
In Cold Blood: The Main Characters' Analysis

What makes someone act out? In Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, the main characters, Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, are young men who feel like outcasts in society. They brutally kill the Clutter family in the small town of Holcomb, Kansas to fulfill their dream of becoming "insiders". To them, being an insider is to be successful and wealthy, however to fulfill this desire they resort to violence. For a person to become an insider in an honest way, a person's conscience must guide their behavior, but without a conscience, Dick's psychopathic behavior is determined only by his impulses and desires; Perry acts out to seek a higher insider status due to the influence of Dick.

Capote suggests some people grow out of these dreams because they pursue them with honesty and hard work; they have good values and are realistic that they will let go of their dreams even if they don't fulfill them after trying their best in an honest way. These are people, like the Clutters, who grew up in stable homes with positive guidance on socially acceptable morals and beliefs. Mr. Clutter has already achieved his dream of being a successful farm owner and starting a family. 'Always certain of what he wanted from the world, Mr. Clutter had in large measure obtained it. On his left hand, on what remained of a finger once mangled by a piece of farm machinery, he wore a plain gold band, which was the symbol...of his marriage to the person he had wished to marry.' (Capote 6) One of Mr. Clutter's fingers had been mangled while working on a farm, but instead of letting one thing stop him, he continued to work hard and honestly, and later was able to own a successful farm and marry the girl of his dreams. However, he did not attain the dream of having a healthy wife, but he accepted the reality and grew out of that dream, and instead focused on helping his wife get better and the well-being of his children and his farm.

Of those who don't grow out of these dreams, many have a problematic upbringing and lack a good value system, causing them to act out in an immoral way. Perry's childhood was rough; He moved from place to place due to his parents' rodeo business, and was put in an orphanage after his alcoholic mother died from choking on her own vomit. Perry sees that Clutter family is the complete opposite of his childhood life. "Perry saw in Herb Clutter everything that he'd ever wanted in a father and didn't have--a home, stability, a family." (Capote 185) Perry witnessed his father beating his mother, and in the orphanage, was beat by the nuns for wetting his bed due to a poor diet. As he grew up, he had to deal with the suicides of two of his siblings, and the estrangement of his only remaining sibling. Perry joined the military at 16, and he fought in the Korean war, where he saw many horrors. He saved enough money to buy a motorcycle, but crashed and almost died in the accident, leaving his legs permanently damaged. Because of his injured legs, he worked out obsessively, building up his upper body to seem more masculine. He also spins a lie to Dick about how he killed a man without mercy. "Dick became convinced that Perry was that rarity, 'a natural born killer'...It was Dick's theory that such a gift could, under his supervision, be profitably exploited." (Capote 55) Perry is insecure about his image and masculinity, and it causes him to look up to and seek validation from other more masculine men, like Dick, and he is influenced by them and follows their footsteps to a negative path towards a criminal record.

The novel suggests that people act out when their dream is unattainable because they have

mental illnesses, and therefore have no moral compass telling them what is right or wrong. A prime example of this is Dick. Dick had a comfortable childhood; He was supported by his friends and family, and he excelled in school and sports. This is revealed when Mr. Nye is interviewing Dick's parents. Mr. Hickock tells Nye, '[Dick was] 'An astounding athlete--always on the first team at school...A pretty good student, too, with A marks in several subjects.'"(Capote 166) However, after being unable to go to college due to his financial situation, he spiraled in a downward path, letting anger guide him. Then, he had an automobile accident, which disfigured him physically and mentally, furthering his downward spiral. This accident shifted half of his face, and it is implied that something also shifted in his brain, causing him to have a mental illness which led to his psychopathic tendencies. Many studies link brain injuries to psychopathic tendencies. One famous case is Phineas Gage, who suffered from a brain injury while working as a railroad construction foreman. "Whereas before the accident Gage had been dependable and trustworthy, afterward he became disrespectful, profane, impulsive, and unreliable—traits reminiscent of psychopathy." (Koenigs) Dick shows many characteristics of a psychopath, including false charm and glibness, a lack of remorse, and impulsivity. He shows false charm when he and Perry go out to pass false checks to make some money. "[Dick] Smooth. Smart... it was incredible how he could 'con a guy'...For the task proposed, it seemed, Dick had perfect pitch."(Capote 97) He shows no remorse for killing the Clutter family, unlike Perry, who regretted it. He also is controlled by his impulses, when he wants to rape Nancy and another girl on the beach, but Perry stops him from doing so. "I found he'd taken [Nancy] to her bedroom. She was in the bed, and he was sitting on the edge of it talking to her. I stopped that." (Capote 242) Dick's psychopathic behavior causes him to try reaching his dream of becoming wealthy in a violent and dishonest way, stringing along Perry with him.

The people that don't act out on their dreams are people who learned to work hard and with honesty, while the people that do act out have rough childhoods or a mental illness. What one can learn from this is that in order to attain dreams, one must do so honestly and with good intentions. Mr. Clutter worked hard and honestly, and in the end, attained his dream, but his life was ended in cold blood when Dick and Perry, people who tried taking the shortcut to success, murdered him and his family. If Dick and Perry had sought success the honest way, they and the Clutters could have lived a successful life. For people with mental illnesses, it is important for them to seek help to control their urges and not cause death and destruction.

Bibliography:

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