

Redemption and Forgiveness in the Film *Dead Man Walking*

Eric Sterling

Department of English and Philosophy,

Auburn University Montgomery

PO Box 244023, Montgomery, Alabama 36124-4023, USA

Email: esterlin@aum.edu

Abstract:

The film *Dead Man Walking* focuses on the transformation of death row inmate Matthew Poncelet, who is about to be executed for a rape and two murders. Poncelet initially is unrepentant and unwilling to confess. However, under the guidance of Sister Helen Prejean, Poncelet undergoes a spiritual conversion and repents for his crime. He sees that Sister Helen loves him, so he learns to love himself. His anger toward the families of his victims evolves into understanding and remorse. His genuine remorse, confession, and settling of accounts lead to his redemption. The change in Poncelet's attitude manifests director and screenwriter Tim Robbins's theme that even villainous criminals are capable of reform and thus should not be executed; furthermore, the killing of murderers – no matter how heinous their deeds – constitutes cruel and inhumane vengeance that does nothing to heal the pain and suffering of the victims' families.

Keywords: Forgiveness, redemption, death, murder, capital punishment, remorse, Christianity, repentance.

In Tim Robbins's highly-acclaimed film *Dead Man Walking* (1995), Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn) has been sentenced to death for the murder of Walter Delacroix (Peter Sarsgaard) and the rape and murder of Hope Percy (Missy Yager). Initially, he uses Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon) for selfish reasons, wanting her merely to help him with his appeal and to locate a lawyer for him so that his death sentence can be commuted to life imprisonment. However, after he witnesses Prejean's selflessness and devotion to him, Poncelet gains respect for her and begins to take seriously her thoughts on faith and spiritual redemption. As a result, Poncelet starts to engage in a more meaningful dialogue with her. With her help, Poncelet undergoes a gradual but significant transformation. In fact, Poncelet discerns a transformation in Sister Helen herself that affects him and brings him closer to redemption. Poncelet starts, with her support, to read the Bible and to repent his violent misdeeds and racist and pro-Hitler thoughts. Just before the film concludes, Matthew finally confesses to the double murder, taking responsibility and expressing genuine remorse for his crime. Poncelet never becomes a model citizen, yet he does change, and, rather than acting as a self-absorbed criminal, he begins to consider the welfare of other people, such as Prejean and the Delacroix and Percy families. Poncelet eventually relinquishes his hard feelings for his victims' families. His hatred for the Delacroix and Percy families evolves into an attempt to understand their pain, a confession, and a final request for their forgiveness, which leads to his

redemption. Prejean indicates that Poncelet's case in the movie derives partly on that of Dobie Williams: Williams's "last words were to forgive his persecutors: 'I just want everyone to know I don't have any hard feelings against anyone.' You see that strength and peace in him to meet his death in this courageous and loving way – that's God" (Dear 2000). With the spiritual guidance of Sister Helen, Poncelet becomes a changed person, as Williams did, ready to ask God and his victims' families for forgiveness, and ready to meet his Maker.

Robbins's movie focuses on the transformation of Prejean and the concomitant change in Poncelet, as well as the spiritual growth in Earl Delacroix (Raymond J. Barry), murder victim Walter Delacroix's father, who eventually forgives Matthew for the murder of his son. It is the change in Prejean that incites the positive alteration in Poncelet. Initially, she appears hesitant to visit and help him. She seems anxious and uncertain concerning what to expect as she drives for the first time to the infamous Angola penitentiary in Louisiana. Perhaps her anxiety derives from the heinous nature of Poncelet's crime, which she attempts to visualize in her mind. Her attitude begins to change, however, even before she meets Matthew. Sister Helen has a brief meeting with Chaplain Farley (Scott Wilson) in which he coldly informs her of her role (to "save" Poncelet) and acts condescendingly toward her, implying that she is unsuitable for this role. Farley challenges her regarding her clothes, clearly disapproving of her for not wearing a nun's habit. Even when she informs Farley that members of her order have not worn a nun's habit for a long time, he expresses his disapproval. He emphasizes her clothing, not the mission of her church or Poncelet's soul. Farley fails to realize that "the communal dimension [of the Church] is important. We are not alone. The community is a communion" (Malone 2005, 146). Farley's behavior is significant because it manifests his shallow character – that to him, her ability to administer spiritual counseling depends partly on her clothes – and his lack of sympathy for Poncelet. If he cared about Matthew, he would not change his focus from the doomed man to preoccupy himself with Prejean's clothing. He would also realize that Poncelet's spiritual fate derives solely from his acceptance of Christ and redemption, not on the clothes of the nun who comes to help him. Farley's comportment illustrates a man more interested in rules and regulations than in compassion for prisoners or their spirituality or soul. Although Sister Prejean considers capital punishment "the opposite of baptism in a community" ("Angel on Death Row" 1996), Farley, contrariwise, accepts it without question.

Yet this is the man who would counsel Poncelet if not for Prejean's arrival and commitment. Wendy Moon says:

[W]riter/director Tim Robbins portrays Chaplain Farley as the stereotypical bureaucratic priest who follows the letter rather than the spirit of the law [...] He does, however, state Prejean's goal in his bureaucratic way: to "save" Matt. Prejean, as witnessed by the lack of a habit, operates in the "spirit of the law." She wants to "save" Matt – literally save his life, but more importantly, help him obtain the freedom and peace that will come from taking responsibility for his crime. Her goal doesn't preclude Farley's goal – receiving the sacraments – it goes far beyond his. (Moon 1997, 88, 89-90)

Here Robbins effectively juxtaposes the bureaucratic Farley, who considers his role merely his job and means of earning a paycheck, with the humane and idealistic Sister Prejean, who becomes disillusioned with the lack of spiritual concern for Poncelet and decides to effect change. To her, working with Matthew is not a job, but rather a calling. Moon says that through the juxtaposition of their characters, Farley and Prejean “convey Robbins’ theme: only those who operate outside the system are free to act with integrity and only those who look past their prejudice can learn to care for one another” (Moon 1997, 90). Prejean, therefore, ignores Farley’s attempt to dissuade her from offering genuine spiritual comfort to Poncelet – thus highlighting the difference between the two spiritual officers – and is more determined than before to help Matthew.

Prejean is also disturbed by the indifference and animosity exhibited toward Poncelet in the Angola penitentiary. In addition to Farley’s bureaucratic perspective on helping Matthew, the medical officers, prison guards, and warden look forward to Poncelet’s impending death. In the film, Warden Hartman’s (Nesbitt Blaisdell’s) condolences to Matthew after the condemned man has been denied a stay of execution is anything but sincere. Perhaps the most telling symbol of the indifference to Poncelet’s life occurs when people eat at the buffet table as they await Matthew’s execution, as if the killing of Poncelet is a spectator sport, mere entertainment like tailgating before a football game. The woman who injects Matthew defends her role in his death, telling Prejean that she is simply performing her job; she does not consider the implications or the spiritual or moral ramifications of her actions. And Poncelet informs Sister Helen that the guards have been placing bets on which prisoner will be executed next. The guards in the film manifest not only vengeful hearts but also a disregard for the sanctity of human life. As Poncelet says just before he dies, “I just want to say I think killing is wrong, no matter who does it, whether it’s me or y’all or your government” (Robbins 1995). Although his words could be dismissed as the egoistic, self-righteous ranting of a heartless murderer as he is being punished for his crime, they should resonate with the audience. Faced with the loss of his own life, Matthew realizes how precious life is and how devastating his murders have been to the Delacroix and Percy families. If Poncelet is killed to punish him for taking human life, which is precious, is not his life worth something as well?

Angry that Sister Helen comforts and advises Poncelet, the man who murdered his beloved daughter, Clyde Percy (R. Lee Ermey) says to her, “This is not a person. This is an animal” (Robbins 1995). Although Percy compares Poncelet to a beast, Matthew is a human being, capable of warmth and sensitivity, just like the murder victims. And he is capable of remorse and redemption, as the film demonstrates. Prejean identifies to some extent with Poncelet regarding his crime because she remembers with shame, disgust, and remorse a horrible deed in which she participated – the killing of an opossum. Although she was a nine-year-old child at the time and although opossums are obviously not human beings, she still remembers the act vividly and experiences nightmarish flashbacks. She realizes that all human beings are capable of committing terrible deeds. When Clyde Percy asks her how she could stand to spend time with Poncelet, she replies, “Mr. Percy, I’m just trying to follow the example of Jesus, who said that a person is not as bad as his worst deed”

(Robbins 1995). Thus, she tells him that despite Matthew's heinous crime, the man is still a human being whose life has meaning and is precious and who is also capable of good deeds.

The guards, Warden Hartman, and the politicians who want to show constituents that they are tough on crime fail to realize that Matthew's life has value. Prejean says to a prison guard who looks forward to Matthew's death, "What he [Poncelet] was involved with was evil. I don't condone it. I just don't see the sense of killing people to say that killing people is wrong" (Robbins 1995). The people who condemn his slaying of two people, ironically, want him killed. This irony resembles the incident when school children show their disapproval of Poncelet's violence by beating up his younger brothers. Ironically, the state-sponsored execution of Matthew Poncelet is premeditated, yet the murders of Walter Delacroix and Hope Percy are not. The killing of Matthew Poncelet does nothing to restore the lives of Walter Delacroix and Hope Percy, and seems hypocritical to Prejean and Poncelet because it is a violent and cruel act intended to prevent further violence and cruelty. Dwight Conquergood says, "Executions are awesome rituals of human sacrifice through which the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence" (Conquergood 2002, 342). Although the state does not monopolize violence, it manifests through capital punishment that it is no better than the killers it punishes. J. Stephen Fountain says that "*Dead Man Walking*, especially the film, with its haunting juxtaposition of the scenes of the crime and the execution, clearly associates the victimization of both Poncelet's victims and Poncelet himself" (Fountain 2004, 51). Initially, Poncelet commits a heinous act, but at the end of the film, he himself becomes the victim of a violent, senseless, and vengeful killing.

In the film *Dead Man Walking*, the taking of Matthew Poncelet's life seems, according to Tim Robbins, to demonstrate that capital punishment cannot be a viable deterrent because of its secretive nature: "The death penalty is very secretive. . . . I find it very strange, for example, that it's carried out at midnight deep in the recesses of the prison. One of the main reasons the death penalty is supported is that it's supposed to be a deterrent. . . . But if this fiction were true, why are executions performed in such a secretive manner?" (Grundmann 1996, 4). If witnessing the punishment of murderers truly inhibits others from killing, it would be logical to make a public spectacle of the execution rather than hiding it. Capital punishment offers little solace to the families of the victims. Sister Helen reports that even after the execution of Robert Lee Willie (one of two men upon whose life the fictional character of Poncelet is based), Vernon Harvey, whose stepdaughter Faith Hathaway was stabbed seventeen times and murdered, said, "They should've strapped him [Willie] in that chair, counted to ten, then at the count of nine taken him out of the chair and let him sit in his cell for a day or two and then strapped him in the chair again. It was too easy for him. He went too quick [...] [We should] fry the bastards on prime-time TV [...]" (Prejean 1993, 235). Harvey has literally and metaphorically lost "Faith" just as his film counterpart Clyde Percy has lost "Hope." Detective Michael L. Varnado, who worked on the Hathaway murder, believes that "the family and friends of Faith Hathaway deserve some small portion of peace – a peace that can only be found in having Robert Willie [Matthew Poncelet in the film] pass forever from the public arena where in

death, in the eyes of some, he has attained the status of victim” (Varnado 2003, 14). Varnado laments that when Susan Sarandon accepted her Academy Award in 1995 for playing Sister Helen and praised the nun in her speech, the actress never mentioned the victim Faith Hathaway nor said anything “of the lives of her parents [the Harveys] who were decimated by the crimes” (Varnado 2003, 15). Harvey, the model for Clyde Percy in Robbins’s film, expresses bitterness toward Willie, which is certainly understandable, for anyone would feel very angry when his or her daughter is raped and brutally murdered; yet the comment manifests a bitter desire for revenge, which cannot bring back his beloved daughter. Viewers empathize with Percy for the death of his beloved daughter but recognize that the killing of Poncelet would not provide him with the release of his bitterness and the solace he craves.

In the film, Robbins juxtaposes Clyde Percy’s hard-hearted attitude toward Poncelet with the forgiving and begrudgingly charitable feelings of Earl Delacroix. Both men lose a child, yet Percy refuses to forgive Matthew and expresses anger toward him and Prejean, while Delacroix gradually loses his hatred for the killer. Perhaps the distinction is logical, for Delacroix’s son was murdered, yet Percy’s daughter was both brutally raped and slain. Robbins gives this grieving parent the name “Delacroix,” which is French for “of the cross” – signifying his eventual Christian and forgiving attitude toward Poncelet. Delacroix overcomes his bitter hatred toward Poncelet, attends a grief support group, and manages to feel compassion toward him, which serves as a double sacrifice. Delacroix has already lost his son, and now his forgiveness, by which he removes from himself the right to retribution (which might have healed his wound emotionally through revenge), results in a second sacrifice. Because of his willingness to forgive Matthew for his crimes, Delacroix is redeemed. Delacroix distinguishes himself from unforgiving people like Clyde Percy, Warden Hartman, and the merciless prison guards. Delacroix’s forgiveness of Poncelet is pivotal to the film, for it manifests his nobility of spirit and generosity by taking away his desire for retribution, so Robbins chooses to end the movie with him praying with Sister Helen. Delacroix’s bitterness is lifted, and he achieves a nobility of spirit through his love and forgiveness.

Paul Lauritzen concedes that “some supporters of capital punishment have insisted that anger and rage are the appropriate moral responses to crimes like those committed by [Patrick] Sonnier and Robert Willie [the historical models for Poncelet], and that to reject the anger and rage would be to betray the victims, just as Prejean worried that it might. But Prejean does not deny that anger is appropriate; rather, her view is that love and forgiveness are possible, and that capital punishment is incompatible with these” (Lauritzen 1998, 232). Sister Helen understands the pain endured by the victims’ families as they attempt to come to terms with the painful loss of a loved one. She tries to redirect the anger and bitterness into a more positive, forgiving, and spiritual response that will ultimately help diminish the pain felt by the families. In the book *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Helen admits:

If someone I love should be killed, I know I would feel rage, loss, grief, helplessness, perhaps for the rest of my life. But Jesus Christ, whose way of life I try to follow, refused to meet hate with hate and violence with violence. I pray for the strength to be like him. I cannot believe in a God who metes out hurt for hurt,

pain for pain, torture for torture. Nor do I believe that God invests human representatives with such power to torture and kill. The paths of history are stained with the blood of those who have fallen victim to “God’s Avengers.” Kings and Popes and military generals and heads of state have killed, claiming God’s authority and God’s blessing. I do not believe in such a God. (Prejean 1993, 21)

By seeking vengeance against Poncelet for his crime, the governor, the courts, and the victims’ families (despite the terrible pain they must feel) usurp God’s role as the dispenser of justice and the One who decides when people should die. God says: “Vengeance is mine and recompense, for the time they lose their footing; . . . Surely, the LORD will do justice for his people; on his servants he will have pity” (Deuteronomy 32: 35-36) (*The Catholic Study Bible* 2011). By deciding to kill Poncelet and actively working toward taking his life, they play God and usurp His role as judge of their fellow human beings.

The attempts to use Scripture to justify the killing of Matthew appear misguided. The following exchange occurs in the film between a prison guard and Sister Helen shortly before Poncelet’s execution:

Prison guard: Tell me something, sister: what is a nun doing in a place like this? Shouldn’t you be teaching children? Do you know what this man has done? How he killed them kids? . . . You know what the Bible says, “An eye for an eye.”

Sister Helen: You know what else the Bible asks for? Death is a punishment for adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, trespassing on sacred ground, profaning the Sabbath, and contempt for parents. (*The Catholic Study Bible* 2011)

The prison guard relinquishes his argument, claiming that he cannot win a Scripture-quoting debate with a nun. He loses this argument with Prejean, not because she is a nun, but rather because he mindlessly cites one passage from the Bible, without thinking about it carefully or considering other passages of Scripture. The passage regarding “[a]n eye for an eye” that the guard quotes, which appears three times in the Old Testament (Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21), is perhaps meant to be taken figuratively, not literally.

Furthermore, in her book, Sister Prejean notes that “no person with common sense would dream of appropriating such a moral code today [...]” (Prejean 1993, 195). Christ clearly disapproved of vengeance and the passage to which the guard refers. Jesus claimed, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on [your] right cheek, turn the other one to him as well” (Matthew 5:38-39). People can cite the Old Testament to justify capital punishment, but they don’t quote Christ to support it.

Many Biblical passages in the New Testament deal with forgiveness and mercy, yet the prison guard fails to consider them. The guard thinks from an Old Testament philosophy while Prejean considers the forgiveness and charity that Jesus Christ preached in the New Testament. The guard, for instance, does not think of the parable (Matthew 18: 23-35) that Jesus mentioned to Peter in which the

king of a country (the nation serves as a microcosm for God and His kingdom) decides to forgive an enormous debt incurred by one of his servants; the servant then demands the payment of a debt from a fellow servant and has the man thrown in jail for not repaying it. The king, upon hearing about the lack of mercy and forgiveness exhibited by the servant he just forgave, orders the servant punished. Christ tells Peter and others, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart" (Matthew 18:35). The inhumanity of capital punishment relates directly to remorse and redemption because the murderer must have the opportunity to recognize the sin and its painful effect upon the victim and victim's family. Capital punishment dehumanizes the perpetrator, while Sister Helen's love for the humanity of Poncelet raises him from the degradation of being relegated to the animal kingdom and restores him to his rightful status as a "Son of God."

It is noteworthy that many passages regarding mercy and forgiveness appear in the Gospel of Matthew because that is the name that Robbins selected for the dead man walking. Robbins based his film on the experiences of two men on death row, neither of them named "Matthew." Robbins could have chosen any name for the protagonist; he selected "Matthew," indicating that the name possesses some meaning in regard to the film, perhaps relating to mercy, forgiveness, and the settlement of accounts. The Book of Matthew is the only Gospel that discusses the aforementioned king who wants to settle accounts with his servants (Matthew 18: 23-35). This section of Matthew, which has no counterpart in Mark, Luke, or John, focuses on how forgiveness can settle accounts between people who are engaged in a bitter or estranged relationship. Matthew must feel merciful and compassionate toward the Delacroix and Percy families for the suffering he has caused them, ridding himself of his hatred for them. Prejean realizes that in order for Poncelet to be spiritually redeemed, he must settle accounts and forgive those who seek his death: he must stop thinking solely of himself and must understand how much suffering he has made the two families endure. If Poncelet experiences a spiritual awakening, when he is executed, he will, according to Sister Helen Prejean, walk with Christ. Janelle Reinelt says, "The symbols and signs of the passion of Christ overlap with the action of state executions (something *Dead Man Walking* certainly exploited visually in the crucifixion iconography of both the film and the opera)" (Reinelt 2005, 107).

In the film, Robbins works hard to demonstrate a contrast between Matthew Poncelet's state of mind at the beginning of the film and at the conclusion to manifest to the audience that all people can change their behavior and are thus deserving of forgiveness and mercy. Upon witnessing how Sister Helen works altruistically on his behalf and empathizes with him, Matthew changes his behavior and his outlook on life and faith. Initially, he exploits Sister Helen and tries to ensure her aid by making her feel guilty: in a phone call, he pleads to her, "You're all I've got. You're not fading on me, are you?" (Robbins 1995). He even tries to make her feel uncomfortable by talking about sex. She chastises him, saying, "Death is breathing down your neck and here you are, playing your little Matt-on-the-make games." When she demands his respect, he asks sarcastically, "Why? Because you're a nun?" Sister Helen responds firmly, "Because I'm a person" (Robbins 1995). At the

conclusion, Poncelet points out that capital punishment is wrongful because he is a person and thus is worthy of life, despite his past misdeeds.

Sister Helen teaches him to treat others respectfully and to care about people other than himself; she shows him that all human beings have feelings and that the lives of all people – including him – have meaning. With Prejean's spiritual guidance, he transforms from a self-absorbed, self-pitying murderer into a caring individual who accepts Christ as his savior. He becomes empathetic and polite, and he expresses genuine concern for Sister Helen's welfare, such as when the nun faints. He also reads his Bible. He learns from Prejean that he must go far beyond seeking a loophole in the Bible: Sister Helen advises him, "Redemption isn't some kind of free admission ticket that you get because Jesus paid a price. You have to participate in your own redemption. You have work to do" (Robbins 1995). Sister Helen becomes his role model and then his spiritual advisor. He thanks her for loving him because he needs love and acceptance from others before he can love and accept himself. Love has "an intrinsic connection with God, who is, according to Scripture, Love. As such, Love is understood to be a divinely infused habit orienting the person towards the divine and inclining him or her toward others for God's sake" (Wright 2009, 202). Prejean tells Matthew, "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you" (Robbins 1995). He then realizes that despite his terrible misdeeds, God loves him. Before receiving Sister Helen's spiritual guidance, Matthew considered God a vengeful and cruel deity. He informs Sister Helen that he dreamed that he was about to be fried when "God came into my cell with a chef's hat on and started to roll me around in bread" (Robbins 1995). Later, when Prejean tells him, "You are a son of God," Matthew replies, "Thank you. I've never been called a son of God before. I've been called a son of a you-know-what plenty of times, but I've never been called a son of God" (Robbins 1995). Despite his joke, he is clearly moved by his realization that God loves him. This love allows him to believe in redemption and forgiveness: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

The transformation of Matthew Poncelet is significant in the film because it allows the audience to discern the capacity for redemption and thus the cruelty and inhumanity of capital punishment. Robbins humanizes Matthew, allowing the writer and director to emphasize effectively the brutality of state-sponsored executions. Audiences might not sympathize, and thus find the punishment cruel, if they consider the doomed man to be evil and beyond redemption. Robbins said in an interview, "I wanted to take the extreme, present the guilty person, the contemptible person, the awful crime. If you're against the death penalty only because sometimes innocent people die, then you're not really against the death penalty. The real moral question here is whether we have the right to kill anyone" (Grundmann 1996, 7). Robbins's moral question resonates more with the audience when they witness Poncelet's suffering at his execution.

However, Robbins might not be describing his protagonist accurately. Poncelet, as portrayed by actor Sean Penn, is far from despicable and evil, and his guilt as a murderer is not established until the film is almost over; even the lie detector test that he insists upon taking is inconclusive because

of his anxiety over his impending execution. Despite the flashbacks of the brutal crime, Matthew's neo-Nazi diatribe, and Clyde Percy's vivid description of his daughter's horrific death, Poncelet is portrayed, to some extent, as a sympathetic character. He loves his mother, loves Sister Helen, and jokes with his brothers hours before his execution. Poncelet had a terrible father who took him to bars starting when he was only twelve years old and an incompetent defense lawyer (actually a tax lawyer who never tried a capital case before and who raised only one objection throughout the entire trial). His warmth and extenuating circumstances allow the audience to sympathize with him when he is executed. In an interview, Robbins mentions that a Southern radio shock jock, who supported capital punishment, viewed the film. The film changed his mind about capital punishment because of the scene in which Matthew is denied the opportunity to hug his mother before he is led to his execution (Grundmann 1996, 6). The scene evokes pathos for Matthew and his mother, making viewers ponder why people who are punishing Poncelet for being cruel are themselves behaving so inhumanely that they do not allow a final hug between the doomed man and his own mother. Matthew expresses concern for his mother's health as she leaves the room. He does not lose his temper or complain, but rather patiently accepts the denial of a final hug, rendering him with more dignity and humanity than the people who are executing him. The same holds true when the prison guards deny Poncelet the last ten minutes he is entitled to spend with his family before his execution, showing their disrespect for him and their urgent desire to kill him. Again, Matthew simply accepts the insult and remains poised. Poncelet also apologizes to the Delacroix and Percy families before he dies and takes responsibility for his crime, further humanizing himself. He confesses to Mr. Delacroix, "I ask you for forgiveness. It's a terrible thing I've done" (Robbins 1995). He tells the Percies sincerely, "I hope my death gives you some relief" (Robbins 1995). The final image that Poncelet envisions as he dies is telling: he thinks of the forest where the bodies of Hope Percy and Walter Delacroix lie, indicating that he is reliving his sin in his mind and feeling remorseful for the murders. His final thought, a vision that serves as a form of settling accounts by taking responsibility, manifests his redemption. Thus, Matthew is not a monster but rather a human being with some decent, redemptive qualities; consequently, many audience members might disapprove of his execution.

Matthew's new lawyer, Hilton Barber (Robert Prosky), tells people at a hearing that lethal injection – and any form of capital punishment – is cruel and inhuman punishment. There is an illusion that the victim experiences no pain because his face becomes paralyzed, and thus he cannot express anguish. Barber remarks that lethal injection, like the electric chair, leads to a horrendous and painful death. The lawyer notes that there are actually three injections, which stop the heart and implode the lungs: the "face just goes to sleep while inside his organs are going through Armageddon" (Robbins 1995). John R. Hamilton observes that "Robbins forces his viewers, via tight close-up, to observe the annihilating chemical conduit needle being slid into Sean Penn's vein, to watch the robotic face of the nurse who swabs his arm, the slow progress of the liquids through the tubes, and a full frame view of Poncelet's [Penn's] unhooded face as he looks out at the witnesses through the glass window" (Hamilton 2002, 121). Sister Helen remarks in her book that people share the

misconception that lethal injection is humane: “one dimension of suffering that can never be eliminated when death is imposed on a conscious human being: the horror of being put to death against your will and the agony of anticipation [...] [A]s if you feel the terror of death any less because chemicals are being used to kill you instead of electricity or bullets or rope?” (Prejean 1993, 217). Prejean’s words concerning the physical horrors involved in capital punishment are very powerful not only because of her reasoning, but also because of the intensity of her emotional feelings.

Viewers of the film can readily discern the pain that Matthew Poncelet endures. His fingers wiggle and shake but are then still. Although Matthew made Walter Delacroix and Hope Percy suffer a great deal, people who consider it shameful that they had to endure such an abomination should realize that a similar atrocity is being inflicted upon Poncelet. That is also shameful.

References:

- “Angel on Death Row.” *Frontline* (PBS). WGBH Educational Foundation. 9 Apr. (1996). <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/angel/angelscript.html>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2014.
- Conquergood, Dwight. “Lethal Theatre: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty.” *Theatre Journal* 54. 3 (2002): 339-67.
- Dear, John. “Getting Found by God: A Conversation with Sister Helen Prejean.” <<http://www.johndear.org/pdfs/prejean.pdf>>. Accessed 30 December 2013.
- Fountain, J. Stephen. “The Trace of the (M)other: Liminality and Maternity in *Dead Man Walking*.” *Believing in the Text: Essays from the Centre for the Study of Literature, Theology, and the Arts*, (Ed.) David Jasper, George Newlands, and Darlene Bird. Oxford/New York: Peter Lang, 2004. 41-56.
- Grundmann, Roy, Cynthia Lucia, and Tim Robbins. “Between Ethics and Politics: An Interview with Tim Robbins.” *Cineaste* 22. 2 (1996): 4-9.
- Hamilton, John R. “Non-Fiction Adaptation as Propaganda: *Dead Man Walking*.” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30. 2 (2002): 119-25.
- Lauritzen, Paul. “The Knowing Heart: Moral Argument and the Appeal to Experience.” *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 81. 1-2 (1998): 213-34.
- Malone, Peter. “Catholic Movies.” *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*. (Ed.) William L. Blizek. London/New York: Continuum, 2009. 137-47.
- Moon, Wendy. “Religiously Using Stereotypes.” *Creative Screenwriting* 4. 1 (1997): 88-98.
- Prejean, C.S.J., Helen. *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*. New York: Random House, 1993.
- Reinelt, Janelle. “The Ambivalence of Catholic Compassion.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 20. 1 (2005): 103-12.
- Robbins, Tim, Dir. *Dead Man Walking*. Screenplay by Tim Robbins. MGM. Film, 1995. All quotations from the film derive from this screenplay.
- The Catholic Study Bible*. Edited by Donald Senior, John J. Collins, and Mary Ann Getty, rev. ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. All quotations from the Bible derive from this edition.
- Varnado, Michael L, and D.P. Smith. *Victims of Dead Man Walking*. Gretna: Pelican, 2003.
- Wright, Wendy M. “Religion, Spirituality and Film.” *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*. (Ed.) W.L. Blizek. London/New York: Continuum, 2009. 198-208.