

How does Capote present the theme of justice
on pages 331–333 of *In Cold Blood*? How are
the themes of justice and injustice explored in
The True History of the Kelly Gang and
elsewhere in *In Cold Blood*?

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In this essay I will attempt to explore the themes of justice and injustice in several places in both the novels: *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, and *The True History of the Kelly Gang* by Peter Carey. The first is an account of a brutal murder of a model American family in Kansas in the 1950s and the ensuing events, and the second is an apparent ‘true’ story of the life of Ned Kelly, an eventual notorious gang member of Irish origin in Australia.

In the extract on pages 331–333 of *In Cold Blood*, justice is a central theme when Capote describes the hanging of Dick and Perry, the two men that murdered the Clutter family. There is a contrast between justice and injustice when Perry, about to be dropped, whispers “I apologise” and sincerely means it, but is about to be treated in the same way as Dick, the instigator and murderer who shows a blasé attitude towards his own execution: “You people are sending me to a better world than this ever was.” and asking just before that whether any of the Clutter family was present, the response followed by Dick seeming “disappointed”, as if he wanted to go out with a bang, not feeling any remorse at all, but accepting his execution.

Ned Kelly, the narrator and main character in *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, is not terribly highly educated: this is visible to the reader due to his narration lacking spectacularly consistently in punctuation, and the use of dialect and taboo words and racism, examples being “eff” and “Chinaman”. *In Cold Blood* makes that book much easier to read, due to Capote’s back-

ground as a journalist and him wishing to convey the seriousness and epic description that he could not do if he used a lighter tone or—as Carey put a lot of effort into doing—stripped punctuation.

Peter Carey explores injustice in *The True History of the Kelly Gang* on pages 200–202 when an old man is refused by Ned’s mother a glass of brandy because he could not pay for it and he “sen[t] a plague among [them]” which Ned’s mother believed that did not disperse until she willingly gave brandy to the next person who asked, freely. As a result of this, she nearly lost her farm and there were “rats in the flour and inside the walls and over the bodies of the children”, forcing Ned’s mother to spend some of her little cash on many bottles of brandy to try to stop the plague. All this, including the death of several of her children, was because she did not give brandy to a rat charmer on the street and was poor and Irish, or so she had convinced herself. Ned himself, the narrator of the story and main character, is shown many an injustice and commits an injustice when he becomes Harry Power’s apprentice and goes with him to threaten Bill Frost with shooting his “pizzle” off to stop him from cheating on Ned’s mother or even liasing with Ned’s mother as Ned does not trust him. Ned, however, does not see this threat (which does not materialise) as an injustice and carries on, however he is apprehensive as he knows killing is wrong: “I gave Harry the thumbs up but inside my stomach was churning”, he narrates on page 140, “churning” not being a particularly pleasant sensation, possibly referring also to the unpleasant thing he was going to try his hand at doing.

Perry’s situation is rather similar to Ned’s in that he is pushed into a life that he does not really want, young and impressionably. Perry hates killing and wants to be with “books and maps” but follows Dick because of a dream of Mexico and riches; Ned is raised from birth in a poor family on a poor farm and desperately wants to make something of himself, with several brothers and sisters who all also vie for their mother’s attention. Ned is also the eldest son and has many responsibilities and a childhood of turmoil, very like Perry who ran away from home at a young age and “wets the bed”. Like Perry, Ned is dragged into a gang and theiving and especially killing unwillingly. Despite this, being quite skilled in equine care, as Perry who can play guitar and read maps, he wishes to impress, do people proud and become like his father. This is shown when Ned comes home from being mistakenly imprisoned and sees his mother’s new boyfriend who he does not like sitting in his father’s chair. As a result of this, he “held the girls” until Bill “had to vacate the chair to get his own potato”, then Ned “sat down, the moment [Bill] stood”.