The Cold

Knowledge Organiser

Context – Stone Cold was written by Robert Swindells and was published in 1993.

Robert Swindells – Robert Swindells is an English writer who was born in Bradford on March 20th 1939. He served in the Royal Air Force, before becoming a primary school teacher. It was at this time that Swindells began his writing career. His first novel, ‘Flawless’, was published in 1968.

Homelessness – Even in the 21st Century, and in relatively wealthy country like the United Kingdom, homelessness is all too frequent. The latest data (2016) shows that on any given night, there were an average of 4,134 people sleeping rough in the UK. This has risen every year since 2011. Remember this is on any given night, so the number who slept rough over the course of a year is likely to be many times more. A study by the Yearly Standard showed that more than 7,500 people slept rough in London at some point in 2015. This included 880 under 25s.

Main Characters – Consider what Swindells intended through his characterisation of each of the below...

Link – Link is the lead protagonist in Stone Cold although Link is not actually his real name – he coined the nickname after seeing a sign for ‘Thames’ on his way down to London from Bradford. Link is forced to leave home aged 16, after being mistreated by his mother’s partner: Vince. He becomes homeless after his sister is also unable to support him. Link is generally a kind and sensitive character, although he is not very streetwise and makes some poor decisions.

Quote: “I was now one of them now – poised at the top of the food chain.”

Shelter – Shelter is the antagonist in Stone Cold. He is a former army sergeant-major, who it is assumed has been discharged for some sort of mental health ground. He embarks on a mission to rid the country of homeless people, which he calls ‘dossers’ and ‘garbage’. His failure to accept his removal from his army role leads him to believe that he is doing his country a service, and is signing up as an ‘agents’ for his own army – “The Camden Horizontals.”

Quote: “I never forget a face, and our next meeting will not be a happy one.”

Ginger – After a few awful nights on the streets, Link meets Ginger, who is streetwise and friendly towards Link. He provides companionship for Link, which is something that many homeless people do not have. When Ginger disappears, Link immediately begins to question Ginger’s loyalty and suggests that it was a bad idea to get too close to someone – it emphasises the loneliness and isolation of being homeless. Ginger’s disappearance also shows how little people care about the homeless – Link has to persevere to find him.

Quote: “I’m so used to being set up, and so was I. I even cried with her leaving a wad of banknotes in my hand.”

Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text.

Invisibility – Link opens the novel by describing himself as one of the ‘invisible’ people, and this is a theme that runs throughout. It is clear in the behaviour of his father (who assumes that the other members of the family will help Link out) of the general public (almost all of whom do nothing to help Link), and the vast majority of whom ignore his presence altogether) and even of the police (the police do very little initially to help find Ginger and the other victims of Shelter, assuming that they have just simply ‘moved on’).

Cruelty and Exploitation – Link’s already bleak situation is significantly worsened by the cruelty and exploitative actions of other. For example, when he first moves to London, he is exploited by the landlord ‘Rattler’, who provides poor living conditions in exchange for high rent and heavy interest payments. He is then robbed by a fellow homeless person, under the threat of violence. The squalid conditions in Captain Hook’s barge (that he makes a great deal of money from) is another example of exploitation.

Swindells’ Literary Devices

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Chapter-by-Chapter Summary – Alongside key quotations.

Chapter 1-2

Link describes himself as one of the ‘invisible people’, and explains how little people care about the homeless. He discusses how he discarded into homelessness, beginning with his dad running off with a receptionist a couple of years before. Link doesn’t blame his father for his problems though – he blames his abusive stepfather. He explains the awkwardness of seeing someone you know when you are begging for money. In Shelter’s first ominous message, he talks of how he will clean the streets of dossers, turning them into rubbish. He says that he is the “scroungy blighter’s” and has a ‘plot’ to clear the streets of them.

Chapter 3-5

Link realises that his ragged appearance is making him more and more vulnerable. He begins to show downward spiral. Shelter invites him in. Link realises that he has two weeks to find work or he will be homeless again. Rat-face comes for the rent three days early, which Link cannot pay. He is forced to move out, and realises he is now homeless.

Chapter 6-8

Link has a terrible first night on the streets - he is punched by a toilet attendant, has his place in a doorway stolen by another homeless person, and is then robbed of his last meaningful possession – a watch that his mum bought him. After a few uncomfortable nights, Link meets Ginger. Ginger begins to show Link the ropes. Link describes to the reader the horrors of being a homeless person. Meanwhile, Shelter’s mental instability is further revealed as he explains that he has stored the body of a missing protester. He then kills a ‘2nd victim’, a young homeless woman.

Chapter 8-12

Ginger and Link spend the last of their change on a bed for the night. Shelter attempts to clear the streets of them. Link is told the last change of a bed for the night at ‘Captain Hook’s’ – Ginger is introduced to Ginger’s friend, he feels strangely jealous of. Link feels extremely isolated and disappointed when Ginger leaves him to meet more friends. Ginger fails to return, and a Big Issue vendor tells Link that Ginger was seen talking to a man. Link then realises that his hopes are dashed.

Chapter 12-15

Link begins to fall for Gail, even momentarily noticing nothing the cold and the hunger. Link decides that he wants to find a job to help give a house to Gail. Shelter redoules his efforts to get ‘Laughing Boy 1 & 2’. He leaves for them to separate, before convincing Ginger that Link had been hurt in an accident. Back at the flat, he falls, Gail.

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