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Block: E Block

In Cold Blood Part II Analysis Sheet

Text’s author and title/comment?

*In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote: Neighborhood Unrest — Pages 87 - 88

Consider the text’s rhetorical situation. What is behind its creation? What is its audience?

This novel was written to educate older generations on the vicious happenings of the murder of the Clutter family in lonely, Holcomb, Kansas on the night of November 15, 1959. In this section in particular, the author wants to show how the Clutters’ neighbors are feeling after the murder. Capote’s audience are adults and young adults who are mature enough to handle reading about death and murder. The audience is people who are interested in learning about the murder of the Clutters, especially since “there was no apparent motive for the crime” and “there were almost no clues” (according to the back cover of the book). The audience wants to know why these murders happen and want to gain insight into these murderers’ thoughts. In this particular section, the audience is people who may want to know about the impact the mysterious murders had on the town.

What is the author’s purpose? Inform, persuade, or entertain? Explain.

The purpose of the text is to inform. This passage illustrates the effect the Clutter family murder had on the inhabitants of Holcomb. These pages make lucid the notion that people no longer feel safe in their homes because the Clutter family was murdered. The text makes evident that the Clutters were the most generous, amiable, and loved residents in this Kansas small town; they were the least likely people to be targeted and that festering thought engendered fear in Holcomb. This passage makes evident the toll this viscus murder took on the residents of Holcomb, as well as the hearts they touched when alive.

Cite a passage that illustrates the author’s message (embodied thought/logos) and discuss it.

“‘But that family represented everything people hereabouts really value and respect, and that such a thing could happen to them—well, it’s like being told there is no God. It makes life seem pointless. I don’t think people are so much frightened as they are deeply depressed’” (88).

The author’s message is that since the kind and good-natured Clutters were murdered, morality is practically useless and no longer has any value if bad things can still happen to good people. More specifically, as the schoolteacher mentioned in the quote above, “‘it’s like being told there is no God’” because the Clutters were not protected or saved since they were murdered. Through deductive reasoning, if even the most respectful people can be murdered, then anyone can be murdered. Moreover, it isn’t the constant fear of uncertainty every day that plagues the neighbors, but rather the depressing and hopeless belief that goodness doesn’t necessarily guarantee security.

Cite additional content that develops / supports / illustrates the writer’s message. What claims does the author make? How does the author assert his/her presence and knowledge? (Build from previous section).

The author describes that the town-folk are hastily buying locks to subside their anxiety and relinquish their fear that was caused by the murder of the Clutter family. When describing the fear that lies as a blanket over Holcomb, the author states, “imagination, of course, can open any door-- turn the key and let terror walk right in” (88). Capote asserts his own knowledge on the neighbors by explaining the neighbors’ belief by claiming that letting your mind run wild with possibilities of danger festers trepidation. In addition, quotations from the neighbors, including one that states the Clutters’ murder “‘might happen again’” confirms the neighbors’ fears and also asserts that the author knows how the neighbors feel. All of these quotes support the idea that on the surface, the neighbors are frightened and fearful of everything, which will later help develop the writer’s message that although neighbors seem like they are scared, they are actually more depressed than scared.

Describe the tone of the text.

At first, the tone is seemingly humorous when talking about Mrs. Myrtle Clare scorning the townsmen, but then the tone suddenly shifts to become more sharp and severe when Clare suddenly has her money stolen. Capote then shifts to a more uneasy tone to reflect the general fear surrounding the neighbors. Once Capote starts to explain the reasoning behind the neighbors’ feelings, especially when explaining the schoolteacher’s depressing feelings, the tone becomes more resigned and melancholic. As the scene approaches to an end, the tone becomes more bitter when the text mentions the suspicions the neighbors now have of each other.

What words/phrases reveal the text’s tone?

Words like “intrepid” (87) and colloquial phrases like “‘let em’ try’” (87) contribute to the humorous tone in the beginning of the text. Mrs. Myrtle Clare’s overconfidence in her safety is moreover humorous and colloquial phrases make the text seem so out-of-the-ordinary in a book about murder. Afterwards, words like “masked bandits” and “invading” (88) reveal the more sharp and severe tone. The uneasy tone is characterized by words like “terror”, “startled” and phrases like “entire families, who had sat the whole night wide awake, watchful, listening” (88). The resigned and melancholic tone are revealed from words like “‘it’s like being told there is no God’”, “‘pointless’”, and “‘deeply depressed’” (88). Lastly, the bitter and suspicious tone is displayed through words like “distrusting” and “they believed the that the murderer was among themselves” (88).

Point out prominent passages, lines, words, phrases and discuss how such language features contribute to the substance of the text and its appeals. (Says / Does).

“Of what were they frightened? ‘It might happen again’” (88).

Through this hypophora, Capote clearly answers the pressing question in the audience’s mind. Capote also elaborates beyond a simple, one-sentence answer by explaining that there was more to fright but rather there was also depression rampant among the neighbors according to a schoolteacher. This hypophora allows the audience to get a direct answer, allowing them to better understand the text.

“‘Prosperous. Secure’” (88).

These two words take up one sentence each, immediately gaining the attention of the audience. They emphasize that the neighbors saw the Clutters as very “prosperous” and “secure”, but yet, they were suddenly murdered. Capote emphasizes the neighbors’ shock and disbelief of the Clutters’ deaths.

“...Arthur Clutter, a brother of the deceased, who, while talking to journalists in the lobby of a Garden City hotel on November 17, had said… ‘I’ll wager whoever did it was someone within ten miles of where we stand’” (88).

Since the neighbors learned about the murder on November 16, Capote strategically adds in the date that Arthur Clutter made that statement (November 17) to show how quickly the neighbors have become tense of each other. Capote proves to the audience that the neighbors are at unrest and creates an uneasy effect on the audience. The readers know that Dick and Perry have already traveled way farther than that and the murderers are not the neighbors. This dramatic irony evokes sadness and pity of the characters in the audience because they feel bad for the brother of Herbert Clutter, who is lost and does not know the truth.

How are ideas arranged? How do ideas take shape through the text’s content and its function?

First, the text starts with a humorous entrance with Mrs. Myrtle Clare, who scorned those who were afraid of “tricks”. Clare was used to serve as an “exception” to those who were frightened. In the midst of a tense and serious story, starting the section off with humor was surprising and different and immediately grasps the audience’s attention. However, Clare’s threat that “‘Anybody wants to play a trick on me, let em try’” (87) was taken seriously when her money was stolen, so the beginning of the section really functioned as a counterargument to the idea that everyone was safe. From there, the rest of the ideas go on to explain the neighbors’ thoughts and fears, which fits into the larger story because the neighbors’ extremely tense feelings show how severe the murders were. Arthur Clutter’s statement is strategically placed at the end to emphasize how much the neighbors believed that someone around them was the murderer, which functions as an explanation as to why the police still have not found Dick and Perry yet.

What else did you find remarkable or engaging about this piece of writing? Explain.

The quote, “imagination, of course, can open any door—turn the key and let terror walk right in”, was one I found intriguing. Fear is intangible and can only be created by ourselves. The personification of imagination and fear helped me understand the situation better—I could feel the neighbors’ fear. Imagination is what fuels the fire that engenders fear. When fear takes control, it causes distrust between friends and family, just as it did to those residing in Holcomb. Capote states that fear does not truly exist unless we give it the power too, unless we give it the key to open our door. I found this to be interesting as I never thought of fear as such and it improved my understanding of the chaos left behind by the Clutter family murder.

Another remarkable element about this piece is how short it is. In only two paragraphs, Capote succinctly captures the neighbor’s thoughts and feelings. These two paragraphs demonstrate the great impact the Clutters’ deaths have on the town and it is greatly depressing to see how devastated but also hopeless the neighbors were.