

Close Study 7: Don Cullivan's Letter

Please read the following excerpt: it is an overview of the narrative of Chapter 4 up until Perry meets Don Cullivan. It gives some context to this study, but it also has some information that the Insight chapter summary did not. Highlight and annotate anything of interest, especially if it's relevant to your essay topic*

** I have decided that non-exam students will be allowed to choose **one** essay topic, which they will need to email to me. I will then change the wording of the essay topic on the day of the SAC so that you cannot pre-write your essay. For exam students: you will give me **three** essay topics, and I will choose one, and then re-phrase it, and give it to you on the day of the SAC.*

Excerpt to give context:

The fourth and final section of the narrative is entitled 'The Corner', which refers to a section of the Lansing Penitentiary where death row inmates are housed. **This concluding section recounts the trial and execution of the accused men and perhaps comes closest to revealing the authorial perspective that has controlled the narrative thus far.** During the course of the trial, Capote repeatedly foregrounds aspects of the process that the reader can only conclude were prejudicial to a fair trial. In the state of Kansas, for example, **the M'Naughten rule prohibits detailed psychiatric testimony, allowing only the more limited opinion of a psychiatrist as to whether the accused was capable of knowing that what he did was wrong.** Capote includes the detailed psychiatric evaluation of Perry that was excluded from the trial and allows the reader to view evidence denied to the jury. Perry begins to keep a journal with entries that unemotionally record stages in their trial, the appointment of their attorneys and the news that the state will seek the death penalty. Perry is portrayed as isolated and alone, visited by neither his father nor his sister, in contrast to Dick, whose family, though shocked at the accusations against their son, continue to show him their support and are aggrieved at what they claim is the unfairness of the trial proceedings. The only visitor Perry does receive is an acquaintance from the Army, Don Cullivan, who writes to Perry in an attempt at Christian charity.

Read the paragraph before the letter – pages 260-61 from “Except for the squirrel” to “anything to do with.”

1. I find this part interesting. Perry clearly misses Dick, even though he now views him in a very different way – it would seem the qualities of Dick's to which he was attracted are now shown to be an illusion...

Question: Why do you think he still misses Dick then? If he did get to talk to him, what do you think he would say to him?

Read Don Cullivan's letter – pages 261-62.

2. What details from the letter stand out to you? (short dot-points fine).

Extension/thinking question: *why do you think Perry's lock was plastered with pictures of women, when no-one else's was? (think about where he is and the accusation he made about his time in the army earlier in the book...)*

3. Write as detailed a paragraph as you can: that addresses **the specifics** of this question:

Why do you think Capote chose to include this letter?

Consider:

- What does this letter add to the narrative?
- What does it add to the character of Perry?
- Why might it be relevant to hear these points about Perry at this part of the narrative – how might Capote hope for it to influence readers?
- how might the letter support his own authorial viewpoint (his views and values in relation to the issues and themes in the text)?

Hints (of things you could mention):

- early picture of Perry from an impartial observer (not his family)
- what we learn about Perry that we didn't know
- what are the different things Don remembers – what might they reveal about Perry?
- The change in tone towards the end as death is mentioned, and how this serves as a reminder to the reader that the same is coming for Perry... how might this help to support Capote's view of how inhumane it is to have to wait for an extended time on 'death row' but still clinging to some faint hope.
- The role of religion in Don's life, and the relevance to Perry's life and his situation now. How is religion portrayed by Capote in the book? Does he portray it positively or negatively?

Read the paragraph after the letter, from 'The name meant nothing' to 'I remember Don Cullivan...'

4. Why is Perry so thrilled by the letter?
5. Why do you think Capote included this little bit of Perry starting to write a reply to Don, before cutting it out (not including the letter)? What does it add or what is Capote's intention?