

Dead Man Walking
By Tim Robbins

This film is based on a true story and concerns Matthew Poncelet condemned to death for a double murder and rape of a young couple Hope Percy and Walter Delacroix, while his fellow conspirator was sentenced to life imprisonment. (These are not the real names of the accused and victims). He called upon a nun Sister Helen Prejean who lived and worked with the poor black community in Louisiana. Poncelet was white, poor and racist and when he called upon Sister Helen he denied having killed the victims, but not his involvement in the crime which he said he committed while under the influence of drugs. Sister Helen helps him with his appeals and accompanies him to his death by lethal injection. The film is based on her book* about her work on death row with various criminals sentenced to death and her campaigns against the death penalty and her victim support work. Susan Sarandon plays sister Helen and she won an Oscar in 1996 for her performance and Sean Penn plays Poncelet.

· Dead Man Walking by Helen Prejean Harper Collins 1993 ISBN 00 00 628003x

There are many websites dedicated to eradicating or supporting the death penalty. Here are two you may like to consult.

<http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/>

<http://www.prodeathpenalty.com/>

Important vocabulary

to be on death row	to appeal for clemency	pardon board	appeals court
the death penalty	capital punishment	hanging	lethal injection
the electric chair	electrocution	cell	state governor

Instructions. Print out pages one and two. Watch the video and answer the questions. Check your answers at the end on page three and four. The numbers refer to the minutes from the beginning of the video.

Questions about extracts from the film

1.35 According to Poncelet's letter what is life on death row like ?

1.35 In the first interview between Sister Helen and Poncelet what surprises him about Helen ?

What do they have in common ?

What does he say about his crime ?

What help does he ask for and what does he give her ?

1.35 What details of the crimes are given ?

00.18 What does the lawyer Barber who is against the death penalty and has agreed to take up Poncelet's case say about the courts and the death penalty ?

Why can't he talk about politics at the pardon board and what does he need to do ?

What are the stages of appeal ?

1.35 What are the main arguments of Barber at the pardon board ?

00.30 What are the arguments by the lawyer for the state ?

00.44 In the scene where supporters and opponents of the death penalty are outside the prison what does the father of one of the victims say ?

1.35 How do the parents of the other victim describe Poncelet ?

01.18 What are Sister Helen's arguments for helping Poncelet and what are the guards arguments ?

1.35 What does Poncelet admit just before the sentence is carried out and how does Sister Helen react ?

01.55 Complete the song

There's a pale _____ coming and I'm going _____
I'll rise in the morning , my _____ decided,
I'm a dead man _____x2
In St James _____ I was _____ and christened,
I've got my story, but there's no _____ for you to _____
It's just a dead man _____.

Once I had a _____ , I had a girl,
Between our _____ and actions lies this world,
In the deep _____ their blood and _____ rushed over me,
All I could feel was the _____ and the _____ and the fear inside me,
Like a dead man _____

'Neath the soft _____ my eyes went _____
Sister I won't ask for your _____ my sins are all I have,
And the _____ above my prison _____ slowly across the sky,
A new day _____ my _____ are full tonight

We all walk alone, cannot stay,
There no need to say _____
All the friends and family, all the _____ going round, round, round,
I have _____ for so long, how I wish for you today,x2

If you want to think about the issues raised in this film go to this internet page.

<http://www.eslpartyland.com/teachers/film/dead3.htm>

ANSWERS

1.35 According to Poncelet's letter what is life on death row like ?

Size 6x8ft, locked up 23h a day, no work, hard not to get fat, surrounded by people that want to kill you, lives on rice, pancakes and potatoes.

1.35 In the first interview between Sister Helen and Poncelet what surprises him about Helen ?

She lives and works with the poor in the St Thomas project, which is a slum full of niggers.

What do they have in common ?

They both live with the poor.

What does he say about his crime ?

He didn't kill anybody and he was under influence of drugs and alcohol; He did what his accomplice Karl said, because he was scared of him.

What help does he ask for and what does he give her ?

To file a motion to the pardon board.

1.35 What details of the crimes are given ?

Two young lovers were killed brutally and the girl was raped, they were left in a forest, it was a gruesome brutal crime.

00.18 What does the lawyer Barber who is against the death penalty and has agreed to take up Poncelet's case say about the courts and the death penalty?

They don't want to hear appeals even with new evidence.

Why can't he talk about politics at the pardon board and what does he need to do?

The pardon board are political appointee; she needs to show Poncelet as a human being.

What are the stages of appeal?

Pardon board, federal board, Supreme Court

1.35 What are the main arguments of Barber at the pardon board?

Poncelet is poor, he had an amateur defence by tax lawyer, who raised one objection during the whole trial, and money would have made a difference and would have paid for the opinion of experts. Jury selection lasted 4 hours and the trial 5 days. Barber gave the history of the death penalty and explained that the lethal injection is an attempt to try to find a humane way of killing. For him the accused is put to death like an old horse so we don't have to taste the blood of revenge.

00.30 What are the arguments by the lawyer for the state?

Justice is long past due, Poncelet has had trials, retrials etc and he is a heartless killer. He describes the suffering of the families who won't see their children graduate, get married and have children and who are asking for justice

1.35 In the scene where supporters and opponents of the death penalty are outside the prison what does the father of one of the victims say ?

It's the only way we can be sure won't kill again.

1.35 How do the parents of the other victim describe Poncelet ?

He's not a person, he's an animal, God's mistake, there was no one to comfort Hope. Is he sorry ?

00.18 What are Sister Helen's arguments for helping Poncelet and what are the guards arguments ?

*What he did was evil, I don't condone it but there's no sense in killing people to show that killing is wrong
The guard says eye for an eye tooth for a tooth is the law ,but Sister Helen says this is not Jesus's rules*

1.35 What does Poncelet admit just before the sentence is carried out and how does Sister Helen react ?

"I killed the boy and raped the girl, I was a victim, afraid of Vitelo"

Sister Helen is shocked ,but comforts him ,promises him God's love and acceptance. She asks him if he takes responsibility for what he did and when he says yes, tells him he now has his dignity and is a son of God.

Complete the song .

There's a pale horse* coming and I'm gonna ride it

*signifies death

I'll rise in the morning my **fate** decided,

I'm a dead man **walking**x2

In St James **parish** I was and **born** and christened,

I've got my story, but there's no **need** for you to **listen**

It's just a dead man **talking**

Once I had a **job**, I had a girl,

Between our **dreams** and actions lies this world

In the deep forest their blood and **tears** rushed over me,

All I could feel was the **drugs** and the **shotgun** and my fear inside me,

Like a dead man talking

'Neath the soft sky my eyes went **black**

Sister I won't ask for your **forgiveness** my sins are all I have,

And the **clouds** above my prison **move** slowly across the sky,

A new day is **coming** my **dreams** are full tonight

We all walk alone, cannot stay,

There no need to say **goodbye**

All the friends and family, all the **memories** going round, round, round,

I have **wished** for so long, how I wish for you today,x2