Summer Study Guide for Truman Capote’s
In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences

Part I: The Last to See Them Alive

1. What is the English translation of the epigraph? What do you think the author hoped to achieve by including it?

2. When Capote writes, “Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks,” to what is he comparing these?

3. Compare and contrast the way Capote characterizes the town of Holcomb pre-murder and post-murder.

4. How does Capote present the Clutter family to readers? What rhetorical devices/strategies does he use (i.e. imagery, simile, metaphor, anaphora, dialogue, litotes, etc.)?

5. What is Teddy? What, ironically, is his “flaw” in “valor”?

6. Although the Clutters are presented as the quintessential, wholesome, “cherry-pie” American family, each of the Clutters is also illustrated as perfectly human. For each of the Clutters (only including Herb, Bonnie, Nancy, and Kenyon), discuss his or her character flaw(s) or quirk(s).

7. When Perry and Dick are introduced, how are they depicted? Do they appear to be cold-blooded killers? Why or why not?

8. To whom does the following line of dialogue refer, “‘I can’t imagine you afraid. No matter what happened, you’d talk your way out of it’”? Why do you think Capote chose to include this line?
9. In “one of his favorite theatrical fantasies,” Perry Smith imagines himself to be whom?

10. Who wrote Perry a “farewell letter”? How does this person describe Perry’s character and why is it important?

Part II: Persons Unknown

11. Describe Al Dewey and his connection to the Clutters.

12. What does Dewey confirm was, in fact, a “queer coincidence”?

13. Who is the first “person of interest” (suspect), and why?

14. Why was the motive of robbery “more or less dismissed”?

15. What are some of the items that Dick and Perry purchase with Herb Clutter’s checks?

16. What about the murder scene causes Dewey to believe the murderer(s) possessed a “twisted tenderness”?

17. When Perry tells Dick, “I think there must be something wrong with us,” what do we learn about Perry’s family?

18. Why do you think Perry tells Dick about the time he murdered a man in Vegas? What part of the story is true?

19. Briefly describe Perry’s relationship with his father and his surviving sister, Barbara. Make sure to discuss Perry’s time in Anchorage and Barbara’s letter.
20. Who is Jonathan Daniel Adrian?

Part III: Answer

21. Who is Floyd Wells and why didn’t he want to tell anyone about the murder initially? Who is the first person Floyd confides in?

22. How does Floyd remember the Clutter family?

23. What disturbs Marie Dewey most about Perry and Dick’s mugshots?

24. On what does Mr. Hickock (Dick’s father) blame Dick’s actions? What is ironic about the fact that Mrs. Hickock (Dick’s mother) blames Perry for her son’s mistakes?

25. Who saves Mr. Bell’s life?

26. Detective Nye tells the woman at the hotel that Perry and Dick are wanted for what?

27. What does Barbara mean when she concludes that “They shared a doom against which virtue was no defense”?

28. To get confessions, detectives interrogating Perry and Dick tell them that the police have what evidence?

29. How does Perry remember Nancy Clutter?

30. Briefly compare and contrast Perry and Dick’s conflicting stories regarding the night of the murders.
31. How did the crowd react to Smith and Hickock’s arrival?

32. Why did Perry, after blaming one of the murders on Dick, ultimately admit to killing all four Clutters?

33. Where did KBI agents find the murder weapons?

34. How did Dick explain the murder to his father?

35. From whom does Perry receive a letter, and what are its contents?

36. What is the significance of the yellow bird, which first appeared earlier in the book?

37. Perry says, “It’s easy to kill” and compares the murder of the Clutters to what?

38. In his confession, what did Perry say about Mr. Clutter?

39. For how long did the jury deliberate? What was Perry and Dick’s response to the death sentence?

40. How many people attend the execution?