Capital punishment: Ambivalent positions in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Lullaby*

Bachelor's Thesis

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1. Introduction

When people are asked what they associate with America, what is the typical answer? Hollywood? Grand Canyon? Obama? 9/11? Correct, all these things have to do with the nation that represents the idea of liberty, equality, and justice like no other. Part of the American justice system is capital punishment.

The first execution in the British colonies of North America took place in 1608. Since then, the death penalty has been in use. A possible explanation could be that “Americans apparently want to feel that they are in control of evil and have an answer for it” (Lifton 24). One of the best known popular examples this quote applies to is the Salem trials in 1692, where nineteen people, who were regarded as the embodiment of evil, were hanged by fellow Puritans. During the period of Enlightenment, when the American nation was founded, first criticism was voiced against capital punishment and it was argued that if it did not deter crime, it should be abolished. Up until this day, criticism increased and the argument of low deterrence is still valid, even though the belief that it should reduce murders is also strong. Yet, the system of capital punishment was transferred from colonial times into the national period nevertheless. In the late 1960s, for the first time in U.S. history the majority of Americans disfavored the death penalty. Thus, the government began to work on improving the process, e.g. guaranteeing fairer trials, which also consider mitigating factors, and inventing more humane methods of execution, e.g. lethal injection.

As of today, the death penalty is still effective in 32 states and the majority of Americans, that is to say 68% (cf. Gallup), support it. If given the opportunity to decide if the criminal should receive the death penalty and life without parole, 50% would choose the former, whereas 45% would pick life without parole¹ (ibid). Likewise, the majority of the American people still thinks that it is morally acceptable to sentence someone to death. Their main reason is thinking this is the most suitable punishment for the prisoners’ crime. President Bush once stated: “I support the death penalty because I believe, if administered swiftly and justly, capital punishment is a deterrent against future violence and will save other innocent lives” (Cotkin 164). Likewise, President Obama supports the death penalty as well. Also, throughout the last seven years support for capital punishment has been consistent (cf. Gallup). However, there are also people opposing the ultimate

¹ The other 5% remain indecisive.

penalty, mostly because they are of the opinion that no one has the right to decide over life and death and by reason of fearing that an innocent person could be executed. Furthermore, Steven Colbert, who is especially popular on social media websites, said: “It [capital punishment] sends a clear message. We as a society think it is depraved to take a human life and to prove it we're going to kill you” (Veeoz). He claims that the government cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing themselves. Generally, it seems as if everyone has a clear opinion about the issue of the death penalty.

Who Owns Death? (2002) by Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell successfully illustrates these different and opposing attitudes, which are representative for everyone involved in the processes of capital punishment, e.g. prison guards, prosecutors, and murder victims’ families. However, the book fails to consider that one and the same person can be torn between supporting and opposing the system. In this thesis, the examination of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Lullaby* (2001) will show that individuals do not always have a clear opinion regarding capital punishment but that it can be as ambivalent as the whole issue itself.

The thesis is structured as follows: In chapter 2 *Who Owns Death?* I will approach the question of capital punishment considering the representation in the book as the form of justice system as it exists in America today, meaning like it functions in reality. Lifton and Mitchell trace attitudes about the death penalty in American society and maintain a neutral description until their own opinion is voiced in the conclusion. Then, *In Cold Blood*, which builds on an actual case, offers an alternative justice system, in which Capote tries to constitute an imaginative, fairer trial for the novel’s main characters. Chapter 4 deals with *Lullaby* where Palahniuk approaches the issue of capital punishment from yet another level because his main character basically takes the law into his own hands, which turns him into a killer. However, the novel can be regarded in the light of capital punishment due to the fact that it was written as part of Palahniuk’s coping mechanism while deciding if his father’s killer deserves the death penalty. Concerning the novels there is a summary and background sub-chapter included in order to be briefly introduced into the novels. Next, a short summary of how capital punishment has been defined in the three books is given and the authors’ views on capital punishment, as expressed in interviews or in Lifton and Mitchell’s case in the “Preface” and chapter ten “The End of Executions” of *Who Owns Death*, are presented. Following is a description of how the perpetrators are represented and how the use power is dealt

with. I chose to focus on the representation of the murderers because by looking at how they are described one can detect the opinion about death penalty itself at least to some extent. Is the perpetrator a monster or still a human being? Does he evoke feelings of fear or sympathy? Does he do good things or is he purely evil? These are some of the aspects taken into consideration. As to the use of power, it is examined for what kind of purpose power is used. Is it the author trying to influence his readers in order to change their opinion about the perpetrators or the system of capital punishment in general? Who owns death? Who has the right to decide if a person lives or dies? Those last two points of focus, i.e. representation of the perpetrators and use of power, serve to illustrate that individual people can have divided opinions on capital punishment themselves.

2. Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Who Owns Death*

2.1 Definition and Criticism of Capital Punishment

Throughout the book capital punishment is defined as “state killing” (cf. Lifton 17, 214), which is imposed when a felony is so severe that no other punishment is regarded as suitable. The verdict is something final and should function to deter crime. Further, it expresses that American society does not accept extreme violence within its state’s boundaries. Likewise, “a large proportion of American society continues to regard [the death penalty] as an appropriate and necessary criminal sanction” as Supreme Court Justice Stewart reveals (Lifton 216) to serve justice. However, the authors try to raise awareness that capital punishment should be seen as a form of murder and it does not matter if it is part of American law and thus considered legal because the state still puts a living person to death and owns the right to determine who lives and who dies. Further, it is said that one cannot show that killing is wrong by killing oneself by a member of the clergy and a journalist (cf. Lifton 10, 38). Since the state functions as a killer itself, it no longer serves as a role model for its society. Moreover, Justice Thurgood Marshall declares that “the great mass of citizens . . . would conclude that the death penalty is immoral and therefore unconstitutional”² (Lifton 222). Adding to that, it is declared that many jurors do not regard the punishment as proper but as the least improper when compared to other options (cf. Lifton 156). In general, *Who Owns Death?* does convey a negative image of the “barbaric procedure” (Lifton 192), as CNN analyst Greta Van Susteren calls it, because on the hand it denies the value of individual human beings and on the other hand it neither functions as deterrence nor is it the right approach to teach that taking a human life is wrong.

The authors directly say “we have opposed capital punishment for many years” (Lifton xvi) and declare that it is against democratic standards. Moreover, it “violates our fundamental commitment to life while claiming to uphold it” (Lifton xiv), which resembles the argument that one cannot teach killing is wrong by killing. Yet, the authors admit they can understand a murder victim’s family when they say they want the murderer to die as well. (cf. Lifton xviii) However, Lifton and Mitchell do not think that the death penalty succeeds in giving those families closure but in fact is bad for the human mind in general because it has an impact on the violent impulses (cf. Lifton 236). Hence, executions are the wrong approach to lower the level of violence within a

² Referring to the 8th and 14th Amendment.

society. Furthermore, the authors raise the question if “the justice system can never be 100 percent right, then how can it administer punishment that’s 100 percent irreversible?” (249), which expresses their concerns about innocent people being executed. Besides, the authors regard the legal system and the trial as a game (cf. 233), meaning that the verdict is dependent on aspects such as the trial’s location and the defendants’ class and race. Thus, the system functions in a significantly random way and can be regarded as unfair. Further, the authors feel that because executions have become sanitized it is easier to “overcome our inherent revulsion to killing” (Lifton 253). Yet, they conclude that capital punishment will be abolished in the future because almost everybody has concerns about it.

2.2 Description of Perpetrators

When the authors directly refer to a specific perpetrator they usually call them “the condemned man” without adding any further connotation and thus creating a rather neutral one. When it is described how other people see them there is a split between the murderer being a human and a monster, meaning that one can either view the perpetrator as a person who committed an evil act or as the “embodiment of evil” (Lifton 198) itself. The former is often explained by the murderer’s background, e.g. their childhood, and trying to understand their reasons for taking someone’s life. Sometimes perpetrators say that they were “not acting like a normal person” (Lifton 149). If the perpetrator is conceptualized as mentally ill, it is easier to defend them, both emotionally and legally, as insane, which can be helpful because people do not usually believe that crazy people are evil, they are simply scared of them, which could lead to not sentencing that person to death. Moreover, the American justice system works with a jury of ordinary citizens, who are chosen to be part of the process of passing judgment in court cases. Members of the jury may feel as if the defendant, who may not seem different from the average citizen when you look at them, becomes their victim since they contribute in the process of deciding the verdict (ibid). However, if one focuses on the evil the perpetrator did, one can also view them as “animals” (113) and “domestic terrorists” (ibid). *Who Owns Death?* distinguishes between the murderer being human and something purely evil by including several opinions from different members of American society. Yet, there were no examples of individuals who cannot decide how to feel about the condemned man.

2.3 Use of Power

When it comes to capital punishment the hierarchy can be seen as follows: on the top level there are governors and Supreme Court justices, the district attorney is responsible for the trial and the wardens are the ones who actually carry out the execution.

When people apply for the job of a warden on death row many of them do not understand what they will be dealing with. However, to be chosen one has to comprehend that they are not only the inmates' care-taker but that at one point they will be a member of the so called "execution team" (Lifton 75) and hence responsible for putting the prisoner they cared for to death. Once they get into the system the struggle between feeling and non-feeling begins and that is when many of them create a kind of execution self to distance themselves from what is happening (cf. Lifton 76-77). Further, the emotional numbing is promoted by an extremely strict routine, where everyone has a specific task they have to concentrate on, and by working in teams. That way wardens feel less responsible for their actions. Moreover, they often tell themselves that they are simply "an instrument of the state" (Lifton 79) and that everyone who supports the death penalty is just as responsible for the death of the condemned as they are (cf. Lifton 78). Another method of emotional numbing is re-reading the murderer's file to remember that they are not merely killing the person they got to know but that this person did something extremely evil and receives punishment for their crime (cf. Lifton 86). Yet, distancing does not always work and wardens have to struggle with the execution's aftermath, including nightmares and even daydreams.

Prosecutors are in charge of deciding if a crime is tried for capital punishment. Some of them deny responsibility by saying that it is the jury, which decides over life and death. However, others also feel empowered and excited by their position and it seems as if "You're playing God" (Lifton 119). Even if prosecutors are concerned during their first cases, making the decision becomes easier over time as is shown by the example of Ron Sievert, who already "felt much less troubled by the trials and the penalties" (Lifton 115) by his fourth case. Still, one has to keep in mind that intended verdicts are strongly dependent on each prosecutor since all of them have individual beliefs they follow and hence draw different conclusions.

Governors are capable of granting clemency and thus of saving a person's life. Yet, nowadays clemency is granted on fewer occasions. On the one hand, governors do not want to seem as if they were "soft on crime" (Lifton 8), which would make them appear weak and could

possibly cause them to lose political power. On the other hand, there are new research methods to ensure a person's guilt, e.g. DNA testing, and hence additional scrutiny is not needed anymore. But also governors struggle with their responsibility and often pray to God to receive guidance and thus they transfer their burden to a higher power to make them feel less responsible. Also, governors may feel that they, and no government in general, has the right to make a decision concerning life and death, which becomes clear when a California governor asked: "What did the good Lord give me that I should have the right to determine whether even the most abject, horrible character lives or dies?" (Lifton 135). That kind of power puts governors in the final position since they are the last ones who can stop an execution when it was already imposed.

A jury should resemble the "values and beliefs of [its] community" (Lifton 138) and its members are chosen carefully. For instance, there is a smaller chance for people to become a jury member for capital cases if they do not consider both options, i.e. life and death. The question then is: can the jury be regarded as truly representative for a community if some of its members are excluded because of their beliefs? During the trial, jurors are under immense pressure and can experience psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, which suggest anxiety and feelings of entrapment (cf. Lifton 144). Further, when only a few people are of a different opinion the rest of the group uses its power to influence them in order to acquire the same mindset as the group's majority. This only increases the emotional pressure during that time. Also, jurors have to cope with the consequences of their decision. While some do not encounter any difficulties, others might feel like murderers themselves (cf. Lifton 148) because they were the ones who said that a certain person deserved to die and because of their decision that person will be sentenced to death. Another important aspect is that the judge usually only guides the trial and can supersede the jury's decision just in a few states. The thought behind this system is that if only one person was in charge to decide over life and death, it would give them an ultimate kind of power, which is to be prevented.

As this chapter has shown, none of the parties involved in the system of capital punishment is really comfortable with their position. Further, it becomes obvious that no one wants to take responsibility for ending a person's life, which indicates that something has to be wrong with the concept of executions (cf. Lifton 154). To raise awareness concerning the consequences of the participants' actions *Who Owns Death?* asks if it should be obligatory for all of them to attend an execution and hence become more conscious of their power. All in all, it becomes clear that the

state holds the power to decide over life and death and actively works to preserve it, e.g. when an inmate becomes sick or suicidal they are taken care of and brought back to health, so it is still the state, who in the end decides when it is their time to die. Based on *Who Owns Death?* my two important observations are that the person of the perpetrator is usually split into good and evil; and questions of power are very often seen as diffuse, so that no single person carries the weight of responsibility for killing another human being. However, in the two novels I examine this situation is different.

3. Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*

3.1 Summary and Background

In January 1966, Truman Capote's non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood*, which deals with the murder and murderers of the Clutter family, was published. The book is divided into four chapters. The first one is called "The Last to See Them Alive" and sets the scene by describing the victims' hometown Holcomb, Kansas. Moreover, the Clutters' last day is narrated and they lead a seemingly normal life including going to work, having to run errands, and having friends over. Yet, Capote also gives details concerning family problems, distorting the image of the picture perfect family. Meanwhile, the murderers Dick and Perry prepare for the robbery and killing of the Clutter family. The chapter ends with the discovery of the family's dead bodies. Chapter two is called "Persons Unknown". The KBI starts its investigation and the detective in charge, Alvin Dewey, suspects that there was more than one killer and, since it appears as if they knew the family's home well, that they were close to the family. The motif still remains unclear. At the same time, Dick and Perry run off to Mexico, where they stay until they run out of money, which makes them return to the United States. Further, details about Perry's background are included, e.g. telling about his miserable childhood. "Answer" begins with Floyd Wells, a former cell mate of Dick's, reporting to the police about suspecting Dick of being responsible for the Clutter murders. Next, the police questions Dick's parents and Perry's sister about their relatives' whereabouts. Yet, unsuccessfully. Dick and Perry return to Kansas to write bad checks and make money, which the police comes to know of. After travelling to Miami and Texas, the pair goes to Las Vegas where a police officer recognizes the license plate of their stolen car and hence both are arrested. After a while in custody, both confess and are returned to Garden City, Kansas. The last chapter "The Corner" focusses on the trial and the perpetrators' life on death row. Dick makes an appeal to the Kansas bar association claiming that they did not have a fair trial to change their verdict. The investigation, however, remains unsuccessful. Finally, Dick and Perry are executed on April 15, 1965 by hanging. The novel ends with a flashback of Dewey visiting the Clutters' grave and admitting that the deaths of the murderers did not bring him closure.

All in all, it took Capote six years to finish the novel. He got the idea after reading a very brief *New York Times* article called "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain" stating: "A wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They

had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged.” After that, Capote decided to go to Holcomb and investigate the case himself. He was accompanied by his friend Nelle Harper Lee, who helped him to establish contact to and gain the trust of the residents of the rural town. Nevertheless, the people were suspicious at first and the situation only relaxed after Dick and Perry had been arrested, so that was when most of the interviews were conducted. Besides interviewing Holcomb’s residents and respective KBI detectives, Capote also talked to the murderers’ families and other killers in order to gain further insight into the criminal mind. Furthermore, he did not take notes or use a tape recorder during the interviews since he felt that would disturb the atmosphere. For that purpose he trained his memory to a 95% accuracy in recalling conversations. Moreover, Capote tried to keep himself out of the book, i.e. not taking the position of the narrator, and except for small hints he succeeded. Still, his point of view becomes visible through the selection of the presented information.

3.2 Definition and Criticism of Capital Punishment

Capote once said “I feel that capital crimes should all be handled by Federal Courts, and that those convicted should be imprisoned in a special Federal prison where, conceivably, a life sentence could mean, as it does not in state courts, just that” (Plimpton 41). Likewise, he had no respect for the Supreme Court because in his opinion it takes them too long to make decisions and he also criticized the amount of time that passes from the verdict until the actual execution (cf. Grobel 120). While writing *In Cold Blood*, Dick and Perry’s execution was delayed several times, which Capote thought of as exhausting and wrote to a friend “What a country! What a law system!” (Capote Letter to Sandy Campbell 415) that exemplifies his general aversion towards the handling of capital cases in America. Reading Grobel’s interview, one gets closer insight into Capote’s opposition to the death penalty and one learns that he did not think that Dick and Perry deserved to be hanged (cf. Grobel 118). Also, Capote started working against this “institutionalized sadism” (Voss 147). For instance, he interviewed other killers and also collected material for a documentary called *Death Row*, which addressed criticism concerning capital punishment.

Throughout the novel the reader is confronted with different opinions about the death penalty. One of them reads “I believe in capital punishment. It’s like the Bible says – an eye for an eye” (Capote 241), whereas another one supports being locked away and not being allowed to

have visitors for the rest of their lives³. Support for the death penalty is reasoned by protecting the public and its function as deterrence (cf. Capote 249, 333). Further, Dick refers to capital punishment as “‘revenge’” (Capote 328) but does not think there is anything with wanting revenge. Yet, there are also voices opposing this “‘relic of human barbarism’” (Capote 295). For instance, one cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing and that the state has no right to decide over life and death. Capote also includes the opinion of the Clutters’ reverend (cf. 258), who although he was close to the victims does not think that the murderers deserve to die by the hand of the state because it is God’s decision to make. Moreover, it is shown that people are not comfortable participating in the trial. For example, jurors make up excuses why they are not able to fulfill their duty and even Dick’s attorney does not have a good feeling doing his job. Further, Detective Dewey thinks that having them executed would give him a feeling of relief and bring him closure, which as shown at the end of the novel is not the case. Also, the novel’s title can be read as criticism towards the death penalty itself since it might not only refer to the murders of the Clutter family, but also to the “cold-bloodedness of the state of Kansas in taking the lives of the Clutter killers in retribution for their crime” (Voss 122).

3.3 Representation of Perpetrators

3.3.1 Perpetrator as a Human Being

Perry Smith is described as being very small and having tiny feet (cf. Capote 13, 217), which makes him seem like a child and not like a strong or powerful man. Photos of Perry, from when he was in Mexico, are referred to as “remarkable” because of his expression of total serenity (cf. Capote 116). Besides, his eyes are said to be “pretty” and “dreamy” although his face looks arrogant in general. Adding to that, his own face fascinates Perry (cf. Capote 14) and he knows how to create certain looks, e.g. gentle or romantic. However, he is not mainly confident about his appearance and is also ashamed of his legs, which had been badly injured in a motorcycle accident, which becomes obvious when he still wears pants on the beach in order to not offend people (cf. Capote 192). Hence, the image of Perry is rather pitiful and the reader senses his feelings of inferiority.

³ This is different from life without parole during that time in Kansas since perpetrator could get out of prison after some years if they received life without parole.

As opposed to his outward appearance Perry thinks highly of himself character wise as he sees himself as “‘exceptional’, ‘rare’, ‘artistic’” (Capote 43). In spite of being referred to as an “‘uneducated, homicidal half-breed” (Capote 280) and his father having denied him any form of education, he always pays attention to proper grammar and corrects others if they do not. Moreover, Perry is described as being creative, for instance he likes to sing, is able to play various instruments, writes poetry, and draws (cf. Capote 14, 129). Also, he cares about others even if do not care about him. For example, at first he admits to having killed the whole Clutter family by himself so Dick’s parents would not have to wonder what they did wrong to make Dick become a murderer. Another soft side of Perry is that he enjoys being a host when a friend visits him in prison and takes pleasure in planning their evening. This makes him seem very feminine and in no way dangerous. However, if someone shows an honest interest in him, he will be suspicious at first as to what their motives are. For instance, he cannot make sense of Mrs. Meier, the woman who takes care of him while he stays in a court house cell, wanting to make him his favorite dish (cf. Capote 245). Moreover, Mrs. Meier describes him as being shy and talking quietly, which adds to the perception of Perry being no powerful, self-confident man. In addition, his sister says that he can seem “‘warm-hearted and sympathetic” (Capote 175) and is able to evoke pity in others, including the reader. Adding to that, is the fact that Perry is very child-like since he still wets his bed and sucks his thumb. Also, he likes animals as he teaches a squirrel tricks while he is in custody. These points do not make him seem dangerous in any manner. In fact, one begins to think that Perry has a lovable side and wonders how he was able to kill these people. Nonetheless, he is said to have a lot of “‘inward rage” (Capote 104), which he does not tend to show, yet his sister is afraid of him since “‘he has no respect for anyone” (Capote 174) and does neither respect the law nor other people’s rights. Besides, she acknowledges that Perry is above average intelligence yet he does not seem to know right from wrong even if he should (cf. Capote 137). Also, he shows traces of being paranoid when he thinks two men outside his cell are watching him and wanting to help him escape (cf. Capote 256-257). On the other hand, he is described as a nice man, who is ashamed of his mistakes and generally good-hearted (cf. Capote 125). Further, he is sensitive to what others think about him and can be easily hurt. Another point that makes Perry seem more human than monstrous is that he believes in superstitions, such as the number 15 or red hair (cf. Capote 40). Moreover, he has “‘no respect for people who can’t control themselves sexually” (Capote 195), referring to children and rape, which also makes him appear rather “normal” and not different from the average person.

Furthermore, Perry seems desperate for friendship and feels as if Willie-Jay, a former cell mate, is his “real and only friend” (Capote 40). Yet, he also wants Dick to be his friend and to be respected by him because Dick seems to be everything Perry is not: masculine and self-confident. In order to achieve that he wants to impress Dick by telling a lie that he once killed a colored man for no apparent reason, which makes him seem like a “natural killer” (Capote 53) with no conscience to Dick. Nevertheless, Dick thinks Perry is not insane but a good-hearted person. An example that illustrates how much Perry depends on Dick is that he is afraid to leave him and believes that as long as both of them stay together nothing can happen to them. Also, he worries and even panics when Dick is away for too long. Perry’s conclusion is that Dick will betray him, which adds to the perception that Perry does not trust others. The fact that Perry is dependent on Dick to such a great extent stresses his insecurity and vulnerability, letting him become someone the reader can relate to.

Another technique employed by the author to evoke feelings of pity in the readers is to give details about Perry’s miserable childhood. Not only did he have to witness his mother getting beaten by his father, but also he experienced physical violence himself. While staying at an orphanage, he was abused and discriminated against for being Indian by one of the nuns (cf. Capote 128). By including lively details Capote enables the reader to see a vivid picture and feel sorry for what happened to Perry. Also, one starts to wonder how it would have been possible for him to not become crazy since his parents never cared for him and he never experienced love or moral values. Likewise, his father took it out on him when he was feeling discontent and also insulted him for being “greedy” and “selfish” (Capote 132). The most shocking incident is when his father tries to shoot him (ibid). How then could Perry have turned into a “normal” man, who knows not to act on impulsive feelings and the difference between right and wrong if no one ever showed him? Already during his childhood, he became a “wild thing, a thief, a robber” (Capote 178) and on his eight birthday he was arrested for the first time. Yet, the picture of being a bad kid is reversed by telling that Perry already thought about killing himself as a child (cf. Capote 195), which again evokes feelings of pity and concern for a man who has murdered innocent people. However, he created a sort of imaginary savior in his mind; a yellow bird that takes him to a better place and brings him peace. It is not uncommon for children to imagine someone or something that helps them to cope with difficult situations. This point does contribute to Perry appearing human and the fact that he still thinks a lot about the yellow bird as an adult only shows that he still acts child-like indeed.

By all means, killing people does not make Perry seem like a child. Still, Capote manages to show Perry's troubled and caring character. For instance, after the killings Perry is worried that they will get caught and does not believe it is possible to get away with it. Also, he starts to think about that there has to be something wrong with them to have done such a thing (cf. Capote 104). However, he thinks it is not his fault and blames it on his family issues, which are explained by Capote one more time to create a sense of understanding and justification for Perry's actions as far as this is possible. Perry knows that what he did is unforgivable, yet he does not feel regret, which makes him wonder if he is human at all (cf. Capote 282). To show that he in fact is Capote points out several instances during the murders that emphasize Perry's human side. Before Perry and Dick enter the house, Perry is scared and does not want to do it. Being convinced by Dick he then "hoped [they] could do it without violence" (Capote 227) and later says: "I didn't want to harm the man. I thought he was a very nice gentleman" (Capote 237). In order to have no need to get rid of witnesses, Perry had tried to convince Dick to wear stockings over their heads to not be recognized. Later, when they are inside in Clutter's home he tells Dick not to beat Kenyon and further protects Nancy from Dick because he fears that Dick might have the intention to rape her. Moreover, he tries to make it comfortable for the victims. Mr. Clutter told them about his wife being invalid, which is why Perry gets a chair for her to sit down. In addition, he does not want Mr. Clutter or Kenyon to lie on the cold floor and puts them on a mattress or a couch and also asks them if the rope around their hands is too tight (cf. Capote 234-235). This shows that he really did care for them and did not plan on hurting him. Yet, when he did he still wanted them to feel as little pain as possible as Mr. Clutter did not die instantly after his throat was cut so Perry also shot him to save him from any further suffering. Perry says it felt like he was not himself and in a dream-like state, which resulted in him not realizing what he was doing until it was too late (cf. Capote 234). Further, it is hard for him to understand his own actions and he tries to make sense of it by blaming it on his miserable life as he states "'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 282). Because the reader knows a lot about Perry's background it is more difficult to hold him responsible for his actions.

Even though Capote includes signs of Perry being a reckless and impulsive killer, he always tries to balance them with positive aspects or explanations to why Perry turned into that kind of person. The reader is introduced to a rather contradicting picture of Perry as there are positive

voices about him, such as his father, Mrs. Meier, and Joe James, who took care of him after his motorcycle accident, as well as the fairly negative description by his sister. Yet, Capote tries to make Perry appear as not responsible for his own actions by referring to his terrible childhood several times and also using different sources accounting for that, i.e. his father, his sister, Perry's own account. He even includes details of how Perry was abused and what he had to endure as a child to make the reader feel sorry for him. Moreover, Perry is presented as craving respect and education, although he received neither. Furthermore, Capote also talks about Perry's human and child-like character and shows features "normal" people can also relate to and makes the reader wonder what kind of person Perry would have become if his life had started in a different way and he would have grown up in a loving home, going to school, and being taught moral values. All in all, Perry seems more like a misunderstood and mistreated child than a monster.

3.3.2 Perpetrator as a Monster

Dick is described to be of average height and skinny instead of looking muscular and strong (cf. Capote 28). His face is said to be "composed of mismatching parts" (ibid), which is due to a car accident, and his eyes look mean. The only positive physical feature is his beautiful smile, which helps him to look like a typical American good-kid. Concerning his character Dick as opposed to Perry seems "tough, invulnerable, [and] 'totally masculine'" (Capote 15), which makes him seem more capable of committing reckless acts than Perry. However, as Perry later acknowledges he is only the tough guy in situations where he is superior to others (cf. Capote 187). By others he is described as a "clean, polite, nice voice, good diction, a pretty decent-looking fellow" (Capote 209) one could have a good time with. Moreover, Dick cares for his family as he is worried what will happen to them after the murders and is ashamed that he hurt them again. Yet, he only feels bad for his actions when it is already too late and he does not think about his parents before the crime. All his life he experienced a loving family life, a family who cared for him and protected him from being arrested many times more than he actually had been. Besides, Dick had a family of his own since he had been married twice and was the father of two children. Back in high school he was a good student and successful athlete, who even received several scholarships. He used to be a good boy which is why his parents blame the killings on Perry. Also, all these aspects make him appear less sympathetic than Perry, which makes it easier to see Dick as a murderer. However, after a car accident in 1950 Dick's personality changed for the worse. He began spending money he did not have. In order to make more money, Dick gambles and writes

invalid checks, which already suggests Dick has a manipulative character and hence he appears unlikeable. As a result of Dick being a “smooth talker” and good performer (Capote 160), who can easily convince people he is successful and receives money easily. He mostly spends his money on alcohol and women, which does not change when he is with Perry. To be successful with the ladies is important to him and he uses every occasion to receive their attention, for instance when he is at the beach with Perry and starts to do some tricks to impress women (cf. Capote 192). Moreover, his dad says that after Dick came home from prison for the first time in his mind the whole world had turned against him (cf. Capote 158). Likewise, he thinks other people are dumb and not as smart as him. Moreover, Dick is obviously drawn to danger and reckless behavior as he drives without headlights at night. Also, he shows a violence behavior because he randomly runs over dogs and enjoys it. Yet, he thinks of himself as a sane, balanced person (cf. Capote 104). To be regarded as normal seems to be important to him as he tries to convince himself that it is also normal for adult men to find young girls sexually attractive and to seduce them. Further, Dick is described as having no understanding for art and as being shallow (cf. Capote 14, 42, 251). In addition, he finds it hard to trust people and cannot accept failure, which is why after discovering that the Clutters do not have a safe he still carries out the initial plan and after being arrested he has the desire to change his fate.

As to the killings, he is convinced that he has the perfect plan and pays attention to details while planning the robbery, such as how much tape and rope would be needed and arranging alibis. Also, he is sure that no one will be able to trace anything back to him or Perry, which is also why he insists on not leaving any witnesses. A former fellow inmate confirms “‘he told me he would probably tie them up and then rob them and then kill them’” (Capote 274) hinting that the intention to kill the Clutters was already present from the beginning on. However, Dick says that he only went in that house to “bust that little girl” (Capote 236). In order to get Nancy’s attention, Dick lies to her and tells her that he has had a terrible childhood and stayed at an orphanage, which shows that Dick does not greatly value being truthful to others. When Mr. Clutter tells him he does not own a safe, Dick’s mistrusting character comes to light and he starts yelling at him and Perry later reveals he thought “Dick was ready to smash him” (Capote 231). Moreover, it becomes clear that Dick wants to be obeyed, which is why he starts hitting Kenyon when he refuses to move. Also, this shows that he becomes violent and loses his temper easily. After the arrest, he tries to

deny all guilt and blame it on Perry since he “‘wouldn’t harm the fleas on a dog’” (Capote 226), which as the reader has come to know is another lie.

Capote presents Dick as having had a rather normal life and being a good boy. One wonders what happened that Dick would commit such an act. However, the reader is no more than curious and does not feel sorry for him. Additionally, there is a great focus on Dick’s negative traits and rarely is there anything positive mentioned to balance this out which results in creating a bad image of him. The only positive account about him comes from his father, everything else mentioned by other people, like his neighbor, is negative and makes Dick appear like someone you should stay away from. Running over dogs, seducing and raping young girls does make him seem evil and dangerous. One learns that Dick acts impulsive, for example the stealing or going back to Kansas to rob the Clutters was rather impulsive since he needed money again, which adds to him being a person to be careful and alerted around. Another point why the reader is unable to feel sympathy for Dick is that he is not bothered by the killings, meaning that after it happened he does not worry about anything and does not feel bad for what he did. Also, he seems to be very convinced of himself. All in all, the reader gets to know Dick as a bad person, the monster behind the killings, and thus does not feel sorry for him in any way.

3.4 Use of Power

3.4.1 Capote’s Preference for Perry

It becomes obvious that Capote had a closer relationship to Perry than to Dick. He succeeds in letting the reader feel sympathetic for Perry and in creating a more positive image of him than of Dick. For instance, one night it is raining and both of them are running outside but due to Perry’s small legs he is slower than Dick. Besides, he has to carry a heavy suitcase and does not get any help from Dick, which on the one hand makes Dick appear as not being helpful and on the other hand one feels sorry for Perry for getting soaked. The argument that Dick is not helpful is picked up again when both see hitchhikers along the road and Perry has to convince Dick to give them a ride. When one of the hitchhikers is starting to get sick, Dick wants to leave them on the side of the road again, whereas “little old big-hearted Perry” (Capote 200) is worried what might happen to him and again convinces Dick to let them stay. It is expressions like this that emphasize the friendly side of Perry and Dick does not receive positive illustrations like that from Capote throughout the novel. Adding to that, is the fact that both of them have not eaten a proper meal in

a while but it is only reported that Perry is “starved” (Capote 181) and no attention is given to how Dick feels. Other examples include wondering how Perry got into his material situation because “it [was] incredible [that] a person of his intelligence, his talents?” (Capote 186) could not be successful and the fact that both men are stealing repeatedly but it is said that Dick does it impulsively and Perry only when he really needs to (cf. Capote 281). Hence, Capote tries to justify Perry’s behavior, whereas he judges Dick for doing the same thing.

Moreover, the reader gets to know Perry on a more personal level since Capote shares some of his diary entries. Additionally, it is described how he spends his time after the arrest, i.e. teaching a squirrel tricks and keeping his cell clean. The fact that Perry connects with animals makes him appear less threatening. Also, Perry has no visitors and no cell mates around him as opposed to Dick, who is visited by his parents and has people to talk to. Thus, one feels sorry for Perry because he has to cope with the situation all by himself (cf. Capote 251, 253, 313). After the verdict, it is said that Perry is crying like child in his cell and for the first time he reaches out to Mrs. Meier to hold her hand. Also, he does not eat or speak. This shows that Perry is truly scared of what will happen to him and adds to the perception of him being child-like rather than dangerous. Furthermore, “a notion that he ‘might not be normal, maybe insane had troubled him” (Capote 257) whereas Dick still thinks he is a normal person. It is also explained why Perry could not have become a man, who knows moral values. His terrible childhood is described in great detail while concerning Dick there is not much said other than he has always had a loving family and was a good kid. By including many details of the abuse that Perry had to endure as a child, e.g. the physical abuse within the family or in the detention homes (cf. Capote 239, 265, 267), Capote manages to create uneasy atmosphere where the reader cannot help himself but feel pity for Perry.

Further, Capote labels the killings a “psychological accident” (239) with regard to Perry. Also, it is interesting that it is Perry’s point of view from which the murders are told. The only other details the reader receives come from the police but there is no statement from Dick. Hence, the reader is exposed to a limited point of view and believes that the things happened the way Perry tells them. Thus, one gets the impression that Perry cares for the victims by protecting Nancy from getting raped and making it comfortable for Mr. Clutter and Kenyon, whereas Dick seems to be the one pulling the strings and stressing that there must not be any witnesses left. Further, after referring to the article “Murder Without Apparent Motive” only Perry is said to fit into the category

of legally insane men and the crime seen from his perspective is also explained in those terms but Dick is not included. Thus, there is a clear focus set on Perry, which is trying to justify his crime.

In addition, accounts by others referring to Dick are not positive except for the one by his dad. However, Perry is described as not “the worst young man I ever saw” (Capote 245) by Mrs. Meier and he “possessed a quality, the aura of an exiled animal, a creature walking wounded” (Capote 333). Hence, one does not think too badly about him oneself and rather concentrates on the terrible things that had happened to him throughout his life. Also, one of his friends writes to him “because God made you as well as me and He loves you just as He loves me, and for the little we know of God’s will what has happened to you could have happened to me” (Capote 253). This emphasizes that Perry is human, not different from anyone else and still no matter what he did, forgiven and loved by God.

The focus of the novel clearly lies on Perry. Not only are there more details included about his life but also, as already mentioned, the emotional part of the novel is told from his point of view and hence a biased picture is created. Additionally, Capote tries to balance Perry’s negative aspects with his caring and pitiful character, whereas Dick is portrayed as being undiscerning and dangerous.

3.4.2 *In Cold Blood* as Freeing Dick and Perry

One thing Capote does with this novel is that he gives the perpetrators a voice, a chance to tell their story and to explain themselves in a way that was not possible at during their hearing. Also, it becomes clear that Capote is of the opinion that both did not have a fair trial and as a result he gives an alternative solution within his own justice system. Hence, *In Cold Blood* can be regarded as freeing Dick and Perry.

During the trial, it is proposed that the state hospital in Larned, Kansas examines both perpetrators to rule out insanity. However, this proposal is opposed by the prosecutor because he fears that having psychiatrists talk to a jury might evoke feelings of sympathy for Dick and Perry (cf. Capote 258). He is of the opinion that this is something an ordinary doctor can take care of as well since “it’s no great job to find whether a man is insane or an idiot or an imbecile” (Capote 259) and any other option would be wasted effort. Counsel Smith is the only person that raises awareness that there are two more lives at stake and they should be considering every possibility to preserve those lives. In the end, the court works with local doctors, who cannot find any traces

of mental illness regarding Dick and Perry. Yet, Dick's attorney succeeds in getting Dr. Jones from Larned to examine both free of charge. When he testifies in court he is only asked whether the perpetrators knew right from wrong at the time they committed the crime. As to Dick his answer is "Yes." (Capote 285), whereas he has no opinion on Perry (cf. Capote 288). In both cases he was willing to explain his findings, but the M'Naughten Rule, which says that "the defendant will be found not guilty by reason of insanity if he or she can show a mental disease or mental defect rendered him incapable of understanding the nature of his or her action, or of distinguishing between right and wrong regarding the crime with which he or she has been charged" (*Wex Legal Encyclopedia*), only requires a yes or no answer.

However, Capote does include the doctor's opinion in the novel and hence creates a different picture than what the trial produced. By doing so he offers the reader further insight into the perpetrators' personalities and shows what kind of important information was denied during the trial, which might have resulted in a different verdict if the material had been permitted. Referring to Dick Dr. Jones says that "organic brain damage [which resulted from his car accident] cannot be completely ruled out" (Capote 286) and that only after the accident he began to show signs of anti-social behavior. Although Dick has moral values and knew what he was doing, he still carried out the plan and acted upon his impulses, which hints on "emotional abnormality" (ibid). Moreover, he easily loses his temper when confronted with frustration and does not seem to learn from experiences. All in all, Dick shows "typical characteristics of (...) a severe character disorder" (Capote 287). Perry on the other hand has "definite signs of severe mental illness" (Capote 288). It is explained that he grew up without rules or moral values and never experienced love or being cared for, which emphasizes Capote's opinion that Perry never had a chance to turn out "normal". Moreover, he has a "'paranoid' orientation towards the world" (Capote 289) which makes him suspicious to what people's motives are and aids his trust issues along with his belief that people usually are hostile. Further, he is overly sensitive to criticism and easily misinterprets statements, which can result in a belief that people often make fun of him or even discriminate against him. Still, friendship and being understood are of great value to him, which is why Dick is so important to him while human life in general is not. Furthermore, it is difficult for Perry to separate what is really happening from "his own mental projections" (ibid) and to control rage when he feels inferior or pushed into a corner. If all that information or at least part of it had been permitted during the hearing, the jury might have had a different picture of the murderers, especially with regard to

Perry since he is portrayed as a helpless victim of his past, who cannot be held responsible for his own actions. Hence, the reader begins to question the fairness of the trial just like Capote intended.

To strengthen this thought, Capote also includes an article by Dr. Satten called “Murder Without Apparent Motive” (290-294). The article states that perpetrators may generally seem controlled and balanced although their acts do not have a rational motive, which classifies them as insane, according to his own definition that their motives are senseless and delusions can be involved. Due to difficulties of controlling themselves and earlier traumatic events, the individuals are capable of committing purely violent acts (cf. Capote 291). The men mentioned in the article did not know why they killed their victims and found themselves in a dream-like state, not realizing what they were doing until it was too late. Also, they did not feel rage when it happened and afterwards feelings of “guilt, depression, and remorse were strikingly absent” (Capote 293). Moreover, it is explained that these men experienced violence throughout their lives, “severe emotional deprivation in early life” (Capote 292) and usually feel inferior to others. All of those characteristics apply to Perry and it is easy for the reader to establish that connection since Capote repeatedly referred to Perry’s personal background and feelings earlier in the book. What happens before the killing is that the victim turns into a substitute of a key-figure to these traumatic experiences and the perpetrators’ anger and rage is projected against them. The article’s summary first explains the theory behind the hypothesis and also gives several examples of perpetrators, so that Capote’s readers are able to connect it to Perry while reading it. Yet, to be certain that connection is established Capote himself categorizes Perry among these men and links his life to the theoretical background of the article. Moreover, it is said that at the time of the murders Perry was “under a mental eclipse, deep inside a schizophrenic darkness” (Capote 294), i.e. the dream-like state Dr. Satten was referring to, and the Clutters could have been substitutes for many people in Perry’s life, e.g. his father, nuns. Hence, the reader is offered a number of possible parallels between Dr. Satten’s article and Perry’s personality, which leads them into considering Perry as mentally deranged and reviewing the verdict critically. Apart from the article, Capote also includes the example of Lowell Lee Andrews (304-309), who could be considered insane but received the death penalty as well. By including another example, Capote strengthens his argument that the Kansas justice system does not operate fairly. Since he does not only limit the issue of insanity defense to the particular case of Dick and Perry, one gets the impression that in fact there might be something wrong with the system in general, which adds further weight to Capote’s stance.

Moreover, Capote also views the trial as generally unfair. One example is that the auction of the Clutters' estate was set one day before the beginning of the trial, which brings back the memory of the deceased and promotes prejudices regarding the perpetrators. Further, four jury members knew the Clutters personally and hence can be regarded as biased. Capote also displays an example of prejudice within the group which adds to that point (cf. 265). Moreover, not only some of the jurors, but also the judge himself was slightly acquainted with the family. Further, the judge allows the display of crime scene pictures during the trial because he thinks it is necessary evidence, whereas Dick's lawyer states that "the sole reason the pictures are being introduced is to prejudice and inflame the minds of the jurors" (Capote 272). Thus, the reader gets the impression that the initial situation is already unfortunate for the defendants and the people in charge clearly act in favor of the Clutters, in spite of maintaining a neutral position. Adding to that, a reporter from Oklahoma declares the trial as unfair and that Dick and Perry never had a chance to begin with (cf. Capote 298). Also, whenever there are positive statements made about the perpetrators the court is quick to silence those. Later on, Dick himself fights for a fair trial considering the biased jury and the "hostile atmosphere" (Capote 318). Furthermore, he declares both defense lawyers as incompetent, which is confirmed by investigating attorney Shultz later on. Shultz concludes that "Fleming and Smith had deliberately neglected their duties, (...) betrayed their clients by not consulting with them sufficiently, (...) by waiving a preliminary hearing, (...) by making remarks to newsmen damaging to the defendants, [and] by failing to prepare a proper defence" (Capote 321-322). All in all, three execution dates could be avoided but the verdict remained the same after all.

By criticizing the way the trial was conducted in general and by addressing the failure of justice within Kansas law, Capote succeeds in making the reader believe that the trial was merely unfair and that Dick and Perry were refused any chance of surviving. Capote's argument is strengthened by including Dr. Jones' professional explanation to why both men could be regarded as mentally ill and by referring to Dr. Satten's article. Hence, Capote offers an alternative solution to what the court recommended. One that would have saved two more lives. By choosing this way of presenting, it seems as if Capote himself is of the opinion that Dick and Perry did not have a fair trial and he functions as an alternative legal figure to give them another chance to change the picture created by the court. Thus, the reader is strongly influenced to believe that Dick and Perry would have deserved a fairer trial or even a different verdict, saving them from the gallows. Hence, *In*

Cold Blood can be seen as freeing both perpetrators since public opinion, referring to the readers', was changed for the better or at least challenged.

3.4.3 *In Cold Blood* as Using Dick and Perry

Capote puts Dick and Perry in the center of attention throughout the novel and as Hickman argues his "panoptic configuration of the novel assures that the characters (...) are never exempt from the scrutiny of the narrator, and as a result are readily available to the reader's gaze as well" (466). As a result, *In Cold Blood* does not only free the perpetrators, but seemingly places them back under the surveillance of a prison guard and hence controls them. Whenever the third person narrator is used this panoptic vision becomes visible since the narrator is omniscient and seems to know more than the characters themselves. A good example for Capote's panopticon from the novel is the description of the early period after the murderers' arrest (cf. Halfmann 79). Dick and Perry stay in separate cells and have no way of communicating with each other. During that time, Capote functions as a supervisor since he knows what each of them is doing and thinking and shares his insights with the reader. Likewise, he also shares some of Dick and Perry's most intimate thoughts and feelings, which assures that they remain in the center of attention throughout the novel. For instance, Capote includes some of Perry's diary entries (cf. 246, 249, 250) and letters sent to him (cf. 134-138, 252-253). Moreover, he tells the reader about Perry's vision of the yellow bird, Perry's savior, and also about his reaction after the verdict when he is at Mrs. Meier's (cf. 300). Also, he includes pieces of information Dick sends to his mother and lets the reader know what Dick and Perry think about each other in the course of the novel. Capote has immense insight into the murderers' lives along with their emotional states and makes use of that. By doing so he reinstates the characters' imprisonment and their subordinate position.

The power relation between the author and the perpetrators also becomes obvious when one takes a look at letters written and interviews given by Capote. In an interview with Lawrence Grobel, Capote states: "I (...) not only knew the people I was writing about, I've known them better than I've known anybody" (113). However, Capote acknowledged that he knew a lot about Perry, whereas Perry knew only little about him, which puts himself in a superior position. To become close to them Capote sent them books and magazines and also wrote each of them twice a week (cf. Plimpton 40). As to emotional involvement, Capote said that he kept his distance and simply had an understanding for them (cf. Grobel 118), which was different for Perry as will be shown

later on. Another instance that illustrates that Capote had the upper hand in their relationship is that the murderers only got to see a very small parts of the book. Even though they were its main focus and worried about their representation, Capote would not let them read many passages. In addition, Capote said “I had a perfect control-agent” (Plimpton 34), meaning that Dick and Perry had no chance to be dishonest to him without him finding out. Since they were separated during the first period following their arrest, Capote could crosscheck the details given by them. Hence, it was possible for the author to lie to the perpetrators but that did not prove itself true vice versa. Moreover, Capote shared information during an interview I do not believe was his share. I am referring to telling that the murderers enjoyed killing the Clutters and that they had also planned two other murders, which were not included in the novel (cf. Plimpton 35). Again, this reveals that Capote had the upper hand. Furthermore, in one of his letters he ridicules Dick by referring to his letter to the Supreme Court: “really, it is too absurd. I especially liked his complaining that the sentence was unconstitutional because it meant ‘deprivation of life’” (Capote Letter to Alvin and Marie Dewey). But then again, Capote wanted to be at the murderers’ farewells but permission was denied, hence he thought about convincing Dick to designate him as a witness (Capote Letter to Alvin Dewey) and thus taking advantage of him again. Also, the killers thought that Capote might help them with the appeal or even support them financially, which he did not because he needed them to be executed for a powerful ending. Hence, he committed “exploitive betrayal” (Voss 125). Eventually, Capote succeeded in collecting “wonderful material, and lots of it” (Clarke 331) and became not only excited about the novel, but obsessed with it (cf. Clarke 336). Yet, the process of writing the novel was also accompanied by exhaustion, depression, and anxiety since Dick and Perry needed to be executed before he was able to complete it. There were several delays in executing the murderers and because he was anticipating the end to such a great extent Capote feared “‘if they should get it (a new trial) I will have a complete breakdown of some sort’” (Clarke 349). He also said “‘I hardly give a fuck anymore *what* happens’” (Clarke 352) at one point, which shows that he does not care if the perpetrators live or die and he is ready to sacrifice them for his own success. I am not saying that Capote was not touched by their deaths but he clearly focused on his novel and becoming a successful author. As a result, he thought it was acceptable for him to use Dick and Perry.

The murderers on the other hand had different feelings towards Capote, especially Perry. At first, Perry did not trust Capote and hardly communicated with him because he was unsure if he

was not simply being taken advantage of. Yet, over the course of time that changed and during the last five years of his life he “could not have been more complete and candid” (Plimpton 33) and felt close to the author. Perry was “fascinated by him” (Clarke 327) and cared for him as he told him to be careful, e.g. while driving. Moreover, he often complimented Capote, telling him “I like talented personalities very much and I feel that you are a very perspicacious homo sapien.” (Clarke 344). Before his execution, Perry told Capote he loved him and was thankful for his friendship. Also, he kissed him on the cheek, wrote him a 100-page letter, and left him everything he owned. Which shows that he was feeling very close to the author and cherished their relationship, whereas Capote planned on burning Perry’s belongings since the book was all that mattered (cf. Plimpton 42). This instance exemplifies the different perceptions of their relationship best because it shows that Perry was feeling deeply connected to Capote, whereas the author only focused on his novel and did not value Perry’s personal belongings. Further, Perry was jealous of Dick and always wanted to know what Capote wrote to him. Dick as opposed to Perry did not need long to open up to the author since he was “like someone you meet on a train” (Plimpton 33) and “only too obliged to tell you everything” (ibid). During the years, Capote became the focus of the murderers’ lives, which becomes especially clear when one thinks about that he was also the last person to speak to them before the execution. This shows that the author became an important part of their lives and someone they felt they could confide in.

As this chapter has shown, *In Cold Blood* does not only function as freeing Dick and Perry but also as an instrument to keep them imprisoned and to take advantage of their situation. Capote deliberately places them in the center of attention throughout the novel and never leaves them out of sight for too long. This gaze has the result of them being under constant surveillance, unable to escape. Moreover, it becomes clear that Capote was the one in charge and succeeded in getting Dick and Perry to share their most intimate thoughts and feelings with him, while remaining distant himself. He solely focused on writing a bestseller, whereas the murderers came to see him as a friend. Hence, Capote made use of his power in two different ways – freeing them, while keeping them imprisoned. Moreover, Capote does not reveal himself in the novel. Thus, he does not acknowledge his own responsibility concerning the handling of power but rather pushes it away.

4. Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby*

4.1 Summary and Background

Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Lullaby*, which was published in 2001, deals with the story of Carl Streater. He is a journalist and has to investigate a series of infant deaths. Soon, he discovers that the connection between the sudden deaths is a poem in a book called *Poems and Rhymes around the World*. The poem is actually a lullaby but when it is recited, out loud or in one's thoughts, it kills people, including Carl's own family as the reader finds out in the course of the novel. He memorizes the poem and starts to kill people randomly. Yet, Helen Hoover Boyle, a realtor, knows about the poem's power as well and when Carl finds out he wants her to help him control his power, however they remain unsuccessful. Still, they decide to go on a mission to destroy the existing copies of the poem and are joined by Mona, Helen's assistant, and Oyster, Mona's boyfriend. Driving across the country, they also hope to find the grimoire, which is the original source of the culling song and other powerful spells. As it turns out, Helen's day planner is the desired item. When the group discusses what to do with it, Carl is the only one who thinks they should destroy it. Later, Mona and Oyster steal the book and are in the possession of every spell it contains except for the culling song. Meanwhile, Carl has been arrested being suspected of several murders and wants to plead guilty to cleanse himself from sin. However, Helen has knowledge of an occupation spell and uses it on a police officer to save Carl from his fate. Both of them depart for a new mission, namely to find Mona and Oyster, who are travelling through the country and create spectacles using all kinds of spells from the grimoire.

The background to the novel is the following. In 1999, Fred Palahniuk, father of Chuck Palahniuk, dated Donna Fontaine, whose ex-husband Dale Shackleford was in jail for sexual abuse and had threatened to kill her as soon as he was released from prison. Shortly after his release, he followed the couple home from a date and shot Fred Palahniuk in the abdomen and his ex-wife in the back of her neck. Later, he tried to set the apartment on fire to destroy the evidence. When he was found responsible for the murder, Chuck Palahniuk had to write a victim's rights statement and thus participating in the decision if Shackleford should receive the death penalty. During that time, he also started writing *Lullaby* to cope with this experience.

He came to the conclusion that Shackleford "has caused so much misery for so many people that [the death penalty] is perhaps the only form of redemption he has left" (Palahniuk 2002) and

further decided that he wanted to witness the execution⁴. During the process of reaching a decision, he talked to several different people. One of them being Buddhist and believing that a life requires death of other things, such as animals or plants, and that a person who has committed such a crime should no longer be able to take away the life of anyone or anything (cf. Palahniuk “Freak Speak”). Moreover, another friend told him that “the only way to bring the criminal back into humanity is to capture and punish him. His punishment becomes his redemption. It's an act of kindness” (Palahniuk “Freak Speak”). Both of these opinions are included in *Lullaby*. Since the novel served as a coping mechanism for Palahniuk, the culling song will be interpreted as a form of death penalty in the following chapters.

4.2 Definition and Criticism of Capital Punishment

As stated above, I will interpret the lullaby in the sense of the death penalty. On page 36 of *Lullaby*, it is described in the following way: “The book calls it a culling song. In some ancient cultures, they sang it to children during famines or droughts, anytime the tribe had outgrown its land. You sing it to warriors crippled in battle and people stricken with disease, anyone you hope will die soon. To end their pain. It’s a lullaby.” By calling it a lullaby, the poem receives a sense of innocence. Moreover, it seems as if it helps people, ends their suffering, and gives them peace. Hence, the first description of the poem is fairly positive. Further, what becomes clear is that the culling song has already existed for a long period of time and has been used not only by different groups of people, but also at different occasions. This thought can also be applied to the death penalty since it has been applied by various cultures and for diverse reasons as well.

Furthermore, it is said that if the intention of the person reciting the poem is strong enough they can kill the other person no matter where they are. This hints how powerful the poem can be, or how easily a jury could condemn someone to death if they were convinced of his guilt and thought that there was no other suitable punishment for his crime. If they want someone to pay for what they did, the jury will be able to achieve the favored outcome. Yet, a well-adjusted person would have to say the culling song out loud and it would be harder for those people to make the spell work (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 77). Thus, this characteristic shows that a “normal” person would have difficulties to vote for the death sentence and it conveys the message that there has to be something wrong with capital punishment in general. Adding to that, Carl is also concerned with

⁴ In 2011, Shackleford’s sentence was transmuted to a life sentence.

the consequences of the poem. He says: “Sticks and stones will break your bones, but now words can kill, too” (Palahniuk 2003, 41). This can be interpreted in terms of the jury declaring their verdict because they indeed *say* that the defendant is guilty and deserves to be punished to death. Moreover, Carl fears that if the poem becomes known to the public, there might be people who will create improved versions of it. This example can be referred back to the evolution of methods of capital punishment. At first, people were shot or hanged but now there are the electric chair and lethal injection. Both of these methods have made the process of killing another human being easier. If it becomes easier to make the call, does one think about it as much as one would have before it seemed like a painless, quick death? In addition, Carl admits that it only takes him a moment to kill someone (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 36). Moreover, Carl makes the following statement: “Here’s the power of life and cold clean bloodless easy death, available to anyone. To everyone. An instant, bloodless, Hollywood death” (Palahniuk 2003, 40). This again can be referred back to the evolving methods of capital punishment. He says that anyone could do it. It takes less courage and personal effort to release the fluids that will eventually kill the criminal than to pull the trigger of a gun, for example, since you do not feel as responsible for killing that person because you only triggered the process indirectly by releasing the deadly chemicals. He says it is “instant, bloodless” (ibid), and Hollywood like, meaning that it has lost its horrifying character (at least to some extent) and it is almost glorified. The reference to Hollywood could also mean that the public envies the condemned for their easy death just like it envies Hollywood celebrities. Also, it is often thought that the convicts have an easier death than their victims, which makes it unfair in terms of retribution.

Yet, Carl’s reaction to reading the poem is that his “face feels livid and hot with oxygenated hemoglobin” (Palahniuk 2003, 36), which shows that reciting the poem or participating in capital cases has an impact on everyone involved. Also, the approach to destroying the culling song is doubted as well seeing that the question “killing people to save lives?” (Palahniuk 2003, 160) is raised. The reader gets the impression that using the poem, thus killing people, in order to obtain copies of it so that one may save humanity from it is not the right way. To refer this back to capital punishment, one could say that the government should set an example and it does not teach that killing is wrong by killing on its own behalf. There has to be another way to make people understand that taking another human life is not right. The characters’ strategy to rid the world from culling is called “constructive destruction. (...) Condemning one innocent man so millions

don't die" (Palahniuk 2003, 173). I think this can be seen as critique to the argument that capital punishment serves as deterrence. As there always remains the possibility of executing an innocent person and it is questionable that this is worth the cause. "Constructive destruction" can be seen as a metaphor for deterrence itself: the government destroys a human life in order to foster the idea that killing is wrong and keeping others from committing such crimes. However, as mentioned earlier this method is not acceptable.

Hence, *Lullaby* can be seen as criticizing the death penalty throughout the story. It is argued that the methods used to put someone to death nowadays are too easy, almost like putting someone to sleep. Thus, one might not really consider the consequences of death sentences. Also, it is questioned if capital punishment is the right approach to teach society that killing is wrong because the state does make use of it itself and in this manner becomes hypocritical and loses its function as a role model.

4.3 Representation of the Perpetrator

4.3.1 Perpetrator as a Murderer

Since Carl uses the poem himself, he can be regarded as a murderer. The first homicide happens out of curiosity when he initially discovers the relation between the crib deaths and the lullaby. Telling his editor to "try a little experiment" (Palahniuk 2003, 36) he recites the poem. Three days later, Duncan still does not show up at work so Carl figures that the poem did its magic. Shortly after, he begins to think about when to use the song again (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 58), which is similar to serial killers who just committed their first murder. Even though he says he would not utilize it for personal issues, he does not eliminate the possibility of simply using it again, which shows that he is already showing signs of malicious intent. Back at his apartment, he recites the poem without even thinking about it. This time, the poem's power is emphasized by comparing its sound to thunder and calling it "the sound of doom" (Palahniuk 2003, 60). It becomes obvious that making use of it is a harmful act, also it seems that once Carl starts to recite the song it is unstoppable and killing is unavoidable, almost like an automated process. This shows that Carl is not able to control his power anymore. Soon, he uses the lullaby on arbitrary occasions, showing that he slowly loses any moral concerns and acts impulsively just like murderers. One day during his daily commute, he simply kills four people (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 68-69), he considered a

nuisance. Thus, him using of the poem is based on irrational reasons, which is also true for many killers.

Although he does try to control his urges by counting, the impulse is much stronger than his will not to kill and he is not able to stop. To Carl killing becomes like an addiction. This can also be seen when Carl, referring to a serial killer who stated that killing becomes easier the more often you do it and that he was not able to stop, admits: “I have to agree. It does get to be a bad habit” (Palahniuk 2003, 135). By calling it a “bad habit” the seriousness of the act is minimized dramatically. Carl does not realize that he is committing crimes because to him it is more like smoking cigarettes, an addiction. By now, the reader comes to understand that this is an obsession Carl is not able to let go of under the current circumstances. An example for killing becoming easier over time is that at one point in the story, when the group is on the road, Carl recites the poem in his head and kills a radio host (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 132). He is half asleep when it happens, which shows that he does not even need to think about when to use the poem anymore and it is not an effort to do so. Killing has become that easy to him. Also, it does not seem as if he feels remorse for what he has done. Although he knows that he is responsible for people dying around him, he does not experience any feeling of guilt, a characteristic of psychopathy.

However, there are two incidents where he uses the poem in a “good” way. The first one is when Helen and he are in a library wanting to destroy a copy of the book but the librarian does not want to give them information concerning who currently has the book. So, in order to complete their mission Carl sacrifices him (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 150). The second example is when Carl kills Nash in self-defense and to keep him from using the poem for perverted reasons (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 236-37). However, Carl usually tries to justify his actions with absurd reasons for example “his [neighbor’s] stereo was too damn loud” (Palahniuk 2003, 136). He seems completely detached from reality and the ability to understand the consequences his actions involve. Towards the end of the story, Carl sees a picture of him in the newspaper and admits “the man in the photo is so young and innocent. He’s not me” (Palahniuk 2003, 213) indicating that at one point he came to realize that killing is not right. One could also connect this assumption to “the more people die, the more things stay the same” (Palahniuk 2003, 90). This hints that he has to stop killing to change and to save the world.

As this has shown, Carl at least partly comprehends the power the poem holds and still uses it, mostly for absurd reasons. He has evolved into a real killer for whom it seems difficult, if not impossible to control his urges. Also, the killings do not affect him, which makes it easier for him to use the spell and not to second guess his actions. In my opinion, there are evident parallels between Carl and murderers not only because he uses the spell but also due to his way of dealing with the fact that he kills.

4.3.2 Perpetrator as an Opponent of Capital Punishment

As explained in chapter 4.1 the culling song can also be seen as a metaphor for capital punishment and since Carl makes it his mission to free the world from it he can also be regarded as an opponent to the death penalty.

Carl already decides to destroy every copy of the book, which contains the spell, early on in the story, even before he is absolutely sure that the song is the cause for all the crib deaths (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 32). After he first discovers the poem's possible connection to all the deaths and imagines every possible way of its spreading, he understands how dangerous that song could be and what would happen to the world if the wrong person took possession of it. He concludes that anyone could become a target and die the next second. Also, the poem is available to anyone by simply buying or borrowing the book. Hence, anyone and everyone has the power to use it. Has the practice of capital punishment also become available to anyone with the right knowledge? Has it come this far that anyone can be murdered killed by the government? These are questions one asks oneself while reading the novel. Further, Carl explains what kind of security measures would have to be taken if the world knew about the poem (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 41-43). Thus, it becomes evident that Carl is afraid of its distribution and what chaos this could possibly cause. It seems as if the world needs to be protected from arbitrary killing, i.e. capital punishment.

Carl reveals his plan of destroying the poem to Helen and admits that he wants forget it himself. She warns him that he might not be able to, that it might stay in his head forever but he is convinced that he will never use it again. This shows that Carl, in spite of later using the spell himself, generally opposes the power that comes with deciding whether someone lives or dies. Likewise, when he says „sticks and stones may break your bones, but watch out for those damn words“ (Palahniuk 2003, 56), one could read this as the jury's power to condemn someone to death and that they should think about their decision carefully. Moreover, Carl can be seen as a survivor

because he accidentally killed his wife and child by singing them the lullaby twenty years ago (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 84). Thus, he knows what pain the song or the death penalty can inflict on people and wants to save the world so that no one ever has to go through the same as he did. What Carl wants is “damage control” (Palahniuk 2003, 85). He thinks that “the more people die, the more things stay the same” (Palahniuk 2003, 90), hence the poem needs to be destroyed so things can go back to normal, meaning peaceful behavior and not people killing each other. Likewise, one could read this as a critique that too many people are executed. Yet, he admits that it is not an easy task to free the world from culling. Carl thought it would be quick and would not require as much work or as he describes it: “just dropping into libraries, taking a book off the shelf, sitting on a toilet in the library bathroom and cutting out the page. Then, flush” (Palahniuk 2003, 118). However, he has to go to people’s homes and convince them to let him inside, in order to secretly destroy the poem. Thus, it is emphasized that convincing people to abolish capital punishment is difficult and requires patience and hard work.

Moreover, Carl voices the question “why can’t you control the power by just loving people so much you don’t want to kill them” (Palahniuk 2003, 148). A way out of this nightmare surrounding governmental killing or even killing in general might be to turn one’s hatred or fear towards people into love. In order to do so however, people need to let go of their wish for control. By saying that “no one can handle that kind of power” (Palahniuk 2003, 154) it becomes clear that it is not our, the people’s, tasks to decide about life and death. That decision is too powerful for anyone to cope with and this is the exact reason why one comes up with the idea that God is the one who decides that matter because people, including Carl, cannot bear the pressure that comes with such a serious issue. Furthermore, Carl admits that simply people having that kind of power does not make the world a better place (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 155) and that more killing is not the answer to killing. Thus, he thinks that the death penalty does not deter crime or is the right approach to teach society moral values. He is also concerned with going to hell for the abuse of power and wants to prevent that by implicitly warning his group that spells are not a solution. Hence, he represents the opinion of capital punishment being morally unacceptable and that there has to be another way.

To sum up, I think Carl's mission is clear and he is a true opponent of people having too much power, including the power to decide over life and death. One can easily refer his stance to opponents of capital punishment.

4.4 Use of Power

4.4.1 State Owns Death

The question is: Who is legitimized to decide over life and death? God? The state? Individuals? At first, Carl does not act upon his belief that no one should have the kind of power the culling spell holds. When he realizes that he is not able to forget the poem, he says he would not use it for revenge but to do good and starts killing himself. Yet, he is not fully aware of the spell's consequences and its real potential of power at the beginning, as he recites it in the shower and wonders if he just killed the whole building afterwards (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 60-61). Later on, he understands that he "[holds] the power of life and death" (Palahniuk 2003, 175) and tries to justify his killings although he does not seem too concerned with the fact that he is taking lives. What do the other characters think about using the culling spell? Oyster thinks it is a blessing and he would use it for the purpose of population control, whereas Helen chooses political targets. Carl's friend Nash on the other hand makes use of the spell to have sexual intercourse with dead fashion models, which leads Carl to wanting to stop him.

Carl realizes that "the more people die, the more things stay the same" (Palahniuk 2003, 90) and also wants to destroy the grimoire because it holds too great of a power. Yet, it is Mona who finally opens his eyes saying that in order to kill the victim has to be your enemy and with every murder one becomes less human. The only way out is to let the world kill you or kill yourself (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 134). In her opinion the police functions as a savior. Also, Carl becomes to realize that what he does is wrong and is worried about going to hell, which illustrates the thought that he does not have the right to decide who lives and who dies and that he will pay for his sins. Carl begins to think that the only way to gain freedom is to confess and be saved by the police, who would "deliver [him] to God and reunite [him] with humanity" (Palahniuk 2003, 237). Hence, he thinks that he would deserve the death penalty, which is imposed by the state, for his crimes since the only way to become human again is to die as Mona said. During that time, the image of the police as a savior is used more frequently (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 184, 215), which emphasizes the fact that Carl wants to stop killing and give back the ultimate power to the state. Later on, when

Helen wants to rescue him from the police station he does not want to go at first because he thinks he deserves to be punished for what he did and believes the only way to come clean is by confessing and pleading guilty. As Helen points a gun at him he follows her, yet as soon as Helen's body dies⁵ and a police officer⁶ walks in, he begs him to put him behind bars and says he will confess to anything.

Thus, although it takes Carl most of the novel to realize he thinks that the state is the only institution who should have the power to judge if someone lives or dies. He sees salvation only possible by confessing his crimes to the police and turning himself over to the state. Moreover, he actively works against anybody else besides Helen and him to know the poem and when Nash discovers it, he kills him to save others by controlling who holds the power of life and death.

4.4.2 No One Owns Death

Carl describes the death penalty as follows: "governments do it after years of deliberation and by due process, I tell her. It's only after weighty consideration that a criminal is deemed too dangerous to be released. Or to set an example. Or for revenge" (Palahniuk 2003, 148). However, Helen thinks it is about control and dominating others and has nothing to do with justice. Carl comes to realize that no one should have the kind of power to decide about life and death and that no one is able to handle it. While saying that he does not refer the power to anyone in particular which is why one can also read this as opposing the state holding that kind of competence. Moreover, he says that "certain people having magic is not going to make the world a better place" (Palahniuk 2003, 155). "Magic" refers to the culling spell and hence can be seen as a symbol for the death penalty. By deciding certain people should die because of what they did neither is the world going to transform into a peaceful environment nor will all the evil disappear. Further, Carl thinks that as soon as people are given power, no matter how much, they will always want more and it will demoralize them.

Yet, I think the most important scene for strengthening the argument of no one being legitimized to hold the power over life and death is when Helen uses the occupation spell on a police officer (cf. Palahniuk 2003, 241) in order to get Carl out of jail. By doing so, she saves him from receiving the death penalty and grants him a second chance. Thus, it can be said that not even

⁵ Helen is still alive in the body of a police officer but Carl does not know that yet.

⁶ Helen

the state has the right to make that decision. By occupying an individual person in the position of a police officer, Helen shows that even the people within the system, who make the decisions, are only human beings. Hence, they will make mistakes at one point but also they are not capable of handling that kind of power. Again, her saving him does not mean that what he did was right but it shows that neither individual people nor the state should kill. It is not legal for anybody.

Thus, *Lullaby* can also be seen as opposing state authority when it comes to capital punishment. If one reads between the lines criticism becomes obvious.

5. Conclusion

Capital punishment has always been a controversial issue and this will not change as long as it is still in use. It seems as if everyone knows what to think about it, as if everyone made up their mind and has a clear opinion to whether the death penalty is morally and legally acceptable. As a result, it can appear like deciding between black and white, either you support or you oppose capital punishment. *Who Owns Death?* Illustrates that point of view quite well. The authors show how different people affected by the death penalty cope with the situation. Moreover, it is included what these people think about the issue in general and how they feel towards the perpetrators. Although the reader is presented a broad perspective, it becomes obvious that *Who Owns Death?* only demonstrates clear-cut opinions. Hence, it encourages the notion that every person has a definite viewpoint regarding capital punishment.

However, I am not so sure what to think about it myself and I feel it is a very complex issue. Thus, it might not be possible to make up your mind and simply decide between yes and no. There are various factors to take into consideration when thinking about the death penalty: the perpetrator's background, their mental health, factual circumstances, the legal system in general and if the law is applied in a fair and uniform way, but most importantly who has the right to decide over life and death. As this thesis has shown, I am not the only one who is torn in the middle.

In Cold Blood without any doubt differentiates the perpetrators, Dick and Perry, even though they were tried together. Capote clearly favors Perry and succeeds in making the reader feel that Perry is still human despite killing the Clutters. Further, Perry's soft and vulnerable character is shown, e.g. writing poetry and childhood abuse, which makes him appear less dangerous and less responsible for his acts than one might think when reading about the murders. On the other hand, Dick is presented as having lived a good life and being taught moral values as opposed to Perry. As a result, one gets the impression that Dick should know the difference between right and wrong which leads to holding him responsible for the killings. Further, Dick is shown to be a cruel and evil person since he randomly runs over dogs and seduces young girls. Moreover, he appears to be rude and impulsive. All this contributes to the feeling that Dick is dangerous and merciless. By portraying one perpetrator as a monster while creating a sympathetic image of the other, it becomes evident that Capote himself did not have a set opinion. Likewise, the author's use of power confirms that assumption as well. On the one hand, Capote gives the perpetrators an

opportunity to tell their story in a way it had not been possible during the trial. Also, the author functions as an alternative justice system and expresses the opinion that Dick and Perry would have deserved a fairer trial or even a different verdict. He does that by describing the trial's circumstances and by referring to insanity defense. According to *In Cold Blood*, at least Perry definitely was mentally ill and thus should not have been hanged. Capote further influences the reader to adopt this point of view by including intense background information on the characters and also by introducing professional observations. As a result, the novel serves as a way to freeing Dick and Perry. Yet, at the same time it also keeps them imprisoned because the perpetrators are under constant surveillance, as a consequence they are the permanent focus of the story. Moreover, Capote took advantage of them in order to write a bestseller and reveals some of their most intimate thoughts and feelings. It becomes evident that Capote held a superior position in the relationship to the perpetrators and did not only use his powers for their good. To sum up, on the one hand Capote shows that the perpetrators did not deserve to be hanged due to an unfair trial and non-eligible evidence. On the other hand however, he needed them to be executed in order to finish his book and write a powerful ending.

Lullaby works with a character that generally opposes capital punishment⁷ and wants to destroy the almighty poem, which kills people, because he thinks it is too dangerous and too much power for people to hold. Further, Carl is of the opinion that only because one knows the poem exists, i.e. the death penalty, does not necessarily mean that one should also use it. Yet, while Carl is on his mission he makes use of the poem himself. Also, it seems he kills impulsively and does not feel remorse. Hence, *Lullaby*, just as *In Cold Blood*, presents the perpetrator not as purely evil but as a concerned human being as well. Moreover, the question of who should be able to decide over life and death is raised. On the one hand, after a long time Carl comes to realize that the only way to free himself from his sins and find a way back to humanity is to confess to the police. Thus, the state functions as his savior. Likewise, he thinks that no one should have the poem's power and actively works against its distribution. Also, he wants to stop killing himself to give back that kind of power to state officials. On the other hand, it is addressed that not even the state should have the right to decide who lives and who dies. Helen thinks that it is only a means to control and dominate

⁷ In form of the lullaby.

people. By saving Carl from the police and granting him a second chance it is further exemplified that state killing is wrong. Thus, also the issue of use of power remains unresolved.

As this thesis has shown, there are instances when people do not have a clear opinion concerning capital punishment and that at times their opinions might be as ambivalent as the issue itself. Capote and Palahniuk both confirmed that assumption by portraying the perpetrators in two opposing ways, as a human being and as a monster or murderer. Further, the issue of use of power becomes evident in both novels and it was shown that power can be used in very different ways.

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