

# Anyone except the clutters: the question of meaning in capote's in cold blood

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A strange thing happens when people like the Clutters experience an “undeserved” misfortune. Perhaps misfortune is an understatement in the Clutters case, but the fact is that when bad things happen to good people, everyone around them cannot help but question the nature of good and evil; with that comes the existence of God. Capote put it best in the quote he included from the schoolteacher: “Feeling wouldn’t run half so high if this had happened to anyone except the Clutters. Anyone less admired. Prosperous. Secure.

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.” (88) The question of why bad things happen to good people is a very loaded question; one that is broader than the scope of this essay. The goal of this essay will be to determine what Capote’s answer to this question is, at least in the context of this novel. Does he believe that the Clutters died for a reason, or that it was simply a random act that they were caught up in by chance?

Throughout the novel, the one character who is completely consumed by the question of meaning is Detective Dewey. His dedication to finding the Clutters murderers is driven by his belief that “he might suddenly ‘see something,’ that a meaningful detail would declare itself” (83). The Clutters murder didn’t seem to have any apparent meaning. But Detective Dewey was not alone in his belief that the actions people do are meaningful; that the events that occur in this world have an order, a design.

This belief is prevalent, especially in religious groups, and we learn in the novel that Holcomb, Kansas is part of the “ Bible Belt” (34). It was definitely a religious town, and the Clutters were churchgoing folk. Dewey, for this reason, cannot escape believing there is a reason for everything, and that the Clutters death had a purpose. Is that what Capote wishes to tell us? Because I have a difficult time understanding what purpose there could be for a hard-working, wealthy family of four to be murdered in their beds for “ a few dollars and a radio” (103).

The structure of this novel is rather strange for a “ murder-mystery”; it is not told chronologically; the night of the murder is skipped over until the very end. More importantly, we are told right from the beginning of the novel that the four Clutters are murdered, and we know who murdered them. For a typical murder-mystery, the revelation of the killer is always the climax of the action. In fact, Capote has given us more than the names of the killers; he gives us insight into their lives, and thoughts, leading up the murders.

The reason for this is because Capote has fashioned a novel where we are not reading to find out who perpetrated the crime, but why the killers killed the Clutters. I think, of all the characters in this novel, Dewey is the only one who tries to answer this question. In fact, the reason why he believes that the killers to be motivated by personal interests, even though the deaths were “ brutal and without apparent motive” (70), is because he believes that there must be something he is not seeing.

He mentions several times that the police department “ didn’t have all the facts” (70) and didn’t really know what they were dealing with. He looks at all the clues; analyses all the data; interviews all the townspeople who had grudges, business, or any reason to dislike the Clutters. He knows that the information he is seeing doesn’t make sense, but he can’t figure out the key, the clue, the mystery that will make their deaths make sense. Dewey thinks that the key to understanding why the Clutters died is their killers. If he can find who killed the Clutters then he will know why they killed the Clutters.

Unfortunately, all of the “ knowledge” about the crimes from those who committed it does not give Dewey any definitive answers: But the confessions, though they answered questions of how and why, failed to satisfy his sense of meaningful design. The crime was a psychological accident, virtually an impersonal act; the victims might as well have been killed by lightning. (245) I don’t think that this is a fair statement for Dewey to make, although he is the character that would definitely believe this way. Saying that the Clutters might as well have been “ killed by lightning” (245) is to say that anything could have killed them.

While this is true in the sense that anyone could die at any given moment, it is not true in the sense that the killers could not have been just anybody. The Clutters were a good, white, well-off and (reasonably) happy. Though when we read this novel, we may not feel extremely attached to the Clutters, we can easily see that they were good people. Their neighbours have only nice things to say about them, and the town thinks that “ of all the people in the

world, they were the least likely to be murdered” (85). They were not the kind of people who made other people want to murder them.

The killings could be said to have been “ impersonal”, but I think that the more correct statement is not that anything could have killed the Clutters, but that Dick and Perry could have killed anyone. The Clutters were the arbitrary part of the equation. The only reason they were chosen over any other family was the fact that they were tipped off about a safe on their property. If they had never been told about the safe I believe that Dick and Perry, in all likelihood, would never have met the Clutters. The killers, particularly Dick, were prepared to kill up to twelve people that November night.

Dick had no way of knowing who would be there, but knew that it didn't matter who was there, he would do what he had to in order to secure his and Perry's venture. That they only got a radio and 40 or 50 dollars out of the bargain was secondary. The Clutters were the epitome of the American Dream, embodying a lifestyle that all Americans could relate to. But if they die and there is no reason for it, no meaning to it, then that means that the American Dream, by extension, is also dead; it would be “ like being told there is no God” (88).

If the American Dream is dead, then being a good person is not enough to protect you from the bad things in the world. I think that though Capote has Dewey searching for meaning to this tragedy, I would argue that Dewey never finds what he is searching for. The perpetrators were expected to be

monsters; evil; remorseful at least. But I don't think Dick and Perry fulfilled the public's idea of the Clutter's murderers. ? Works Cited Capote, Truman. In Cold Blood. Toronto: Random House, 1993. Print.