Dead Man Walking Essay, Research Paper

DEAD MAN WALKING

Dead Man Walking is a great book that deals with one of our nations most controversial issues: capital punishment. The books narrator, Sister Helen Prejean, discusses her personal views on capital punishment. She was a spiritual advisor and friend to two death row inmates; Elmo Patrick Sonnier and Robert Lee Willie. From her experiences, she developed views on the death penalty. She believed it was morally wrong and spoke openly about it. Sister Helen successfully defends her views on capital punishment while stating that capital punishment should be illegal. Her experiences have taught her that although these criminals were dangerous and deadly, and that their crimes were inexcusable, a death sentence should not be the answer.

I believe Sister Helen s success in dealing with the issue of capital punishment falls on the two cases for which she was a spiritual advisor. In these cases, Sister Helen always tried her best to grant stays of execution or a court appeal. She fought for what she believed in and tried her best to abolish the death penalty. Sister in no way condemned what these killers had done, but tried her best to comfort them in their time of loneliness, sorrow, and need.

Sister Helen s first case, Patrick Sonnier, better influenced my opinion on capital punishment. Her strategies in dealing with a convicted killer were brave and courageous. She was always willing to meet with Patrick and to talk about anything he liked. She helped him to realize his mistake, but more importantly, helped him to become a better person. She was always reminding Pat that God had the power of forgiveness, and that if he were truly sorry, God would forgive him. Sister Helen s best arguments were the details she spoke about prior to Sonnier s death. When Sister Helen spoke about Pat s legal defense, it made a big impact on me as a reader. She persuaded me to look at things from two angles, instead of just one. As a reader, I was upset with the comparison between Pat s sentence and his brother s sentence. How could two brothers who conspired in the murder together receive two different sentences: Pat receiving a death sentence, while Pat s brother Eddie receiving a lesser charge in a life sentence. Sister Helen s method of using the line she overheard at Angola about the wrong brother is being sent to the chair also pushes the reader to believe that maybe Louisiana is killing the wrong man. How could you be in favor of capital punishment if you are unsure in regard to its accuracy? Also, the methods she uses describing Pat s last night are very convincing and accurate. Sister describes in great detail the shaving of Pat s head, his final march into the death room, and the guards strapping him down. These descriptions, along with the description of his death, give the reader the idea that this is terribly wrong and inhumane. Sister s details really made me believe that there are other methods available for dealing with convicted murderers. Death does not have to be one of them.

Sister s next case was Robert Lee Willie. Although this case also presented a strong argument opposing capital punishment, I did not feel it was as convincing as the Pat Sonnier case. Sister took on this case after the death of Pat, and maybe that had an effect on her ability to be Robert s spiritual advisor. Her persona in dealing with Robert Willie did not seem as constructed or convincing as her dealings with Sonnier. Although she fought hard for Willie s life, it seemed like she was content when the Pardon Board made its decision to go along with the sentence of death. She seemed to have the attitude like she knew he was going to die, so why try and fight it. I think the cocky attitude and the rebel-like personality of Robert gave Sister Helen these ideas. Although Robert Lee seemed like a nice man, he never felt remorse for his actions. He never apologized to the Harvey s for the murder of his daughter, but did say that he hoped they would get some peace by seeing him put to death. I believe that Sister Helen fought and prayed to see Robert Willie not receive the death sentence he had gotten. But I also believe that she thought there was no hope. Pat Sonnier had a great chance to receive a stay of execution. He was extremely sorry for his actions and was in the middle of a conspiracy. I believe Sister thought that if Pat did not get a stay, there was no way that Robert Lee Willie would get one either.

The victims of these crimes, the Harvey s, LeBlanc s, and Bourque s, provide a good argument in favor of capital punishment. During these sections of the story I believe Sister Helen has non-success in dealing with capital punishment. By documenting the families responses, she is putting the reader into an extremely personal situation. A great example of this is when the Harvey s are describing the death of their daughter. When Elizabeth s brother went to identify the body, he was against capital punishment. But after seeing her dead, beat up, broken body, he was all for it. I believe this is Sister Helen s only weakness in her arguments opposing capital punishment. Although she tried to comfort the Harvey s, and show them that capital punishment was wrong, she was missing something. Sister was missing the dreadful feeling of a loved one brutally murdered at the hands of a killer. Who is to say that people can not change their minds about capital punishment? As of now, I am opposed to the death penalty. If someone killed a person I loved or cared about deeply, and they faced a death sentence, I would really have to consider my views again. This just shows that you should never be truly positive on your views about capital punishment until you have had the opportunity of experiencing a loss by the hands of a killer.

I believe Sister Helen was extremely successful in describing her oppositions towards capital punishment. Her experiences as a spiritual advisor to two death row inmates gave her knowledge about capital punishment that was previously just foundation in her beliefs. Her methods of dealing with the arguments of capital punishment were honest and fair. She presented herself in a way that made you listen to everything she had to say about the death penalty. Her evidence and facts were thoroughly supported throughout the book. She also allowed the reader to decide on his or her own view of capital punishment.