perry has come to realize that Dick simply cannot manage money – the sum they’d earned selling the Chevy has disappeared in a matter of three days, and Dick has refused to get a job as a mechanic, citing the low wages in Mexico. Dick argues that they have to return to the States. “Diamonds,” he says. “Buried treasure. Wake up, little boy. There ain’t no caskets of gold. No sunken ship. And even if there was – hell, you can’t even swim.” Terrified that something bad will happen if he abandons Dick, Perry resolves to stick with his partner in crime. Dick borrows money and buys two bus tickets back to the States.

*Dick caustically and devastatingly shatters Perry's dreams of treasure hunting. He calls him a “little boy,” which indicates that Dick (in contrast) is a fully realized, “normal” man. Still, Dick himself is unable to reach his dreams, due to his inability to manage money or hold down a job. Perry is driven to stay with Dick given his superstitious “hunch” that something evil will happen if he doesn't.*



Checkout time at the motel is drawing near, and Perry rifles through his memorabilia, trying to decide what he can afford to take with him. Perry thinks back on his life – on his parents, on the abusive nuns at the orphanage, and on a stint in Alaska that taught Perry to “dream of gold.” The harsh Alaskan wilderness also taught Perry to dream of warmer climes – Hawaii in particular.

*It seems Perry has escaped into a world of fantasy in order to cope with his deeply traumatic past. Perry's sense that evil will follow him wherever he goes – as if it were fated – seems to stem from his traumatic past as well.*



Perry thinks back on his time as a Merchant Marine. He’d loved the seafaring life, but Perry recalls that had been bullied (and possibly sexually assaulted) by homosexuals aboard the ship. Thinking back on his time in the Army, Perry blames a homosexual sergeant for not promoting him “[b]ecause [Perry] wouldn't roll over.” After being discharged from the Army, Perry got into a motorcycle accident in an attempt to join his father, Tex Smith, in Alaska, where he was supposed to help him open a hunting lodge aimed at tourists. He finally joined his father after recuperating, but the lodge was a failure. Perry then recalls his time in Worcester, Massachusetts, New York City, and (finally) Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing.

*Perry's life story could be seen as one failed dream after another. He chases one dream after the next, bolstered by the highest hopes, only to have his dreams dashed. His abhorrence of “abnormal” sexuality seems to stem from these experiences (given that he reports being assaulted by “queens”). His inability to reach his dreams seems to have forced him into a life of crime.*



Perry is shaken from his reminiscence and pulls out another letter, this time from his sister Barbara, written to him in the spring of 1958, while he was serving 5-10 years in Lansing. The letter starts out by telling Perry about the goings-on in Barbara’s family, but quickly becomes a platform for Barbara to shame her brother for his criminal behavior. (“There is no shame – having a dirty face – the shame comes when you keep it dirty.”) Barbara argues that Perry has free will and that he isn’t doomed to a life of crime.

*Barbara's “normal” life stands in stark contrast to Perry's “abnormal” life of crime. It seems like Barbara has achieved the American Dream – she's made it into the middle class, she's married to a successful man, she has children, etc. Unlike Perry's sense of himself that he can't avoid a life of crime, Barbara argues that he is not fated to a life of evil.*



After Perry reads this letter, it is revealed that he hates Barbara, and that he harbors a wish that she had been in the Clutters' house the night of the murders (presumably so he could have murdered her, too). Perry only keeps the letter because his friend Willie-Jay offered a detailed typewritten analysis of the letter ("Impressions I Garnered from the Letter"), which Perry treasures due to its sympathy for Perry's plight and its insight into his character. Willie-Jay's analysis ends with a warning to Perry: that his letters to his sister should serve a purely social function, given that any further letters from her of this nature "can only serve to increase your already dangerous anti-social instincts."

Perry picks up a notebook: "The Private Diary of Perry Edward Smith." Perry's diary contains quotes, ideas for a speech (something he was never called on to do), and bits of poetry. By this time, it's nearly 1:00 – one hour before checkout. He checks to see if Dick is awake. He is – he's having sex with a teenage prostitute. Perry tells Dick to hurry it up.

Christmas is near. In Holcomb, Alvin Dewey is driving to River Valley Farm, and stops at Hartman's Café for a cup of coffee. A couple of local men harass Alvin about his failure to locate the murderer. Alvin leaves the café and walks to the Clutters' farm. Alvin's mind turns to his now-dashed dream of living in the country; his wife is now staunchly against the idea, given that the Clutters were murdered in their "lovely country house."

His mind then turns to other murders that had occurred in Holcomb. Alvin recalls the 1920 Hefner Slaying, in which an AWOL soldier shot and killed the town's sheriff. Alvin then thinks back on his own experiences with murder cases in Finney County: a man who stabbed a woman in the neck with a beer bottle in 1947; "a pair of railroad workers" who "robbed and killed an elderly farmer" in 1952; a husband who beat his wife to death in 1956; and the peculiar case of a man who committed a murder and then proceeded to bury and exhume the body repeatedly.

Dick and Perry are hitchhiking in the Mojave Desert. Their plan is to get picked up by a solitary stranger, who they'll then relieve of their life and their car. A man slows down, but is suspicious and zooms off. Undaunted, the two continue to wait.

*Perry's seemingly casual attitude toward killing is made apparent in this scene. His religious and sexually "abnormal" friend Willie-Jay attempts to offer an antidote to Perry's homicidal tendencies – he encourages Perry to be aware that he is capable of evil acts as a way of combatting those instincts.*



*Perry's diary reveals more of his unrealized dreams. Dick, meanwhile, seems to embody both "normal" masculinity (at least compared to Perry) and "abnormal" sexuality (he is a sexual predator of young women, or even girls). What's normal and what's abnormal becomes all mixed up, and it starts to seem as if many of the awful acts of the book are committed by people who see themselves as abnormal and their acts as somehow making them seem normal.*



*Holcomb and Garden City seem to have lost their innocence, and as a result Alvin and Marie's dream of living in the country will never be realized.*



*Given the murders that have occurred in the past, it seems that Holcomb (and all of Finney County) have only ever had the appearance of innocence. Much of the book follows this idea, as seemingly "normal" people are revealed to be something other than that. Both normality and innocence come to seem like traits that are only visible from the exterior and are based on incomplete knowledge.*



*Dick and Perry are unfazed by the prospect of taking another human life. Their fantasy is spoiled when the driver evades them.*



## PART 3: ANSWER

Floyd Wells, a former employee of Herb's and a current inmate at Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing (imprisoned for stealing lawnmowers, in a failed attempt at starting a lawn care business), learns of the Clutter murder. He had shared a cell with Dick that summer, and had mentioned to him that the Clutter family was well off. Dick subsequently boasted that he and Perry were going to rob and kill the Clutters. Floyd is afraid to squeal on Dick, fearing retribution, but a fellow inmate (a staunch Catholic) helps Floyd gain an alibi for visiting the deputy warden's office. Floyd goes to the deputy warden and tells him what he knows.

The Dewey residence. Alvin and his wife, Marie, are in the kitchen. Alvin has just gotten word that Dick and Perry are the main suspects in the Clutter killing. He shows his wife the photographs, and Marie considers their faces. Dick - with his narrow eyes - certainly looks like a criminal, but Perry - with his soft eyes that are "dreamy" and "rather pretty" - doesn't look like a criminal at all.

Dick's family's house. Mr. and Mrs. Hickok are speaking to the KBI. Dick's father tells Agent Nye that Dick was a normal boy, but he seemed resentful that his family couldn't afford to send him to college. Mrs. Hickok blames Perry for Dick's continued criminal behavior. Agent Nye catches a glimpse of a 12-gauge shotgun leaning against the wall. Mr. Hickok explains that the gun belongs to Dick.

Dick and Perry hitch a ride with a traveling businessman. Dick chats up the businessman, all the while plotting to give Perry the signal to crack his skull with a rock. Perry feels nauseated - the businessman's laughter reminds him of his own father's laughter, and this makes him feel even more nervous. Just before Dick gives the signal, the businessman pulls over to pick up a third hitchhiker - a black soldier. Perry, relieved, considers this "a goddamn miracle."

Agent Nye visits a rooming house in Las Vegas where Perry had once lived. The landlady remarks that she's expecting Perry to turn up any day, given that he had sent her a package from Mexico for safe keeping until his return. Nye then travels to San Francisco and pays a visit to Perry's sister Barbara, who is not happy to discuss her brother. Barbara - a suburban housewife - has no leads for Nye. She asks Nye to not reveal her whereabouts to Perry. "I'm afraid of him," she says. "He can seem so warmhearted and sympathetic. Gentle. He cries so easily....He can make you feel so sorry for him." The episode leads Barbara to brood about her family's past.

*Floyd, too, wishes to attain the American Dream; after all, he only stole the lawnmowers in order to start his own business. In talking about the Clutters, he unwittingly inspired Dick to cultivate his own dream of riches. Christianity again plays a positive role - here, it allows Floyd to offer information about Dick and Perry.*



*Marie, like many of the townspeople, harbors ideas about what a "normal" criminal should look like. Dick seems to fit the bill, but Perry - given his sensitive demeanor - seems "abnormal." It's interesting that here Perry's abnormality is seen almost in a positive light, but it was Perry's desire to appear normal to Dick that helped to motivate him to kill the Clutters, which is fairly ironic.*



*A college education is often associated with the ability to achieve the American Dream. Dick seems to feel that he was never given a chance at that dream, given that he couldn't afford to go to college. Dick is again referred to as a "normal" person.*



*Throughout the book, Perry's evil acts seem to be tied to his traumatic past, and in particular to his father. Perry believes he is spared from committing murder via a "miracle," which indicates he attributes it to some divine force.*



*Barbara's "normal" life stands in stark contrast to Perry's life of crime. In spite of this, Barbara is haunted by her family's past, and worries that she's doomed to evil - she fears she will either commit an evil act, or that an evil act will befall her. Perry's essential nature is questioned - is he truly a gentle person? Or is he simply evil?*



Iowa. Dick and Perry seek shelter from a rainstorm in a barn. They're headed for Kansas City, where Dick claims he can "hang a lot of hot paper." Dick speculates that the duo should spend the winter in Florida with their spoils. Perry sulks – he's convinced the duo will get caught. They discover a car in the barn and decide to steal it.

The KBI decides to keep information about Dick and Perry secret for the time being – they still aren't sure that they're the killers, given the lack of hard evidence. Meanwhile, rumors still abound in Holcomb. Mrs. Hartman (of Hartman's Café) has noticed that in spite of this, things are beginning to quiet down.

Kansas City. Perry is at the Washateria, doing laundry and waiting for Dick to return. He feels sick with worry. He spies a woman's purse and briefly considers snatching it. He realizes that his life hasn't changed much since his childhood purse-snatching days. "He was still...an urchin dependent, so to say, on stolen coins." Dick finally arrives, and he is triumphant. He's written one bad check, has plans for where he can write some more, and has secured plates for their stolen car. "Then Florida here we come," Dick says. "Just like all the millionaires."

Alvin, in the midst of a dream about catching Dick and Perry, is awakened by a call from Agent Nye. Dick and Perry have been traced to Kansas City, but no one is able to track them down. Alvin has a hunch that they won't be caught – he feels Dick and Perry are invincible.

Christmas Day. Dick and Perry are on the beach in Miami, Florida, where they've been for several days. Dick collects seashells and reflects on the envy he felt a few days earlier when, in the lobby of a luxury hotel, he spotted a man his own age, accompanied by a blonde woman, who "looked as though he knew the glories of money and power." Dick felt a surge of violent rage ("Why should that sunofabitch have everything, while he had nothing?") and left the hotel. Dick gives his seashells to a twelve-year-old girl, and he attempts to hold her hand. He's sexually attracted to her, and he "was sorry he felt as he did about her, for sexual interest in female children was a failing of which he was 'sincerely ashamed'...because other people might not think it 'normal.'"

*Dick has come up with a new fantasy of how he might achieve some semblance of the American Dream. Perry, meanwhile, still suspects that their evildoings cannot go unpunished.*



*The town seems to be returning to "normal," given that talk of the Clutter case has died down.*



*Perry realizes that he's been chasing after the American Dream his whole life. The only way he's been able to do this, though, is through a life of crime and evildoing. Dick continues to build up the fantasy of life in Florida – unlike Perry's romantic dreams of treasure hunting in Mexico, Dick wants to go to Florida because that's where rich people go. Dick seems to feel that just by being near those "winners" he will be a winner too.*



*Alvin feels that the capture of Dick and Perry has become a thing of fantasy. His pessimism stands in stark contrast to Dick and Perry's unwarranted optimism.*



*Being in Florida has put Dick face-to-face with an American Dream he can never realize – one of immense wealth, power, and sex appeal. This is all part of his dream of being "normal" – and even though he says he's achieved it, this couldn't be further from the truth. (He's penniless, he's a fugitive, and he's sexually attracted to young girls.) It seems that Dick's evil tendencies have no cause – there's seemingly no explanation for his pedophilia.*



Perry – aware of his friend’s pedophilia - is concerned that Dick will try to rape the girl, and he is relieved when the child slips away from Dick. Perry overhears Christmas carols on a radio and he is moved to tears. He idly contemplates suicide, which, given his family’s history, seems “like the specific death awaiting him.” Perry feels that his dreams of treasure hunting have been destroyed, along with his dreams of being a nightclub singer. He realizes that he and Dick are “running a race without a finish line” – their money is almost gone, and the two are leaving Florida tomorrow, with the aim of heading west.

The same day, Bobby goes for a walk and unintentionally ends up walking to the Clutters’ farm. Herb’s orchard smells of rotting fruit, and the house has an air of abandonment and disrepair. The only sign of life comes from the livestock corral, where the family’s pet horse, Babe, still lives.

Dick and Perry pick up a couple hitchhikers – an old man and a young boy. Dick is initially annoyed by the passengers, but quickly warms up to them when the young boy introduces him to the art of finding returnable bottles by the roadside. Together, they load the car full of bottles, and the boy exchanges them at a motel. They split the money and eat a big dinner at a diner.

December 30th. The Dewey household. Alvin gets a call notifying him that Dick and Perry have been arrested in Las Vegas. Alvin is at first delighted and then is overcome with dread that the KBI won’t be able to put together enough evidence to convict Dick and Perry. Alvin sets off for Las Vegas.

Earlier that day, Dick and Perry arrive at the post office in Las Vegas to pick up a box they mailed from Mexico (containing, among other things, the boots they wore the night they murdered the Clutters). Dick has hatched a new plan to impersonate an officer and write bad checks at the casinos. He also secretly plans to ditch Perry, once he’s made a bundle. (“Dick was sick of him – his harmonica, his aches and ills, his superstitions, the weepy, womanly eyes, the nagging, whispering voice.”) Perry and Dick drive to the Las Vegas rooming house to pick up the second box, and the police arrest them when they arrive.

*This is one instance in which Perry seems reasonably “normal”—he abhors Dick’s pedophilic tendencies. Perry is once again convinced that his family history has doomed him in some way. Although he feels his dreams have been shattered, the romantic quality of his suicidal fantasy seems to share the romance of his previous dreams.*



*The Clutters’ dreams are ruined – their house lies in disrepair, and the yield from Herb’s orchard has gone to waste.*



*A parallel can be drawn between Perry (and possibly Dick) and the young boy. Like Perry, the boy is a vagabond who’s chasing after a dream of stability. His only means of doing this, however, is by collecting bottles– similar to Perry’s “stolen coins”*



*Once again, Alvin is distrustful of his fantasies and dreams, given the hard lessons he’s learned in life.*



*By this point in the book, Perry’s masculinity is no longer simply “abnormal” – it’s downright feminine! (His “womanly eyes,” for instance.) Dick has concocted a new fantasy, this time one that doesn’t include Perry. His scheme to impersonate an officer is yet another bizarre riff on the American Dream – if he can’t actually have the dream, he can at least appear to have it.*



Dick is interrogated at the Las Vegas City Jail. Agent Nye is surprised by how skinny Dick is. (“I’d imagined a bigger guy. Brawnier.”) Dick coolly lies to Agents Nye and Church, offering a tidy alibi for what he did the night of the Clutter killings. The investigators catch his lies, but Dick still denies his involvement with the murders. Agent Nye emerges from the interrogation room and spots Perry. He’s fascinated by Perry’s short legs, tiny feet, dark complexion, and “pert, impish features.” Alvin and Agent Duntz interrogate Perry, who stumbles over his recitation of the alibi he and Dick had agreed on. The agents accuse him of killing the Clutters, and Perry falls silent. His knees pain him.

Perry and Dick are jailed in separate cells, and they ruminate about their respective interrogations. Perry longs to talk to Dick. Dick, meanwhile, realizes that Floyd has ratted him out. He considers that he should have killed Floyd while he was in prison. Then he realizes that Perry is a greater liability, and regrets not killing Perry while they were wandering the desert.

Perry and Dick are interrogated a second time. Perry sticks to the alibi. Dick, on the other hand, when presented with a photograph of a bloody footprint from the scene of the crime, rats on Perry. “Perry Smith killed the Clutters,” he says. “It was Perry. I couldn’t stop him. He killed them all.”

Holcomb is abuzz with gossip and speculation following the news report on Dick’s confession. Many of the townspeople are puzzled that the killer wasn’t one of their own, and there are rumors that the real killer, or perhaps the person behind the killings, is still at large.

Dick and Perry are being driven back to Garden City in a police caravan. Perry sits in the passenger seat beside Alvin, who is driving. Perry is handcuffed, and when Perry requests a cigarette Alvin is forced to light it for him and place it between Perry’s lips – something Alvin finds “repellent,” for it [was]...the kind of thing he’d done while he was courting his wife.”

Once in Garden City, the agents turn Perry against Dick, and Perry fills the investigators in on details of the murder. Perry recounts how frustrated he and Dick had been to discover that the family had no cash on hand. Perry had been reduced to scrambling for a silver dollar that had fallen out of a doll’s purse in Nancy’s room. “I was just disgusted...One dollar. And I’m crawling on my belly to get it,” Perry says.

*Both Dick and Perry are considered to have abnormal features, at least according to Agent Nye. Dick is considered to be too scrawny (Nye imagines the killer would look stronger), and Perry’s stunted legs, dainty feet, and “pert, impish features” certainly don’t fit the bill, either. It’s not clear in this scene whether Perry is uncomfortable due to his legs, a feeling of guilt, or worry that his evil fate has caught up to him at last.*



*Dick seems to have adopted a casual attitude toward murder. It seems that his motivation for committing evil acts stems from a place of selfishness, whereas with Perry it stems from a place of childhood trauma.*



*In ratting out Perry, Dick has essentially sentenced him to death – yet another example of his casual (and selfish) attitude toward the taking of human life, and his selfish tendency to always put himself first.*



*Holcomb has lost its innocence to such a degree that the townspeople are reluctant to let go of their cynical belief that the killer is one of their own!*



*Perry’s “abnormal” masculinity again is again put in terms of femininity – in this case, he’s essentially taking the place of Alvin’s wife. Alvin, a “normal” man, finds this “repellant”*



*Perry has come to realize that he’s been scrambling for the American Dream all his life. Even though he’s worked hard (similar to Herb), his efforts have only resulted in poverty and a vicious cycle of desperation and crime.*



Perry describes how he'd tried to make the Clutters more comfortable after he'd tied them up. He describes how he had to guard Nancy from Dick, who wished to rape her. Perry reveals that, for a split-second after the murders, he'd considered killing Dick, given that he was a witness. Alvin listens with horror, but also with a measure of sympathy for Perry, given that his life had been "...an ugly and lonely progress toward one mirage and then another."

**Two gray tomcats** wander the streets of Garden City, picking dead birds from the grilles of automobiles. Nearby, a large crowd has gathered outside of the courthouse to see Dick and Perry get escorted to jail. The crowd falls silent when they finally arrive, "as though amazed to find them humanly shaped."

*Perry's ambiguous attitudes toward evil are on display here. He's staunchly against rape, and he's determined to make the Clutters feel comfortable. In spite of this, he has a casual, almost workmanlike, approach to their murder. Alvin finds himself sympathizing with Perry in spite of his evil acts.*



*The two cats, symbolic of Dick and Perry, make their first appearance. The townspeople have assumptions about what a "normal" criminal should look like, and they're perplexed that Dick and Perry don't fit that mold.*



## PART 4: THE CORNER

Perry is the first man to ever be held in the "ladies' cell," which is built into the kitchen of the Sheriff's Residence (an apartment in the courthouse). Josephine Meier, the undersheriff's wife, offers him some food when he arrives, but Perry is silent and doesn't have an appetite. He then expresses his fear that an angry mob will tear him apart, similar to a scene in a Biblical movie he once saw. Josephine finds Perry to be a sympathetic character. She tells her husband as much, and her husband scoffs. Her husband says she should have been at the Clutters' farm when the bodies were discovered – then she could have seen how "gentle" Perry was.

Perry proves to be a rather charming detainee: he acquires a pet squirrel; he takes pride in making his bed; he sketches flowers and portraits of Jesus; and he writes in his diary. He has Alvin change his sworn statement – he wants to claim full responsibility for the murders, so Dick's family won't suffer. Meanwhile, the county attorney swears that he will pursue the death penalty against Dick and Perry. Perry's resentment toward Dick wears off, and he misses him.

Perry receives a letter from an old Army buddy named Don Cullivan. He doesn't have a clear memory of Don, but he's lonely, and is therefore grateful to hear from someone. Don writes to him largely due to his Christian faith. "[B]ecause God made you as well as me and He loves you just as He loves me," Don writes. Perry writes back, with enthusiasm.

*Although he was placed there by chance, it seems fitting that Perry, who is often referred to as womanly, is being held in the women's cell. This further underscores his "abnormal" masculinity. Perry's fear of a "Biblical" execution seems to echo his sense of the having crossed some sort of divine law that would cause others to view him as so evil he should be viciously killed. Again, in spite of being a criminal and a cold-hearted killer, Perry still manages to inspire sympathy in those around him.*



*In spite of being capable of great evil, Perry is also capable of acts of touching domesticity, tenderness, and religiosity. He's sensitive to Dick's family and doesn't want them to suffer (similar to the way he didn't want the Clutters to suffer).*



*Religious people seem to be unavoidably drawn to Perry throughout the book, and Don is no exception. Perry is touched by Don's offer of friendship, and is also desperate to feel like he isn't an outcast.*



Meanwhile, Dick schemes away in his cell in the main jail. He has plans to make a jailbreak and head for Colorado, where he dreams of squatting in summer cabins (something he'd done soon after he'd graduated high school). He fashions a shiv, with the hope of killing the undersheriff.

Perry watches the **two gray cats** from his window and realizes that his life has been a lot like theirs. He learns secondhand that the sheriff discovered Dick's shiv, which leads him to reflect on his own plans of escape. He has a dream of escaping with the help of two young men who he glimpsed from his window – he imagined that they signaled to him, and in response he drew a map and a letter detailing how they could help him escape. His plans dissolve when the two men never show up again. He fantasizes of suicide – in one such dream he imagines cutting his wrists and ankles with a broken light bulb. “The walls of the cell fell away, the sky came down, I saw **the big yellow bird**.”

It is decided that the trial will be held in Garden City, given that sentiment toward Dick and Perry is essentially uniform throughout the state. Additionally, many of Garden City's Christian leaders are opposed to the death penalty. Several medical doctors from Garden City are brought in to verify that Dick and Perry are sane; they find both men fit for trial. In spite of this, the defense brings in its own psychiatrist, Dr. Jones, to evaluate the men.

On March 31st, the Clutters' remaining belongings are sold in an auction that draws 5,000 people. Paul Helm comments that the auction is like “a second funeral.” Babe is sold to a Mennonite farmer – a fact that draws a deep emotional reaction from Susan.

A jury is selected, and during that time Dick and Perry write autobiographical statements for Dr. Jones, the defense's psychiatrist. Perry's statement details a shattered family life of poverty, alcoholism, and periodic homelessness. He details physical and sexual abuse during his time in the Catholic orphanage, and his violent stint in the Army (during which time he was court-martialed for killing a Japanese policeman and demolishing a Japanese café). Dick's narrative is vastly different. He writes that he was a sports star in high school but couldn't afford to go to college, in spite of winning scholarships. In his narrative, he confesses to his pedophilic tendencies, and admits that his interest in going to the Clutters “was not to rob them but to rape [Nancy].” He also writes of a “sickness” due to his car accident – fainting spells and nosebleeds.

*Dick has come up with yet another unattainable and unsustainable fantasy. This is yet another attempt—even in jail—to realize some version of the American Dream, and he is willing to do anything to achieve it.*



*In spite of his moments of self-awareness (for instance, realizing that his life is similar to that of the two gray cats), Perry is incapable of realizing that he dwells in a world of fantasy. His dream that the two young men in the square will help him is downright delusional, and points to mental illness. His suicidal fantasies also indicate that he's descending into mental illness. He longs for salvation, perhaps in the form of divine intervention.*



*The Garden City officials' hope that Perry and Dick will receive a fair trial is perhaps another unrealized dream (one rooted in the American Dream). Even though Perry is clearly descending further into mental illness, he is considered mentally “normal” by the standards of the court.*



*The liquidation of the Clutters' possessions can be seen as a liquidation of their dreams, and an indication of the ephemerality of all dreams, achieved or not. This is why it seems like another funeral – it's the death of River Valley Farm. Susan's unhappiness that Babe is sold to a Mennonite points again to the tension between religions.*



*In reviewing the biographical details of Dick and Perry's lives, the question of nature vs. nurture is brought up: are they naturally prone to evil acts? Or was evil nurtured in them? In Perry's case, it seems like his traumatic past wounded him to an extent that he became capable of evil. In Dick's case, given his “normal” upbringing, it seems like there's no natural cause for his criminal behavior and murderous tendencies. The statements also underscore how both Dick and Perry suffer from physical and mental “abnormalities.”*



The trial begins. Mr. Hickok is convinced that the trial is “prejudiced” against his son, especially when photos of the crime scene are passed among the jurors. Floyd testifies and establishes that the murders were premeditated. Before the court recesses for the weekend, Alvin testifies that Dick had planned on raping Nancy and that Perry had prevented him from doing so. He also reveals that Perry had willingly taken the blame for the murders, in order to spare Dick’s family. Mrs. Hickok breaks down when she hears this, and later tells a reporter she can’t understand where she went wrong with Dick, and that she feels sympathy both for her own child and for Perry.

Spurred by religious feeling, Don Cullivan visits Perry in prison. Perry has a special meal prepared for his guest, and he makes sure the table looks beautiful. After the meal, Perry admits that he doesn’t know why he killed the Clutters. He speculates that he was taking out his own private anger on the Clutters. When asked if he felt remorseful, Perry replies, “Am I sorry? If that’s what you mean – I’m not.” Don presses Perry, asking him how he could be so “devoid of conscience.” Perry shrugs it off, arguing that soldiers commit murder, as do hangmen. “It’s easy to kill,” he says. “A lot easier than passing a bad check.” He adds that if he’d known the Clutters, he’d probably feel some remorse. Before Don leaves, Perry remarks that he should kill himself right then and there. “I don’t know why I should die among strangers,” he says.

The trial resumes. Dr. Jones is brought forth to testify, but isn’t allowed to speak, other than to state whether he has an opinion whether Dick and Perry knew right from wrong at the time of the murders. Dr. Jones states that he does, in fact, have an opinion of whether Dick knew right from wrong. In his evaluation of Dick, Dr. Jones found that Dick has a “severe character disorder” and that he possibly suffers from “organic brain damage.” When asked about Perry, Dr. Jones states that he has *no* opinion of whether Perry can tell right from wrong. Dr. Jones believes Perry “attaches little real value to human life” and that he is probably a paranoid schizophrenic. Further psychiatric consultation separate from the trial finds that Perry may be a rare type of killer, one capable of “murder without motive.”

*It’s not clear whether Perry really wants to help Dick’s family or not – on the one hand, he takes the fall for the murders, but on the other hand he let it slip that Dick wanted to rape Nancy (something that he must have known Alvin would share during the trial). Mrs. Hickok now has sympathy for “evil” Perry, and doesn’t know how her “normal” boy became a criminal.*



*Perry continues to act in what would be considered a traditionally womanly manner: he makes sure there’s a special meal; he pays attention to the table setting; etc. Don, a devout Christian, hopes to convert or at least sway Perry’s convictions, but Perry is both strongly anti-religion (despite his very strong fears about divine justice) and, as it turns out, anti-social. The question of whether Perry’s evil simply because he feels no remorse isn’t answered definitively. In spite of his seeming apathy, Perry still seems to be in the grip of mental illness, and harbors suicidal fantasies.*



*Can a person be naturally evil? Does a history of trauma excuse criminal behavior? These questions are at stake in the diagnosis and analysis of Perry and Dick’s respective mental states. Even though Dick seemed to know right from wrong, Dr. Jones explains that there may be some psychological explanation for his anti-social behavior. And even though Perry clearly suffers from a rare psychological disorder, Dr. Jones isn’t eager to clear him of all wrongdoing.*



The trial's final session is held. The defense argues that the death penalty goes against Christian values, citing that, "It is a relic of human barbarism." The prosecution's attorney, the theatrical and highly experienced Logan Green, sends chills through the courtroom with his closing arguments. He argues that the Bible is in favor of the death penalty, and that Dick and Perry are so dangerous that anything short of the death penalty would effectively give them the chance to murder again. After the trial, several reporters have mixed feelings – some feel sorry for Perry (arguing that the death penalty is "pretty cold-blooded"). The jury finds Perry and Dick guilty of first-degree murder, and the two are sentenced to death.

After the trial, Mrs. Meier overhears Perry weeping in his cell. She holds his hand, and he says, "I'm embraced by shame."

The next day, Dick and Perry are sent back to Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing, where they're put on Death Row. **Death Row** is housed in a "dark, two-storied building shaped like a coffin." The windows of Death Row look out on The Corner, a shed that houses the gallows. Dick and Perry join the ranks of a handful of criminals awaiting death: a black man who kidnapped, raped, and tortured a woman; "an effeminate youth" who killed an old woman and then, in a lover's quarrel, another prison inmate; and Lowell Lee Andrews (an obese, intellectual teenager who, driven by dreams of gangsterdom, killed his immediate family in cold blood).

Dick and Perry survive their first execution date, given that their case is in appeals court. Perry and Dick occupy adjacent cells but they rarely speak to one another, largely because Perry is afraid of having his grammar corrected by the overly intellectual Andrews. Perry goes on a hunger strike, and is sent to the hospital after a week in order to be force-fed. He experiences auditory hallucinations; he hears a voice that asks him, "Where is Jesus?" ("And once he woke up shouting, 'The bird is Jesus!'") He has a recurrent dream of performing in a nightclub to an audience of deceased Death Row inmates. One day, he receives a postcard – it's from his father, addressed to the warden. The anger this card inspires in him gives him the will to remain alive. He begins to eat again. When he returns to his cell, "Dick laugh[s] and sa[ys], 'Welcome home, honey.'"

*The defense argues that the Christian thing to do is to give Dick and Perry a life sentence. The prosecution, on the other hand, argues that a strict interpretation of the Bible calls for their execution. Christianity itself here seems to be a kind of dream – an ideal that characters appeal to and strive for with the best of intentions, only to be unable to actually achieve that dream in the end. Onlookers at the trial are still unsure whether justice was served, as many sympathize with Perry.*



*Perry finally feels remorse – but it seems to be an "abnormal" remorse, one driven by self-pity.*



*The various inmates on Death Row (Andrews in particular) complicate and offer further insight into questions of what is "normal" mental health and who can really be considered evil. Andrews, spurred by dreams of gangsterdom, slaughtered his family. Still, given that he seems mentally ill (or perhaps high-functioning autistic), it's not clear whether he can be considered truly evil.*



*Perry's mental illness reaches a fever pitch during his hunger strike, and his fantastical visions take on a particularly religious tone, especially when he says outright that "the bird is Jesus." Ironically, even though his anger towards his father may have spurred him to kill, it seems to have now given him the strength to live. Dick's greeting to Perry once he returns from the hospital sounds eerily like a wife welcoming her husband home from work (or vice-versa).*



Two years go by. Dick takes to studying law books, with the aim of reversing his conviction. ("I'm no goddamn killer," he proclaims.) Dick's hair is falling out, and he's "frantic" that he's on his way to becoming "an ugly old baldhead." Two new inmates join them: George Ronald York and James Douglas Latham - two handsome young men who murdered a number of women in cold blood. (When asked on television why they committed their crimes, York replied, "We hate the world.")

One of Dick's letters gains some traction with the Chairman of the Legal Aid Committee of the Kansas State Bar Association. A full-scale hearing is conducted in Garden City, in which "the whole cast" is reassembled (minus Dick and Perry). After much deliberation, it's decided that Perry and Dick had "received a constitutionally fair trial," and a new date is set for their execution.

In the meantime, Andrews is executed. Dick and Perry watch the proceedings from their cells in Death Row - they can see everything but the gallows, which is just out of view. Speaking to a journalist (presumably Truman Capote himself), Dick describes Andrews as "a funny kid" who "had no respect for human life." When Dick says goodbye to Andrews, saying that he'll see him soon (implying that he'll see him in Hell), Andrews laughs and says he only believes in "dust unto dust." Dick fondly reflects on Andy's dreams of becoming a hired hit man.

Dick then goes on to assert his innocence - he's convinced, at this point, that he never killed anyone. He claims that Perry wants Dick to die - "He's plain determined that if he goes I go." Dick reflects on capital punishment, and decides he's not against it. "Revenge is all it is," he says. "But what's wrong with revenge?"

Three years pass, and Dick and Perry manage to slip by three more execution dates. Finally, their final appeal fails, and their final execution date is set: April 14th, 1965. Alvin shows up for the execution and he finds the chamber devoid of dignity, a "bleakly lighted cavern cluttered with lumber and other debris." In his last words, Dick says that he holds "no hard feelings." He shakes hands with the KBI Agents (Church, Duntz, and Nye are also present). He hangs and dies.

*Dick seems to have convinced himself that he's not guilty, similar to the way he's convinced himself his whole life that he's "a normal." This is ultimately another failed dream. His appearance becomes more "abnormal" as he loses his hair. The two new inmates seem to be clearly "evil" - even though they appear "normal."*



*Dick's dream of being found innocent is shattered after the verdict in his case is upheld once again.*



*Dick seems fond of Andrews, in spite of the fact that Andrews clearly had evil tendencies. Dick's religious beliefs, rarely touched on in the book, are brought up in his final conversation with Andrews - like Perry, Dick seems to believe in an afterlife. Andrews' shattered dreams of becoming a hit man parallel Dick's own failed dreams of criminal glory.*



*Dick continues to entertain the delusion that he's innocent. The morality of capital punishment is questioned here - is state-sanctioned killing any different from murder in cold blood?*



*The execution chamber, similar to Perry and Dick, doesn't look "normal" - it's oddly shabby. Dick is strangely free of bitterness when he's hanged. Is it because he believes himself to be innocent? Does he forgive the KBI agents? Or is it just another lie? It's unclear.*



Perry is then led to the gallows. His last words are solemn: "I think," he says, "it's a helluva thing to take a life in this manner. I don't believe in capital punishment, morally or legally. Maybe I had something to contribute..." He falters, and adds: "It would be meaningless to apologize for what I did. Even inappropriate. But I do. I apologize." Alvin is deeply moved by Perry's execution. To him, Perry possesses "the aura of an exiled animal, a creature walking wounded." He recalls his first impressions of Perry, how he'd been fascinated by his tiny legs and feet. He now sees those same "childish feet, tilted, dangling."

Alvin realizes that the execution has not given him a sense of closure – rather, he gained closure a year earlier, during a visit to the Valley View Cemetery in Garden City. While at the cemetery, Alvin walked past the graves of Bonnie Jean Ashida (Mrs. Ashida's elder daughter, killed in a car accident) and Judge Tate (who presided over the Dick and Perry's trial and later died of pneumonia). He reaches the Clutters' grave plot and finds Susan standing there. She's in college now, and has grown into a "willowy girl...with long, elegant legs." She chats with him briefly, revealing that Bobby has recently gotten married. Susan then runs off, presumably on an errand. Alvin reflected that Nancy may have grown into "just such a young woman," "a pretty girl in a hurry, her smooth hair swinging, shining."

*Perry's death is similar to his first interrogation. He seems flustered, unpolished, confused – very much like "an exiled animal." His appearance is still strange, and Alvin can't help but notice his "childish feet." Perry's assertion that he could have "had something to contribute" touches on his crushed dreams of stardom and wealth. His bewilderment gives him an air of innocence.*



*Alvin finds closure not in the death of Perry and Dick, but in the continued life of those who were connected to the Clutter family: Bobby and Susan in particular. Susan's "normal" appearance, apparent mental health, and her so-far successful pursuit of the American Dream remind Alvin of Nancy, and give him hope for the future. Susan's return seems almost like the return of innocence to Holcomb, and in a way that brings up the other side of dreams. So much of the book focused on the way that failed dreams can drive resentment and violence. But dreams can also allow and motivate people to move on, to forget, to keep living.*





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