

Torn between forgiveness and hatred

Dead Man Walking

Based on the book by Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ

Play adapted by Tim Robbins

~~ Study Guide ~~

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“Dead Man Walking is a meditation on love, criminal violence and capital punishment.

In a larger sense, it is about life and death itself. Are we here to persecute our brothers or bring compassion into a world which is cruel without reason?”

Sister Helen Prejean

Introduction:

In 2002, a new adaptation of *Dead Man Walking* began to take the college theatre world by storm. The show compelled people to contemplate the death penalty and their ideas and beliefs surrounding the issue. The play project is currently a long-standing effort from writer, director, actor Tim Robbins who adapted the book into both a movie and a play. The play seeks to cultivate responses by engaging people in the exploration of ideas about the justice system, sympathy, forgiveness, and finally, resolution. The play focuses on the relationship between Sister Helen and the convicted death row candidate Matt Poncelet. The play also follows a number of effected relationships; it follows the victim’s families along with the inmate’s family, the prison warden and detention officers, and it also examines the prison system and the death penalty as a whole.

The play centers on Sister Helen Prejean, a catholic nun, who receives a letter from a death row inmate by the name of Matthew Poncelet. Poncelet was sentenced to Louisiana’s death row for killing two young teenagers, Hope Percy and Walter Delacroix. Although Poncelet was sentenced to death, Carl Vitello, his accomplice, was sentenced to a lesser sentence of life without parole. Poncelet, as depicted by the press, is a volatile criminal who often makes references regarding Hitler as a role model. By becoming Matt’s spiritual advisor, Helen is able to get inside the mind of a convicted killer. With letters and visits, Prejean is able to discover and understand a man that the rest of the world only views as a cold-blooded killer.

Prejean becomes emotionally invested in both Poncelet and the case. She fights through appeals courts and letters to the Governor for Poncelet's pardon. In the end, Poncelet is put to death by use of lethal injection. As spiritual advisor, Prejean helped aid Poncelet into admitting and accepting the crimes he committed. Near the end of the play, Matt has an epiphany where he realizes and admits to the crime. Not only does Sister Helen befriend Matt Poncelet but she also accomplishes her role as spiritual advisor.

Throughout the process of aiding Matt, Prejean also becomes involved with Matt's family and also with the parents of the victims. Through many months of often very distressing and difficult conversation Prejean becomes familiar with how the crime affected three different families. Matt's family must come to terms with his role in the murder and his subsequent death sentence. The Delacroix's, who lost their son Walter, scold Helen for not coming to them to hear their side of the story. They eventually open up to Helen and use her as a tool in the recovery process. However, the parents of Hope Percy are disgusted that Helen can continue to aid a man who brutally murdered their daughter. They quit speaking to her altogether. The audience is able to get a small glimpse into the lives of all the families affected and see that every person is different in dealing with tragedies. We learn no matter what side they are on, they are all victims in dealing with the horrible loss of a part of their family.

The play is much more than a story about the death penalty. It intricately tells the story of relationships and raises questions about forgiveness and love.

A Recent Brief History of the Death Penalty in the United States:

The death penalty is an issue that has been debated since our fledgling country was first established hundreds of years ago. It has been ruled unconstitutional and has been reinstated again all in the last 40 years. In 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state death penalty laws were unconstitutional which also brought a halt to federal executions. This decision was overturned in 1976 with new laws and the adoption of new procedures (4). Today, the death penalty is abolished in 13 states and 5 other states have not carried out executions in many years (4). Death administered by lethal injection is the method used by most states, however a few states still use other methods, for example, Nebraska mandated the use of electrocution until it was ruled unconstitutional in 2008 (4). Since the reinstatement of the death penalty in 1976 to October 18, 2008 there were 1,125 executions, of which 954 were by lethal injection, 155 by electrocution, 11 by gas chamber, 3 by hanging, and 2 by firing squad (5). On March 1, 2005 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty be abolished in the case of minors and in 2002 they ruled that executing the mentally ill violates the eighth amendment on cruel and unusual punishment (6).

Themes: social injustice, the moral cost of executions, faith, forgiveness

Character Analysis



<http://www.americancatholic.org/messenger/Apr1996/gfx/f1Main.gif>

Sister Helen Prejean

Born on April 21, 1939 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Helen Prejean grew up in a thriving household of privilege for that era. She was educated in Catholic schools with parents who bestowed a grand amount of attention upon her and her two siblings. Helen was well traveled in her youth which provided opportunities for her to see and understand the ever changing world with both domestic and international exposure. Her father was a lawyer who defended both the wealthy and poor. He sacrificed large salary benefits while defending his poor and African-American clients. Her family exulted in the Catholic religion, and compassion was perhaps innately born into her soul. From this “Cinderella” existence, as Helen recalled, would emerge a woman of strong conviction for annihilating the death penalty, sometimes called “the Mother Teresa of Death Row.”

Committing her life to God and the Catholic Church as a teenager in 1957, Prejean had no current indication of her future impact in the lives of death row inmates; nor did she fully recognize the impact she would have on the critics and detractors campaigning against the death penalty. In 1981 Helen began corresponding with Elmo Patrick Sonnier, a convicted killer facing death on the “Row.” After developing a relationship with Sonnier, she consented to becoming his spiritual advisor. Sonnier, along with fellow death row inmate Robert Lee Willy of whom she later counseled, became a blended character for the movie and play *Dead Man Walking* based upon her book of the same name. Through her multiple books, lectures, and interviews; and Tim Robbins’s adaptation of her book into a movie and play, the world was introduced to this compassionate, spiritual, and forgiving woman. She was a woman so compellingly convicted that she influenced many people through her words and actions. She preaches fairness in the justice system while also calling attention to the ramifications associated with this heinous criminal act.

(Biography information found in sources 11 and 12).

Character Analysis – continued

Sean Penn portraying the movie version of Matt Poncelet



<http://i16.photobucket.com/albums/b45/Lgreeley/1-8.jpg>

Matthew Poncelet

Matthew Poncelet is the compilation of two convicted killers on death row. Poncelet encompasses many characteristics of a murderous criminal from the mere fact that his character is based on a composite of the sinister qualities of two death row inmates accused, tried, and convicted of brutality and unusual cruelty resulting in death. Matthew is a blend of:

1. Elmo Patrick Sonnier ~ Mr. Sonnier was convicted of murdering David Le Blanc and murdering and raping Loretta Ann Bourque, partnering in crime with his brother. The two Sonniers discovered the couple during a hunting expedition on November 4, 1977. Loretta was raped and both victims were shot three times each in the back of the head later that night.
2. Robert Lee Willie ~ Mr. Willie was convicted of murdering Faith Hathaway, raping another female, paralyzing a young man, and kidnapping along with various other charges. Mr. Willie partnered with a friend Joseph Vaccaro in the demise of Ms. Hathaway during a eight day period in May of 1980. She was found shot and left in the woods to die.

In the play adaptation, Matthew and his friend were involved in the act of killing a young man and woman during a romantic interlude. The young man was tied to a tree and had to witness his girlfriend, Hope Percy, being raped by both Matthew and his friend. In the adaptation, Matthew killed the boyfriend, Walter Delacroix, while his friend murdered the girl.

Questions:

How do artists work to affect social change? Has *Dead Man Walking* made you question ideas you once had about the death penalty? Do you believe that plays and movies can ultimately change how you feel about an important universal question?

The United States is one of the only Western Democracies that still uses the death penalty. How has the United States evolved in terms of acceptance or rejection of the death penalty in recent years?

Dead Man Walking is now a book, a movie, an opera, and a play. Describe how all of these different areas of the arts can affect the telling of the same story?

Public opinion spurred by the media can effect the way that an accused killer is portrayed. How did Matthew Poncelet contribute to his persona seen by the media? What is the media's effect in determining public opinion?

Sister Helen's goal is to be Matt's spiritual advisor. She tells him, "Redemption isn't some kind of free ticket admission that you get because Jesus paid the price. You need to participate in your own redemption. You've got some work to do. (Dead Man, 68) In your opinion, did she ultimately achieve what she was there to do?

The following is an excerpt taken from the book *Dead Man Walking* and it involves Bill Quigley, a local attorney and his young son.

'Patrick has asked why people wanted to kill Mr. Sonnier. "Because they say he killed people," Bill had answered. 'But, Dad, then who is going to kill them for killing him?' (60)

Do you believe that government should engage in the killing of criminals? Do you believe the state has the right to say who lives and who dies?

An hour before Matt is set to die, Sister Helen tells him, "Stop blaming him. You blame him. You blame the government. You blame the drugs. You blame blacks. You blame the Percys. You blame the kids for being there. What about Matthew Poncelet? What is he in this story? Just an innocent? Just a victim?" (81).

Why do you think Matt took so long to confess to his sins? He admits his guilt after he was turned down for his final pardon board hearing by the Governor. Do you believe he received his final redemption?

"You know I've never known real love, never loved women or anybody all that well myself. Figures I'd have to go to my death to find love" (87). Matt tells this to Sister Helen minutes before his death. Discuss the impact of unconditional love. Do you think it would be possible to look past someone's terrible sins and to accept them unreservedly?

Quotes:

I'm not saying that Patrick Sonnier or any of the condemned killers I've accompanied were heroes. I do not glorify them. I do not condone their terrible crimes. But each of these men was a human being, and each had a transcendence, a dignity, which should assure them of two very basic human rights that the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls for: the right not to be tortured, the right not to be killed." (Prejean 63)

I didn't go to see the victims' families. I stayed away because I wasn't sure how to deal with such raw pain. The movie's got this part down pat. It really takes you over to the victims' families and helps you see their pain and my awful tension with them. In real life I was a coward. I stayed away and only met the victims' families at Patrick's pardon board hearing. They were there to demand the execution. I was there to ask the board to show mercy. It was not a good time to meet. (Prejean 61).

That, I believe, is what it's going to take to abolish the death penalty in this country: we must persuade the American people that government killings are too costly for us, not only financially, but—more important—morally. (Dead Man Walking)

I should say to him, *yes, yes, apologize. As weak and ineffective and futile as your words of remorse and sorrow may seem, say them.* Only later will I learn from Lloyd LeBlanc, David LeBlanc's father, what such an apology means. He will later tell a reporter that his main reason for attending Patrick Sonnier's execution was to hear an apology. (Dead Man Walking, 42).

He did not want the film to be labeled as anti-death penalty. That's why we see so much about the crime in the movie. Tim shows the horror of what Poncelet did to balance out the possible view of the prisoner as victim. I have no doubt that some people will leave the theatre saying 'Fry 'em' about everyone on death row.
(www.salon.com/06/reviews/dead3.html)

Statistics:

U.S.A. death row population as at January 1, 2006: 3,373 (5)

According to a recent Gallop Poll, 71% of the United States public supports the death penalty when only 26% oppose it (10)

The death penalty costs North Carolina 2.16 million per execution over the costs of life in prison (5).

In 2005, 94% of all known executions occurred in just four countries: China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States (13).

The United States is the only western democracy that uses the death penalty (5).

Currently, the United States has the highest prison population in the world, with over two million people incarcerated (7).

Currently there are 85 people on Louisiana Death Row. 54 (64%) are black and 28 (33%) are white, and the remaining are Asian and Latino (7).

The United States Supreme Court ruled in 2005 that it was cruel and unusual punishment to execute those who had committed their crimes under the age of 18 years (6).

In Louisiana there are only two crimes that may result in the issuance of the death penalty: first-degree murder and aggravated rape of a victim under the age of 12 years. (10)

In 2004, an estimated 16,137 people were murdered in the United States.

⁽⁸⁾ Approximately 43% of these murders occurred in the southern region of the U.S. ⁽⁸⁾ That year only 125 death sentences were handed out for murders and only seven were handed out in Louisiana. ⁽⁸⁾

In 2005 it was ruled that children are no longer executed in the United States and in 2002 the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to execute those who are mentally retarded. (6)

In the latest Gallup poll, Americans were asked if they could chose between the death penalty and life without the possibility of parole. Only 50% of those surveyed said they would favor the death penalty and 46% indicated they'd prefer life without parole. (9)

Activities

Character Analysis ~ Student Interpretation Follow up ~ Post Viewing

thinks

says

feels

believes

does

acts

ends up...



thinks

says

feels

believes

does

acts

ends up...

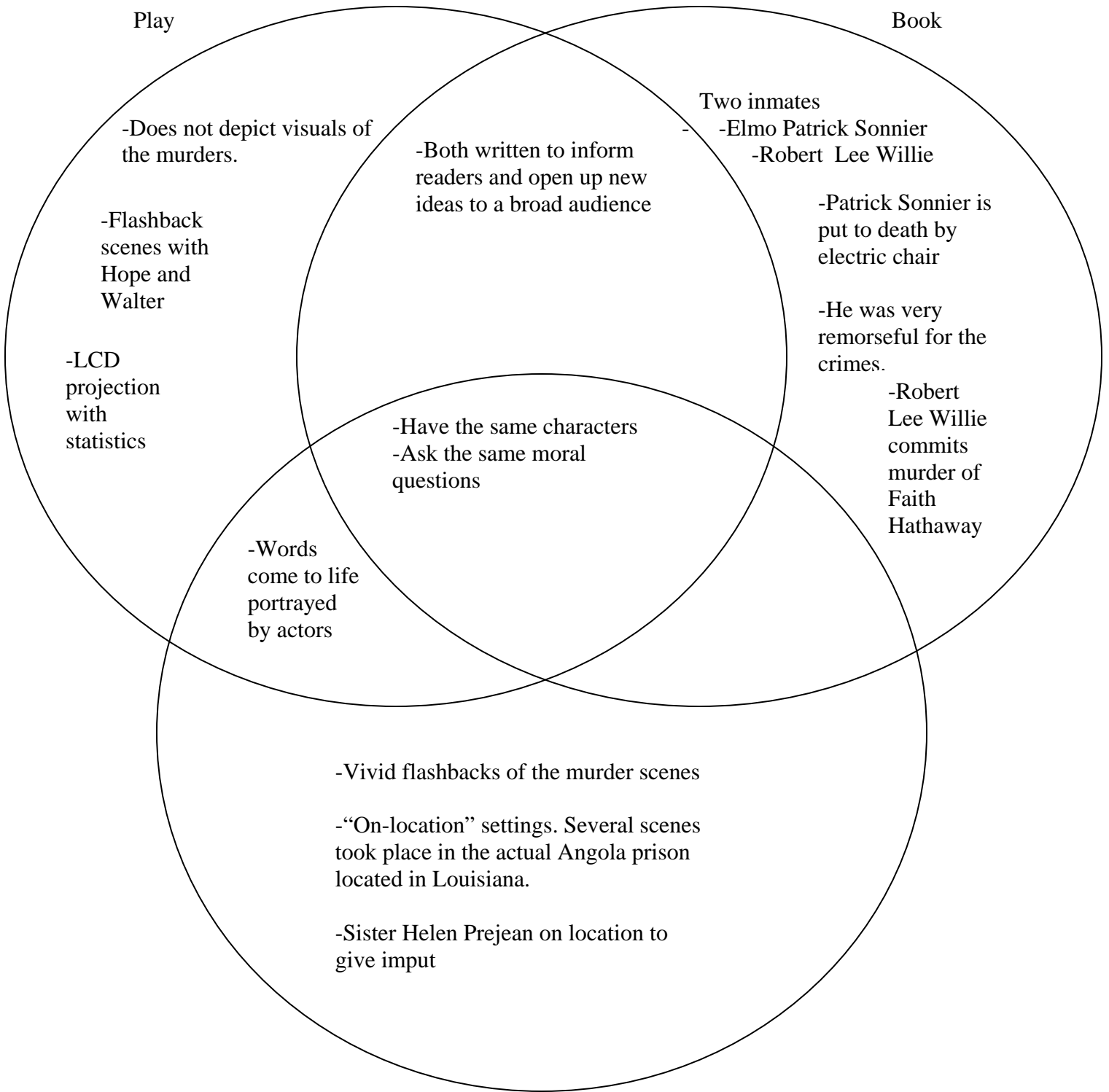
Sum it up....

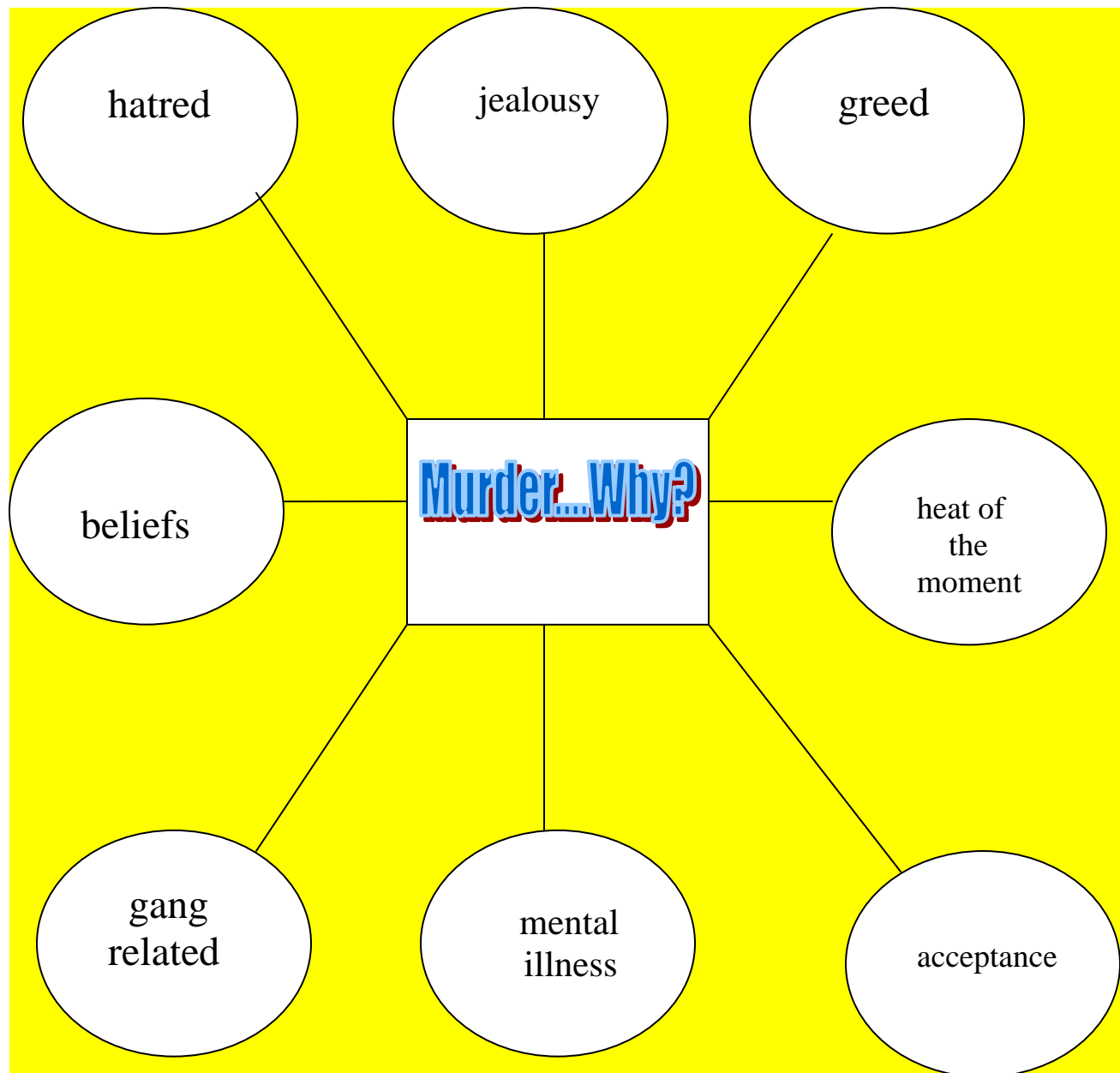
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Active Viewing

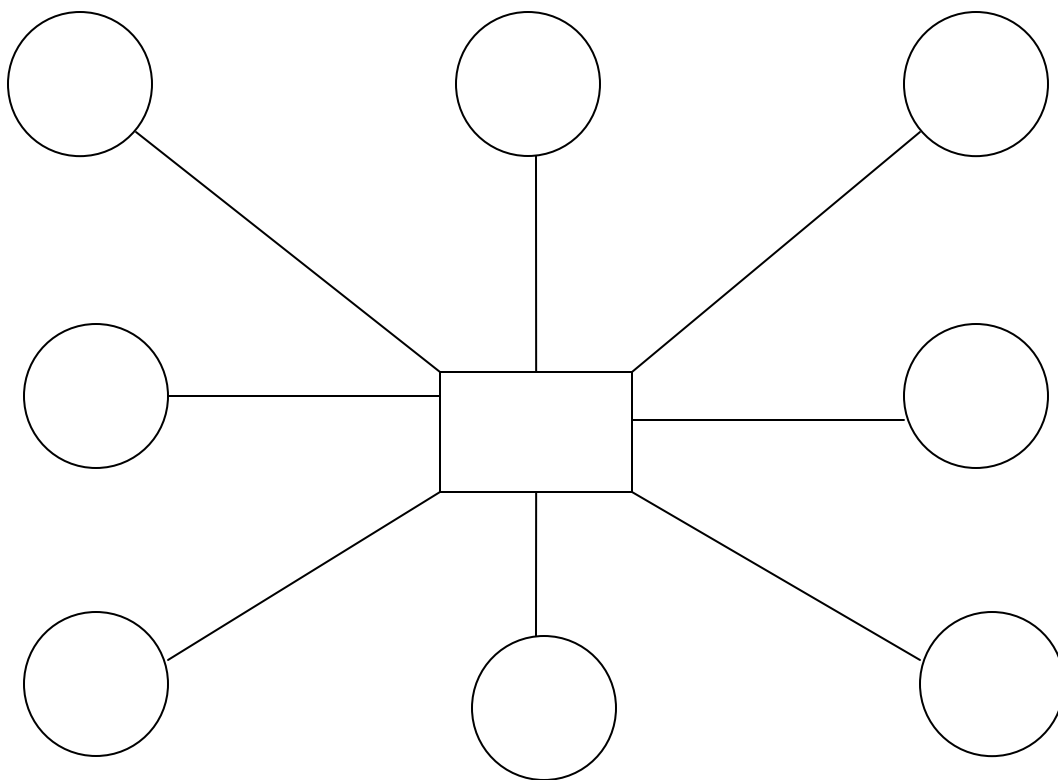
After watching the following scenes from the play *Dead Man Walking*, explain the emotional effect caused by each particular event. Use the chart to record your responses to the events that happened when you watched the play.

<i>Scene</i>	<i>Effect</i>
“Vitello accuses Poncelet. Both say the other did the actual killing. Somebody’s lying to somebody.” (16)	
“When Dunham’s girlfriend appeared, a young woman Poncelet had raped, he winked and blew her a kiss...(18)	
“And the day before Governor Fredericks says he’s running for re-election: surprise! A big announcement with lots of press setting a date for my execution to show how tough he is on crime.” (22)	
“That show, Inside Crime, made a story about Mattie and they told how I tried to help him and all, a regular Ma Barker or something. Now I’m famous. I was in a store yesterday and I seen these two ladies eyeing me and as I get closer to them say, ‘I just can’t wait to hear that they have executed that monster, Matt Poncelet. That’s the mother of that killer!’ they say.” (26)	
“It is the finding of this Board that clemency will be denied to Matthew Poncelet. Execution will be carried out as scheduled one week hence.” (32)	
“Sister, I’m a Catholic. How can you sit by Matt Poncelet’s side without ever having come to visit with me and my wife or the Percys to hear our side? How can you spend all your time worrying about Poncelet and not think that maybe we needed you too?” (33)	
Do you want your last words to be words of hatred? (80)	





Why do people become killers?
Discuss examples for each
category. In which category does
Matthew Poncelet belong? Why?



Fill in your own chart!

Works cited

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