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[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



That fateful night and how one abused man could be responsible for such a heinous crime

One late night in November of 1959, two people murdered a family of four in a small Kansas town. It was a robbery and although they could have left right away with the small change in their pockets, the family died.

Discovering who actually pulled the trigger was a shock to many. It was not Richard Eugene Hickock, a pedophile and rapist, who ran through the house killing each victim one by one. It was the one who appeared gentle and shy; the rather artistic one who snapped in the last few minutes of the robbery. Someone whom even Truman Capote was sympathetic towards. What led Perry Edward Smith to lead a life of crime and eventually slaughter the Clutter family?

Eventually labeled as schizophrenic by the court psychologist, Perry's childhood led to his significant problems in the future. As a result of the trauma experienced during his upbringing, there were three factors that developed and impacted his mentality the most: feelings of rage relating to inferiority, paranoia, and latent homosexuality. These issues were discussed in a psychological evaluation by Dr. W. Mitchell Jones:

Perry Smith shows definite signs of mental illness. His childhood, related to me, and verified by portions of the prison records, was marked by brutality and lack of concern on the part of both parents. . . . Two features in his personality make-up and stand out as particularly pathological. The first is his 'paranoid' orientation toward the world. He is suspicious and distrustful of others, tends to feel that others discriminate against him, and feels that

others are unfair to him and do not understand him. . . . Akin to this first trait is the second, an ever-present, poorly controlled rage- easily triggered by any feeling of being tricked, slighted, or labeled inferior by others (Capote 188).

It can be shown that the factors above developed over time. Early on, Perry's parents were rodeo stars and life was charming. All that changed around the time of the Great Depression and the move to Alaska. His father started making " bootleg hooch" and his mother soon became an alcoholic among other things (Capote 172). Numerous violent fights took over the household, which included the children. His mother took off with them to San Francisco and that is where behavioral trouble began for Perry.

As a result of his mother's continuing drunkenness and bouts of prostitution, Perry became involved with older gang members. Eventually he was sent on and off to detention homes, recalling one where he was continuously abused by a staff member. " I had weak kidneys & wet the bed every night. This was very humiliating to me, but I couldn't control myself. I was very severely beaten by the cottage mistress, who had called me names and made fun of me in front of all the boys. . . . She would throw back the covers & furiously beat me with a large black leather belt- pull me out of bed by my hair and drag me to the bathroom & throw me in the tub. . . ." (Capote 173). He maintained that this woman would rub a burning ointment on his penis; the memory caused him to dwell on what he could have done to her and anyone else who had made fun of him. More than likely, this abuse awaked the inferiority complex and rage inside of him.

Perry eventually was sent to live with his father, but that relationship soured and he left when he was sixteen. The relationship included a lot of animosity between the two as reflected in a verbal altercation with his sister. He yelled at her, reflecting the rage mentioned above, as he threw her against a wall, ““You think I like myself? Oh, the man I could have been! But that bastard never gave me a chance. He wouldn’t let me go to school. O. K. O. K. I was a bad kid. But the time came I begged to go to school. I happen to have a brilliant mind. In case you didn’t know. Dumb. That’s the way he wanted me to be. So that I could never escape him.”” (Capote 114). Perry’s intelligence was actually on a very high level. It can be established, that as he realized this and regret for his childhood increased, he became very sensitive to any type of insult, no matter how minor.

At the age of sixteen, his violent tendencies became more clearly developed when he joined the Merchant Marine. A “ hatred and bitterness” he held for others increased as he realized the importance of having an education (Capote 173). Once he started working, Perry got into trouble in both Japan and Korea. Among many fights, one included throwing a Japanese policeman off a bridge.

The bridge story was also recounted to Perry’s only surviving sister, Barbara Johnson. She remembered a photo from a newspaper clipping of Perry arriving in Alaska free of charge from Pacific Northern Airlines after fighting in the Korean War as a combat engineer and a story he had told her about throwing a man off a bridge in Japan. In the photo Perry “ is looking at the camera, in his expression Mrs. Johnson saw, or she imagined she saw, not

gratitude but arrogance, and, in place of pride, immense conceit, it wasn't incredible that he had met a man on a bridge and thrown him off it. Of course he had. She had never doubted it" (Capote 115). Although Perry already had a criminal past, it can be determined that his violent propensity exposed itself more clearly while in the Merchant Marine.

Johnson admitted she feared her brother; however, she wasn't sure if it was him she feared or whether or not her fate would be the same as her brothers and sister. " They shared a doom against which virtue was no defense" (Capote 114). However, she recognized that virtue was not a part of Perry's life. Violence was an integral part of their family, with a brother who shot himself after his wife committed suicide and a sister who either fell or jumped through a window to her own death. Although his one sister currently had a rather normal life and his brother was a great student in high school, it can be agreed upon that Perry's childhood influenced him a bit more than the others in the family.

Some believe that Perry's feelings of paranoia were combined with his hidden homosexuality and the shame he felt. " With these factors before us we can see that it was Smith's unconscious fear and wish for homosexual assault, and hence of being shamed' by Hickock, that provided the impetus that led directly to the murder of Herbert Clutter. For Smith cut Clutter's throat in a fugue of unknowing which developed out of the panic of being ' one down' to Hickock. In his own words, recorded as a part of his confession'" (Lapsley 214). Perry from the start was out to please Hickock and on that fateful night conflicting feelings influenced his final actions.

According to Perry, while in the Merchant Marine and the Army his relationship with homosexuals was not good. There is also a hint that he might have been raped, but in a contradiction to himself, he feels no ill will. “ I never minded the word, and I liked being a sailor- seaports, and all that. But the queens on the ship wouldn’t leave me alone. A sixteen-year-old kid, and a small kid. I could handle myself, sure. . . . Those kind of girls, they can give you an evil time, especially when there’s a couple of them, they get together and gang up on you, and you’re just a kid” (Capote 82). Nevertheless, Perry admitted that the most meaningful friend he ever had was homosexual. Yet, he may be covering the true story out of shame, since his description contradicts itself. No true anger appears at the numerous altercations that took place.

Perry’s mindset and psychological problems are more apparent when viewed in connection to his relationships, especially the one with Dick Hickock. Although their childhoods were a complete opposite to each other, there were a few similarities between them. They both had high I. Q. s. Dick’s problems seemed to stem from a bad head injury (Capote 188). Criminal problems began only after the injury, which included feelings of sexual inadequacy and violence. Similarly, Perry had a horrible motorcycle accident which caused him to limp and added to his inferiority complex.

Perry had mixed feelings regarding Dick that tended to contradict one another. When Dick was late picking-up Perry at a laundry-mat, his mind reeled with conflicting thoughts until he reappeared. “ The sound of Dick’s voice was like an injection of some potent narcotic, a drug that, invading his

veins, produced a delirium of colliding sensations: tension and relief, fury and affection" (Capote 120). Perry could not picture his dream of treasure hunting off the coast without Dick, while at the same time he dreaded Dick's lack of control (Capote 57). It appears that he could not let go of Dick, his attachment to him ranging from need to attraction.

The two were past cellmates in prison, but their whole relationship was based on a lie Perry told about committing a murder. " When he'd told Dick that story, it was because he'd wanted Dick's friendship, wanted Dick to ' respect him', think him ' hard', as much as " the masculine type" as he had considered Dick to be" (Capote 68). Dick later acknowledged that the story did strengthen their friendship. It can be seen from Perry's action that he really desired friendship in his bitter and lonely life.

The Clutter plan all began with a conversation between Dick and his new cellmate, Floyd Wells. Dick took the robbery earnestly and mentioned to Wells that he and his old cellmate from the past, Perry Smith, would do it. Although Wells did not take him seriously, Dick exclaimed that he would kill the family from the very beginning (Capote 98). In addition, he started to obsess about the young girl in the household and planned on raping her. When dreaming of the crime he would commit, Dick thought more of the fun he would have, whereas for Perry it was only about the money.

The intent to kill them all was at Dick's insistence, therefore it should not be a surprise that Perry protected Nancy from being raped by Dick. He told him to leave her room that night and even tucked her into bed. " I really liked

her. She was really nice. A very pretty girl, and not spoiled or anything” (Capote 154). The man who ended-up killing the family actually had no ill will toward any of them and was disgusted with Dick’s obsession and weakness. “I didn’t want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman. Soft-spoken. I thought so right up to the moment I cut his throat. . . . They [the Clutters] never hurt me. Like other people. Like people have all my life. Maybe it’s just that the Clutters were the ones who had to pay for it” (Capote 191). It appears this statement is true.

Dr. Joseph Satten, a Forensic Psychiatrist, endorsed Dr. Jones’ evaluation and listed Perry as a murderer without motive. “. . . . It is Dr. Satten’s contention that only the first murder matters psychologically, and that when Smith attacked Mr. Clutter he was under a mental eclipse; deep inside a schizophrenic darkness, for it suddenly wasn’t a ‘flesh and blood’ man he ‘suddenly discovered’ himself destroying, but a key figure in some past traumatic configuration” (Capote 191). The rest of the deaths were logical in Perry’s mind, according to Satten, since he killed Mr. Clutter the rest of the family had to be killed too.

Once arrested, Perry still exhibited anger at being uneducated, reflecting that annoyance at another murderer on death row who liked to use difficult words but in the wrong context. His “‘educated accent and the formal quality of his college-trained intelligence were anathema to Perry, who though he had not gone beyond third grade, imagined himself more learned than most of his acquaintances’” (Bates 29).

Furthermore, Perry believed in his principles and expected to be vindicated as a result. Throughout his life he dreamed of a yellow bird and now hoped to be rescued. " While not religious, this expresses a definite sense of spirituality that Perry used to believe he would someday be freed from the victimization of his life" (Bates 29-30). Although Perry realized what he did was wrong and continued to be sorry for his actions, he appeared to blame those actions on how he was treated throughout life. Therefore, in his mind, the culpability could not truly be his.

Perry Smith and Dick Hickock murdered the Clutter family in cold blood for under \$50. At first glance, it is a senseless crime. However, one can begin to connect a logic to their actions with a deeper look at the killers' themselves. Both Perry and Hickock had deep psychological problems, however, Perry is the one who murdered the family. Dick continuously stated "'We're gonna go in there and splatter those walls with hair'" to avoid all witnesses and whistled at the possibility that the victim count could be as high as 12 (Capote 148). Perry, on the other hand, originally tried to avoid the murders. He argued with Dick about buying black stockings to cover their faces, but Dick believed the tattoo under his eye would still be visible.

On that night, Perry was the only one to recognize that Mr. Clutter was telling the truth about the safe and wanted to leave immediately, but Dick was too excited and talked about searching the house and cutting all their throats. Dick more than likely would have killed the family himself, but Perry's various psychological problems got the best of him that late night to the bad fortune of the Clutter family. Between not wanting to look inferior to

Dick and his sudden irrational disgust with Mr. Cutter, the family did not have a chance on that horrifying night.

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