

Session 2, Reading Selection #1

*The following excerpt is from the first chapter of *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote. As you read the excerpt, pay attention to how the author creates the setting for his story. When you have finished reading, answer the questions that follow.*

In Cold Blood

by Truman Capote

1 The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call “out there.” Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside, with its hard blue skies and desert-clean air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West. The local accent is barbed with a prairie twang, a ranch-hand nasalness, and the men, many of them, wear narrow frontier trousers, Stetsons, and high-heeled boots with pointed toes. The land is flat, and the views are awesomely extensive; horses, herds of cattle, a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples are visible long before a traveler reaches them.

2 Holcomb, too, can be seen from great distances. Not that there is much to see—simply an aimless congregation of buildings divided in the center by the main-line tracks of the Santa Fe Railroad, a haphazard hamlet bounded on the south by a brown stretch of the Arkansas (pronounced “Ar-kan-sas”) River, on the north by a highway, Route 50, and on the east and west by prairie lands and wheat fields. After rain, or when snowfalls thaw, the streets unnamed, unshaded, unpaved, turn from the thickest dust into the direst mud. At one end of the town stands a stark old stucco structure, the roof of which supports an electric sign—

Dance—but the dancing has ceased and the advertisement has been dark for several years. Nearby is another building with an irrelevant sign, this one in flaking gold on a dirty window—HOLCOMB BANK. The bank closed in 1933, and its former counting rooms have been converted into apartments. It is one of the town’s two “apartment houses,” the second being a ramshackle mansion known, because a good part of the local school’s faculty lives there, as the Teacherage. But the majority of Holcomb’s homes are one-story frame affairs, with front porches.

3 Down by the depot, the postmistress, a gaunt woman who wears a rawhide jacket and denims and cowboy boots, presides over a falling-apart post office. The depot itself, with its peeling sulphur-colored paint, is equally melancholy; the Chief, the Super Chief, the El Capitan go by every day, but these celebrated expresses never pause there. No passenger trains do—only an occasional freight. Up on the highway, there are two filling stations, one of which doubles as a meagerly supplied grocery store, while the other does extra duty as a café—Hartman’s Café, where Mrs. Hartman, the proprietress, dispenses sandwiches, coffee, soft drinks, and 3.2 beer. (Holcomb, like all the rest of Kansas, is “dry.”)

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4 And that, really, is all. Unless you include, as one must, the Holcomb School, a good-looking establishment, which reveals a circumstance that the appearance of the community otherwise camouflages: that the parents who send their children to this modern and ably staffed “consolidated” school—the grades go from kindergarten through senior high, and a fleet of buses transport the students, of which there are usually around three hundred and sixty, from as far as sixteen miles away—are, in general, a prosperous people. Farm ranchers, most of them, they are outdoor folk of very varied stock—German, Irish, Norwegian, Mexican, Japanese. They raise cattle and sheep, grow wheat, milo, grass seed, and sugar beets. Farming is always a chancy business, but in western Kansas its practitioners consider themselves “born gamblers,” for they must contend with an extremely shallow precipitation (the annual average is eighteen inches) and anguishing irrigation problems. However, the last seven years have been

years of droughtless beneficence. The farm ranchers in Finney County, of which Holcomb is a part, have done well; money has been made not from farming alone but also from exploitation of plentiful natural-gas resources, and its acquisition is reflected in the new school, the comfortable interiors of the farmhouses, the steep and swollen grain elevators.

5 Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb. Like the waters of the river, like the motorists on the highway, and like the yellow trains streaking down the Santa Fe tracks, drama, in the shape of exceptional happenings, had never stopped there. The inhabitants of the village, numbering two hundred and seventy, were satisfied that this should be so, quite content to exist inside ordinary life—to work, to hunt, to watch television, to attend school socials, choir practice, meetings of the 4-H club.

Permission granted by Alan U. Selurant, Trustee of the Truman Capote Literary Trust.

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Session 2, Multiple-Choice Questions

- 19 The author creates a rich setting for his story through the repeated use of
- A. detailed description.
 - B. conflict.
 - C. analogies.
 - D. classical allusions.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 19: Literature/Learning Standard 15

- 20 Which is a statement of fact?
- A. The village of Holcomb is located seventy miles east of the Colorado border.
 - B. The atmosphere of Holcomb is different from that of other midwest towns.
 - C. The people of Holcomb are usually very lonely.
 - D. The views from Holcomb are the best in the Midwest.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 20: Literature/Learning Standard 8

- 21 The phrase, “a white cluster of grain elevators rising as gracefully as Greek temples,” contains an example of
- A. irony.
 - B. allegory.
 - C. simile.
 - D. hyperbole.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 21: Literature/Learning Standard 15

- 22 According to the excerpt, the Holcomb bank
- A. is located in a small building.
 - B. has moved into a new building.
 - C. is the center of commerce in town.
 - D. has been turned into apartments.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 22: Literature/Learning Standard 8

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- 23 According to information in paragraph 4, what does the Holcomb School reveal about the community?
- A. A melancholy feeling hangs over the town.
 - B. Holcomb is a prosperous community.
 - C. Most businesses left town long ago.
 - D. There is a very large school-age population.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 23: Literature/Learning Standard 8

- 24 Why do western Kansas farmers call themselves “born gamblers”?
- A. Gambling money helped to build Holcomb.
 - B. They were “betting” on the success of their children.
 - C. The town was a gambling center for Kansas.
 - D. Farmers “take chances” on the weather every year.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 24: Literature/Learning Standard 13

- 25 In paragraph 5, the sentence, “Until one morning in mid-November of 1959, few Americans—in fact, few Kansans—had ever heard of Holcomb,” contains an example of
- A. oxymoron.
 - B. imagery.
 - C. foreshadowing.
 - D. understatement.

Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 25: Literature/Learning Standard 15

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Session 2, Open-Response Question

- 26 According to the author, there is a difference between the appearance of Holcomb and its inhabitants, and the reality of Holcomb and its inhabitants. Using specific evidence from this excerpt, contrast how Holcomb and its inhabitants appear with how Holcomb and its inhabitants really are.

*Reporting Category/Learning Standard for Item 26: **Literature/Learning Standard 13***