

Ethics of punishment essay on Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" essay sample

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Ethics of Punishment Essay on Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" Essay Sample

In the book, "In Cold Blood", by Truman Capote, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith commit a heinous crime by slaughtering the Clutter family. Should Dick and Perry die for their crimes by receiving the death penalty?

Throughout the book there is clear evidence that supports both sides. Would this case adhere to the M'Naghten rule or were both defendants aware of what crime they were committing? After close analysis of both defendants I do not believe either one deserves capital punishment.

Before looking into the case one must take a look at the two defendants. Along with Perry, Richard (Dick) Eugene Hickock was one of the two murderers of the Clutter family. Dick grew up in Kansas, was married twice, and was jailed for passing bad checks. He is a practical man who exudes confidence and cruelty, but in reality he is not a ruthless or as brave as he seems. Along with Dick, Perry Edward Smith was the other of the two murders of the Clutter family. His legs were badly injured in a motorcycle accident. He wants very much to be educated, and he considers himself quite intelligent and artistic. His childhood was lonely and disorganized. His criminal record seems to be an extension of the strange environment he grew up in.

Perry and Dick do not deserve the death penalty. The defendants of this case adhere to the M'Naghten rule. This means "that if the accused knew the nature of his act, and knew it was wrong, then he is mentally competent and responsible for his actions" (Capote, 267). Perry as well as Dick were not

mentally competent and responsible for their actions. First of all, Perry is mentally crazy and so his actions do not merit death. The only witness for the defense is the psychologist. According to Kansas' M'Naughten Rule all a psychologist can do is testify whether or not a defendant could tell right from wrong at the time of the crime. In regards to Perry, the psychologist says he is not sure, but the judge does not let him say anything further. Capote includes what the psychologist would have said, carefully diagnosing Perry as a potential schizophrenic, " Perry Smith shows definite signs of severe mental illness" (Capote 296).

He writes disjointedly in his autobiography that he writes to the psychologist. At the end of the autobiography he wrote: " Went to Las Vegas and continued to Kansas where got into the situation. I'm in now. No time for more" (Capote, 276). He can't think clearly which shows in his writing. He also, writes like he thinks. He lacks order and coherence. While in jail, Perry thinks he is insane. He plans to escape with the help of a couple men, but when they don't show up outside his window he wonders if he made them up, " a notion that he ' might not be normal, maybe insane' had troubled him" (Capote, 265). He even realizes that he might be a schizophrenic. He was unable to distinguish reality from nonexistence. So how could he tell right from wrong? To him the killing was all just an illusion.

While Perry had a psychological disorder, Dick had a character disorder. During the trial the psychologist examined Dick and announced his findings in the court room. With Dick, he found " Hickock does show signs of emotional abnormality" (Capote, 294). He is not normal. He has had

concussions which has probably lead to this character disorder. While talking with Cullivan, Perry explains Dick's personality, " Dick loves to steal. It's an emotional thing with him- a sickness...Dick, if he was carrying a hundred dollars in his pocket, he'd steal a stick of gum" (Capote, 290). Dick had an addiction of stealing. When you are addicted to something you do whatever it takes to get what you want. In this case Dick wasn't able to easy his addiction because there was nothing to steal from the Clutters. By killing the Clutter family and leaving no witnesses enabled Dick to continue his addiction.

For example, the psychologist in the case found: " He is a person who is impulsive in action, likely to do things without thought of consequences or future discomfort to himself or others" (Capote, 295). He couldn't go to jail. If he did, he wouldn't be able to steal anymore. In addition, Perry explained how it was an emotional high for himself and Dick. " I think we both felt high.... Very high, and very relieved at the same time" (Capote, 256). When you feed into someone's addiction you get this high sensation. There was no way Dick could tell right from wrong. His addiction drove him to kill the Clutters. There was no way he could stop himself. From the above facts it is concluded that both defendants were not aware of the crime they were committing as well as they were not aware of the consequences and therefore should not receive the death penalty.

Perry and Dick deserve the death penalty. They were both mentally capable of knowing what they were doing and they knew it was wrong. First of all, they both preplanned the robbery and killing. Floyd Wells testified in court

that “ Yes, he told me he would probably tie them up and then rob them and then kill them” (Capote, 282). They both knew and had time to think about what they were going to do. They knew it was wrong and they still went through with it. The psychologist even testified that Dick “... seems to be in good contact with reality. He is alert to what is happening around him, and he shows no sign of mental confusion or disorientation” (Capote, 294). This shows that Dick knew what he was doing and knew what the difference between reality and nonexistence was.

He knew that he would go to jail if he killed the Clutters. Besides Dick, Perry also knew what he was doing was wrong. The court psychologist stated, “ He is orientated, hyperalert to things going on about him, and shows no signs of confusion” (Capote, 297). Perry was aware of what was going on. The psychologist even agreed that he is well aware of the events that were going on around him and as well as knew the consequences. It is then proven that both defendants knew what they were doing and knew the consequences of their actions, it is therefore concluded that they should receive the death penalty for this crime.

In my opinion, I believe that neither defendant should receive the death penalty. For the simple reason that I do not believe in killing a person because they killed someone. Two wrongs do not make a right and therefore it would not be right to kill Dick and Perry because they killed the Clutter family. If I did not have this belief I would still say that Dick and Perry do not deserve the death penalty. Perry admitted on page 290 that he was the actual killer of the Clutter family. Dick never actually pulled the trigger. He

assisted in the robbery but not in the killings. Therefore Dick should not be put to death. If anybody it would be Perry.

Perry on the other hand has a mental disorder and therefore cannot be put to death because of the eighth amendment as well as the M'Naghten Rule. Perry should be put in a mental hospital and if then he does recover from his disorder he goes to jail for life without the possibility of parole. Dick on the other hand goes to jail with the possibility of parole. This world may not be just but we can not punish the ones who cannot decipher between just and unjust.

It is very tragic the Clutter family had to be murdered for literally nothing. Dick and Perry murdered an innocent family in hopes of becoming rich. It was clearly shown that Perry has a mental disorder and therefore cannot be tried for capital punishment. Dick on the other hand does not have a mental disorder, but he is not the one who pulled the trigger that killed the Clutter family and therefore also cannot be tried for capital punishment. It is clear that both Dick and Perry need to be punished, but to punish someone who cannot decipher right from wrong is inhuman. In addition, to punish someone who did not contribute to the deaths is un-American and against our whole legal system. That is why it is time to do the right things and punish these two men according to their actions and sanity. Although it is clear that Perry committed the crime it is also clear he suffers from a mental disorder. On the other hand Dick is sane but didn't pull the trigger. Both murderers do not deserve the death penalty and therefore cannot be tried for capital punishment.