

A hanging prose analysis



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George Orwell, most reputable for his novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) uses his signature transparent writing style to record a personal anecdote of ‘A Hanging’ conducted in a Burmese prison camp where he worked during the British colonial era. Though not explicitly stated, the narrative demonstrates the process of cyclic desensitization towards acts of injustice due to purposeful self-blinding combined with subconscious effect from embedded societal norms. Orwell shows his recognition of these processes evolve over the course of the narrative through use of characters and metonyms. Despite the recount presenting non-fiction events as they happened from beginning to end structure, Orwell’s piece displays literary techniques used to ‘move’ his readers, thus making it a work of power over knowledge.

From the first paragraph onward, it is immediately noticeable how withdrawn the workers of the penal institution were from the detained prisoners. “We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two.” This extract suggests that the captives were identified to the writer merely as animals raised for slaughter (p. 1.). Orwell also shows that the prisoners’ poor treatment was indifferent to him through the fact that he displays their bad living circumstances but never comments on them, a point further supported through the introduction of the main protagonist.

Despite the convicted man being destined for death, Orwell only reports his central figure’s physical appearance, “He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes... thick, sprouting

moustache, absurdly too big for his body.” The writer clearly shows his lack of concern towards ‘ who’ he was guiding to death by never mentioning insight on the felon’s thoughts or what he was convicted of (p. 1.). If Orwell was raised with morals against killing and did not know the prisoner’s crime, then it can be inferred that the author’s disregard towards his prisoner may have been shaped by his own self-numbing mechanisms, along with what the law he enforced communicated as ‘ wrong’ and ‘ right.’

Running off the Darwinist theory of evolution, the mentality of the imperialist era was that Anglo-Saxons were the sovereign race. Being upper-class Europeans, no-doubt this ideology impacted the writer and his colleagues, namely the Superintendent who stated upon looking at the time, “ For God’s sake hurry up, Francis,’ he said irritably. ‘ The man ought to have been dead by this time. Aren’t you ready yet?” Orwell makes known the superintendent’s previous profession as an army doctor and combined with his high rank, he was assumedly the most versed in witnessing death. It is not a shock that this character was virtually numb to sensitivity over the matter as displayed in his harsh dialogue (p. 1.). Thus, being an example of the extent a human can detach from emotions towards killing. The next symbolic character featured however, is free from the imprint of the westernized caste system and therefore makes an interpretation of the prisoner without bias.

The first metonym comes in the appearance of “ a large woolly dog, half Airedale, half pariah” on the way to the gallows and creates a light-hearted contradiction to the dark tone previously set (p. 2.). “ It came bounding among us with a loud volley of barks, and leapt round us wagging its whole

body, wild with glee at finding so many human beings together.” Second to the superintendent, the dog shows the way in which societal hierarchy can affect perspective (p. 2.). The animal, not being part of a social system, did not understand what was taking place. In its innocence, it saw not a group of men marching alongside an illegitimate, but a group of men marching. The canine confirms that it saw all of the men as equals when it “ made a dash for the prisoner, and jumping up tried to lick his face.” Despite the dog’s interruption of the formal procession, Orwell continues to illustrate the prisoner’s death march as a seamless process unlike that of a murder (p. 2.).

The description of the detainee’s systematic walking illustrates that everything was operating in a ‘ business as usual’ fashion. “ At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel.” It was not until the subject actively avoided walking through a puddle that the author began to view the impending hanging as a heinous act about to take place instead of a job or standard procedure to be dealt with(p. 2.).

The prisoner stepping aside to miss the puddle is a curious action to perform while walking to one’s death and serves as a moral climax to Orwell who then realises, “ what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive.” Through witnessing that this man, who seemed so invalid, was still able to perform basic actions of reasoning, the author was able to identify the prisoner correspondingly to the dog’s temperament, stating, “ He and we were a party of men walking

together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone — one mind less, one world less.” Similarly, to how the puddle affected Orwell personally, the lynching itself clearly impacts other participants (p. 2.).

Even though hangings occurred weekly, the author displayed that the prisoner’s “ reiterated cry of ‘ Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!’ to his god, was disturbing to workers (except the superintendent) who shared the opinion of, “ get it over, stop that abominable noise!” The moment of the drop acts as the physical climax in the piece and the negative affect this particular hanging had on the prison guards can be seen through the text, “ Everyone had changed colour. The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering.” Orwell mentions that after witnessing the atrocities of mankind even the dog “ retreated into a corner of the yard, where it stood among the weeds, looking timorously out at us.” Whether the workers began to see the same traits in the prisoner that Orwell saw or they were simply shocked by the man’s unusual cries, all of the characters evidently felt disturbed (p. 3.). This point can be further confirmed by the men celebrating amongst each other to reaffirm that what they had done was okay.

The celebration signals an end to the narrative but doubles as the beginning of a new desensitization cycle in preparation for the next week. It is obvious through multiple lines in the text that they all wanted to distract themselves not only by drinking, but also by garrulously laughing for minor reasons, “ Several people laughed — at what, nobody seemed certain.... I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing.... We all began laughing

again. At that moment, Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny." Through all of this unnecessary laughter and questionable 'happiness' shown by the workers, the author is presenting the prison staff numbing guilt and reassuring the actions of peers (p. 4.). The writer's last words, "The dead man was a hundred yards away" display that the underlying issue was physically out of sight and mentally out of mind thus signalling a new 'cycle' beginning (p. 4.).

In conclusion Orwell's use of symbols such as characters, the puddle, the hanging itself and the celebration are effective in demonstrating the way in which humans purposefully blind themselves from transgressions of their own and of the people around them in order to accept actions that go against their core beliefs and values. Orwell's seemingly concise writing style shares a double meaning to convey the writer's own beliefs as if it were a work of knowledge, but because of this second agenda, 'A Hanging' can be identified as a work of power.