

Reader-response essay for "memories of a dead man walking" essay



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"Memories of a Dead Man Walking" is an essay that evokes feelings of deep sadness. The whole premise of the essay revolves around Sister Helen Prejean's memories toward the "Dead Man," Patrick Sonnier. The essay explores her emotions at the moment when Patrick walks into the execution room, hence the title, "Memories of a Dead Man Walking". Through reading Prejean's essay, I have come to the conclusion that the death penalty is immoral and socially biased toward non-white offenders. During the course of the essay, the author remembers her days of being a spiritual advisor for a person on death row.

She recalls watching the filming of the movie: It's something to watch a film of yourself happening in front of your eyes, kind of funny to hear somebody saying that she's you, but I don't stay long with this mirror stuff. What happens is that I'm sucked back into the original scene, the white-hot fire of what actually happened. (60). Prejean explicitly implies that her experience as a spiritual advisor was a bone-deep memory because it was her first time witnessing an execution. The essay sufficiently summarizes the feelings that Prejean had.

These feelings are unique because other than the person facing execution, no one else can really understand those perplex feelings that someone on death row has except for the spiritual advisor. The spiritual advisor is there for the inmate, comforting him and exchanging personal feelings and experiences. However, Prejean did not only intend to write for those who shared the same experience, but she intended to tell everybody how immoral capital punishment really is because of the inequities of American

society. The author first disagrees with people who think it is absurd for a nun to counsel murderers.

Prejean was willing to hang out with criminals because she believed that trying to help death row murderers did not mean involvement with crimes. She often told people that, “ Jesus would hang out with lepers, prostitutes, and thieves. ” Truly, her alacrity in becoming Patrick Sonnier’s spiritual advisor showed no prejudices against murderers. She began to realize that the pain of death penalties is not in execution itself, but “ the torture happens when conscious human beings are condemned to death and begin to anticipate that death and die a thousand times before they die” (61).

I agree with Prejean’s realization because of a situation that I have experienced. Even though pale in comparison, I have experienced anticipation and run over the experience in my mind several times before it even happened. I was due to give a presentation in class. I remember that the first time I did my presentation, I felt a great stress and nervousness before the presentation and I prepped myself at every chance I got before I really did the presentation. It is the fact that a dread does not only exist at the moment that an anticipated situation happening, but it also terrifies people before that moment actually happens.

Although Prejean wanted to convey and exemplify this feeling of anxiety and dread to victims’ families, she knew that it was inappropriate to convince those victims’ parents to forgive Patrick. She knew that she was “ powerless to assuage their grief” (63) because those parents’ abhorrence toward Patrick can never be erased. Most people would think that people like Patrick

deserve this type of mental pain and suffering, which is arguably is pain worse than death.

There is no doubt that a country of absolute sovereignty has an absolute right to punish people in its own territory, since people are living under its protection. However, even a country with a mighty force has no right to end people's lives. Capital punishment is not only a law that goes against the concept of morality, but it also opposes basic human rights- an important concept which has been supported by Prejean's idea of morality. " These men were human being, and each had a transcendence, a dignity" (65).

Because we are born in such a country, we are protected by our rights that the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls for: the right not to be tortured, the right not to be killed" (65). Still, many countries would choose to ignore these moral conceptions rather than legislating penalty other than death for murderers. The United States is not without exception. While capital punishment goes against the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it also goes against the very basic principal on which the United States was formed: that all men are created equally.

In Prejean's experience, "...black families or Hispanic families or poor families who have a loved one murdered not only don't expect the district attorney's office to pursue the death penalty but are surprised when the case is prosecuted at all" (63) because executions are "...almost exclusively reserved for those who killed whites" (64). Prejean also states, " But here's the real reason I got involved with death row inmates: I got involved with

poor people. And everybody who lives on this planet and has at least one eye open knows that only poor people get selected for death row" (62).

After reading this essay, I sympathized with the author's voice regarding human rights and morality. Government should not take away people's right to live, especially due to their social class or status. There is a single element in the essay that most stood out in my memory, " The torture happens when...times before they die"(61). It stood out because I had some experiences that let me feel the same way Prejean describes. The phrase lets the essay seem more conscious in telling readers about the morality of human beings and it centralizes themes in the essay: human rights and the iniquity of American society.