

Essay

5 It was in Burma, a sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard. We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages. Each cell measured about ten feet by ten and was quite bare within except for a plank bed and a pot of drinking water. In some of them brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two.

10 One prisoner had been brought out of his cell. He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes. He had a thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man on the films. Six tall Indian warders were guarding him and getting him ready for the gallows. Two of them stood by with rifles and fixed bayonets, while the others handcuffed him, passed a chain through his handcuffs and fixed it to their belts, and lashed his arms tight to his sides. They crowded very close about him, with their hands always on him in a careful, caressing grip, as though all the while feeling him to make sure he was there. It was like men handling a fish which is still alive and may jump back into the water. But he stood quite unresisting, yielding his arms limply to the ropes, as though he hardly noticed what was happening.

15 Eight o'clock struck and a bugle call, desolately thin in the wet air, floated from the distant barracks. The superintendent of the jail, who was standing apart from the rest of us, moodily prodding the gravel with his stick, raised his head at the sound. He was an army doctor, with a grey toothbrush moustache and a gruff voice. '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?'

Francis, the head jailer, a fat Dravidian in a white drill suit and gold spectacles, waved his black hand. 'Yes sir, yes sir,' he bubbled. 'All iss satisfactorily prepared. The hangman iss waiting. We shall proceed.'

'Well, quick march, then. The prisoners can't get their breakfast till this job's over.'

25 We set out for the gallows. Two warders marched on either side of the prisoner, with their rifles at the slope; two others marched close against him, gripping him by arm and shoulder, as though at once pushing and supporting him. The rest of us, magistrates and the like, followed behind. Suddenly, when we had gone ten yards, the procession stopped short without any order or warning. A dreadful thing had happened – a dog, come goodness knows whence, had appeared in the yard. 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. It was a large woolly dog, half Airedale, half pariah. For a moment it pranced round us, and then, before anyone could stop it, it had made a dash for the prisoner, and jumping up tried to lick his face. Everyone stood aghast, too taken aback even to grab at the dog.

'Who let that bloody brute in here?' said the superintendent angrily. 'Catch it, someone!'

35 A warder, detached from the escort, charged clumsily after the dog, but it danced and gambolled just out of his reach, taking everything as part of the game. A young Eurasian jailer picked up a handful of gravel and tried to stone the dog away, but it dodged the stones and came after us again. Its yaps echoed from the jail walls. The prisoner, in the grasp of the two warders, looked on incuriously, as though this was another formality of the hanging. It was several minutes before someone managed to catch the dog. Then we put my handkerchief through its collar and moved off once more, with the dog still straining and whimpering.

- 40 It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. 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. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.
- 45 It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized 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. All the organs of his body were working – bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming – all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop,
- 50 when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned – reasoned even about puddles. 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.

George ORWELL, “A Hanging” (1931)

Suggested Outline

I. Specificity and Elusiveness

A. Observing Reality

Speaker-narrator as **observer** (cf. I/eye correlation → verbs of visual perception usually coincide with the use of the first person singular: e.g., “I watched”, l. 44 and “I saw”, twice in l. 51) taking very little part in the action. Hence the very **factual** description, with references to: places (“Burma”, l. 1 and “jail”, l.2); people (“Francis”, l. 20); actions (see various action verbs); religions and ethnicity (“Indian”, “Hindu”, “Dravidian”, “Eurasian”), and so on. On the whole, very subtle involvement of the speaker (often included in the group, with use of first-person plural pronouns), which gives an initial impression of objectivity, despite the possibly controversial subject tackled in this essay. Realist attention to some **details** (see short portraits of the various participants, e.g. the superintendent in l. 19-20; or, extremely detailed description of the process leading to the prisoner’s being tied up by the guards). Focus on elements that apparently have no symbolic significance (size of the cell, with units of measurement, l. 3, and references to distances in l. 29 and l. 44; or, the objects that can be found in the cells, l. 4) → focus on the dire living conditions of the convicts, on the unfolding of events (that is reminiscent of literary journalism, or even of a documentary approach).

B. Subjectivity and Nuance

Despite apparent objectivity, linked with the probable autobiographical inspiration of the account, however, prevailing overall impression coloured by the subtle hints of subjectivity found in the unusual imagery, often expressed through similes (betray the speaker’s involvement, which is but hinted at here): e.g., expository description in l. 1-2, with “sickly light” (pathetic fallacy, or even possibly hypallage) and the very unusual comparison “like yellow tinfoil” → sense of unease, and bleak atmosphere. Or the “desolately thin” (l. 17) bugle call, with the use of modalizing adverb “desolately” and adjective “thin” reminiscent of the physical condition of the prisoner, as if everything, from the prisoners to the sounds themselves, was deprived of its substance. Same with “the rains” (l. 1) and the prisoner’s “vague liquid eyes” (l. 8): the constant echoes between the description of the prisoners and that of the setting add to each other to create an increasingly dreary atmosphere. Impression conveyed by the subsequent description of the cells and of the prisoners’ living conditions adds to the pathos of the scene. Yet, **conflicting account** of the events presented here. On the one hand, formal, almost utilitarian unfolding of events (e.g. superintendent’s annoyance at their being behind schedule, l. 16; emphasis on the well-ordered “procession”, e.g. l. 28) → little interest of the jail staff in the prisoner’s humanity, no compassion for the convicts’ plight. But on the other: something almost poetic, because of the unusual imagery in the description and narrative, and the melancholy beauty of the reflection in the final paragraph (e.g., “one mind less, one world less”, l. 58; cf. also use of sounds and alliterations in the passage).

C. Indeterminacy

Instability of meaning captured quite forcefully by the oxymoronic phrase used to describe the warder’s “careful, caressing grip” (l. 13), with paradoxical association of harsh treatment of prisoner and tenderness → decidedly **ambiguous** nature of the experience for the speaker, which sets him apart from the rest of the group even though he includes himself in it. Evidenced by contrast: impression that the warders have to touch the convict to make sure he has not disappeared completely yet (“feeling him to make sure he was there”, l. 13), perhaps because his very weak constitution (see almost pleonastic phrase “a puny wisp of a man”, l. 7) is almost ethereal ≠ speaker’s sharp focus on the prisoner’s corporeality (e.g. l. 7-9, 46-47 and

53-54) → captures the tension between what speaker/readers are expected to believe and thought-provoking reality of the experience. That is why a paradoxical sense of **indeterminacy** pervades the scene (cf. use of indefinite article in the title). Very little focus on the various characters' individuality: for the most part, their job or function is what characterizes them ("condemned men", l. 6, "warders", l. 9, "superintendent", l. 18; "the hangman", l. 23, "magistrates", l. 28) → somewhat notional treatment of the event: not the specific event that matters, but its significance, i.e. "what it means" (l. 50) and stands for. In other words, description of the moments leading to the hanging serves a mainly illustrative function, and acts as a springboard for the reflection on life and death the speaker engages in in the last paragraph. Hence the key role of the last paragraph: analysis that is made of the event by the speaker w/ the benefit of hindsight (cf. subtle shift to present tense & more abstract vocabulary).

⇒ experience as "mystery" (l. 51) to be solved, refusal of one-sided or maudlin presentation of the event, as evidenced by the introduction of subtly comic elements in an account that could just as well been solely pathetic or critical.

II. Comic Disruptions

A. Comic Relief

Treatment of the prisoner's last moments contrasts with what the reader could have expected. Descriptions bordering on the pathetic are associated with jarring elements, especially in the passages dedicated to the description of the prisoner: some physical details verge on the grotesque, e.g. "He has a thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man on the films" (l. 8-9) or "He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees" (l. 45-46). Contrasts between the prisoner ("a puny wisp of a man", l. 7) and the other characters (e.g., Francis is described as "a fat Dravidian", l. 22). The speaker engages in a clichéd portrayal of the prisoner, as if to introduce **comic relief** in an otherwise pathetic scene. The introduction of all too archetypal characters, with the portrait of the prisoner but also Francis's accent ("All iss satisfactorily prepared. The hangman iss waiting", l. 23 → eye dialect), contrasts with the focus on hierarchy and order, a notion which the hanging of a prisoner is supposed to exemplify (cf. capital punishment as way to guarantee law and order < German sociologist Max Weber: government's monopoly on violence).

B. Exaggeration and Irony

Expected solemnity of the event undermined by the central **disruption**, the appearance of the dog. Focus initially on the rather formal, almost ritualistic, abidance by a strict schedule (l. 20-21) and orderliness (l. 26-28), but interrupted by an unexpected ("suddenly", l. 28) event introducing disorder ("without order or warning", l. 29). The exaggerated – if not hyperbolic ("dreadful thing", "loud volley of barks", "wagging its whole body", "wild with glee", l. 31-32) – descriptive pause focusing on the dog and the awkward response of the prison guards ("charged clumsily after the dog", l. 37 and the attempt at stoning the dog, l. 38-39), reminiscent of the chase scenes of slapstick comedy, ridicule the warders' behaviour. The speaker-narrator overemphasizes the theatricality of the dog's irruption through what could be construed as free indirect speech: "come goodness know whence" (l. 30), as if to capture the audience's surprise and shift focus away from the pathos-infused paragraphs framing the description of the dog incident (especially l. 1-6 and l. 50-59), in order to cast ironic light on the cast of military characters, undermining their authority and control.

C. Ironic Humanity

The most striking contrast brought to the fore by the description of the dog's disruptive presence is that between the prisoner's submission and the dog's "lick[ing] his face" (l. 34). The presiding impression is that the prisoner has lost the will, or perhaps even the ability, to resist: "yielding his arms limply to the ropes" (l. 15) → almost pleonastic emphasis on the act of surrendering. So much so, in fact, that he almost disappears in the process: the speaker-narrator has the impression that the guards keep their hands pressed against his "puny" (l. 7) body "to make sure he was there" (l. 13), as if there was so little left of him that he might vanish on his way to the gallows. Further conveyed by a sense of disconnection between the prisoner and his immediate environment: "looked on incuriously, as though this was another formality of the hanging" (l. 40-41) and "as though he hardly noticed what was happening" (l. 15-16). So unsettling that the speaker-narrator has to resort to comparison to try and explain, albeit unsatisfactorily or obliquely, the prisoner's passive demeanour. Helps explain the prisoner's behaviour in human terms, even though he has been **deprived of his humanity** (no curiosity, no surprise; compare with the exaggerated shock of the other participants: "stood aghast, too taken aback", l. 34-35). Paradoxically, these profoundly human features reappear in the dog itself, as it experiences "glee" (l. 32).¹ The dog is, tellingly enough, the only character that recognizes that the prisoner remains a "human bein[g]" (l. 32) just like the rest of the people present: symbolically, the dog's rushing at the prisoner "to lick his face" (l. 34) shows that the dog is the only one to identify the prisoner's humanity. It could be argued that the dog's reaction helps trigger the speaker's epiphany ("It is curious, but until that moment I had never realized...", l. 50), and allows him to reach the same conclusion as the dog, even though the tone is much more solemn at the end of the text: "He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world" (l. 57-58) → strong sense of commonality, with coordination, "together" and "same".

⇒ the comic treatment of the dog incident points to Orwell's critique of the very act of hanging a prisoner and, by extension, of the authority and power of the prison staff

III. Authority and Power

A. Condensed Colonialism

The scene is set in "Burma" (l. 1), which hints at the possibly autobiographical origin of the account, since George Orwell worked for the Indian Imperial Police between 1922 and 1927. As such, it builds on the traditional **tension between the white colonists and the "brown" locals** (l. 5), whose "silen[ce]" (l. 5) might be the symbolic sign of their politically and racially subjugated state. At the other end of the spectrum, the superintendent² appears as the archetypal depository of British authority, both symbolically (he is an "army doctor", l. 19, a position doubly associated with power) and stylistically (he barks orders at the rest of the prison staff every time he speaks: see imperative forms "hurry up", l. 20; "march", l. 25; "catch it", l. 36). Somewhere between the prisoners and the superintendent lies Francis³, an assimilationist

¹ The speaker-narrator further endows the dog with human reactions such as **fear** ("I let go of the dog, and it galloped immediately to the back of the gallows; but when it got there it stopped short, barked, and then retreated into a corner of the yard, where it stood among the weeds, looking timorously out at us.") and **guilt** ("The dog, sobered and conscious of having misbehaved itself, slipped after them.") later on in the essay.

² Although it might be an anachronistic reading, the modern reader cannot help but think that the superintendent's "toothbrush moustache" (l. 19-20) might be a physical clue to his authoritarian attitude, since it is reminiscent of both Adolf Hitler and Charlie Chaplin's satirical take on totalitarianism in *The Great Dictator* (1940).

³ That he should also be wearing "gold spectacles" (l. 22) may point to his engaging in conspicuous consumption in an attempt to demonstrate his (economic) power and show that he can gravitate, although marginally, around the white elite.

native whose “white drill suit” (l. 22) evokes that of the eponymous protagonist of Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901), a sign perhaps of his attempt at wearing clothes associated with white identity and power despite the colour of his skin (“his black hand”, l. 22-23) and his thick accent (l. 23-24). Each character (or group of characters), it seems, stands for one of the various strata of Burmese society. The prison, therefore, can be construed to be a microcosm of the colony.

B. Ironic Animalization

If the prison is indeed a miniature version of the whole province, the literary treatment of the moments leading to the prisoner’s death can but be fraught with political implications. The condemned prisoner is implicitly compared to “a fish which is still alive and may jump back into the water” (l. 14), an image showing that the prisoner is at the utter mercy of his captors. More generally, that the prisoners’ cells should be likened to “small animal cages” (l. 3) exemplifies the overall **animalization** of the prisoners in the text. Even Francis, the all too sycophantic native head jailer, also becomes an animal-like figure because his sibilant accent (l. 23-24 → alliteration in /s/, cf. his name, Francis) is reminiscent of a serpent’s hissing. All the natives are therefore reduced to barely human figures. The episode of the dog, introduced in part for the sake of literary symmetry, encapsulates the relationship between the white men and the animalized natives. For instance, the guards put the speaker’s “handkerchief” (l. 42)⁴ through the dog’s collar, which echoes back, through paronomasia, to the guard’s using “handcuffs” (l. 11) to subdue the condemned prisoner. This symbolic gesture also prefigures the hanging of the convict, since the “handkerchief” (l. 42) could evoke the rope at the gallows. Possible intertextual echo between the speaker’s description of the dog (“half Airedale, half pariah”, l. 32) and Rudyard Kipling’s description of native populations (“Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child”) in “The White Man’s Burden” (1899), as if the dog’s hybridity mirrored that of the indigenous prisoners. Because the characters embodying authority are ridiculed by the speaker, however, the whole power structure on which the prison – and by extension the whole colony – hinges is called into question. Since the dog is the most humane character, the guards ironically⁵ become the actual “bloody brute[s]” (l. 36) in the passage, which adds a decidedly critical layer to Orwell’s account of the hanging. Through structural irony, therefore, the speaker subverts the association between the natives and animality to criticize, albeit indirectly, the senseless violence of the hanging.

C. Meaningless Violence

The speaker’s detailed description of the guards’ weapons (“rifles with fixed bayonets”, l. 10 and another reference in l. 26-27) and tools of subjection (“chains” and “handcuffs”, l. 11) is associated with both physical and symbolic violence, a link expressed obliquely in the way the speaker describes the action (e.g., “lashed”, l. 12, connotes the violence of a whipping or a beating, especially in combination with the superintendent’s “stick”, l. 19) or through the symbolism of one of the guard’s attempt at “ston[ing] the dog away” (l. 39). The violence underpinning the whole process is all the more striking as the prisoner seems to have surrendered completely to it (l. 15-16 and 40-41; see above). Despite this apparent passivity, however, the speaker focuses, almost clinically, on the prisoner’s basic bodily functions (“At each step his muscles slid neatly into place”, l. 46 and “All the organs of his body...”, l. 53-8), which he even seems to associate with a sense of order (“neatly”, l. 46 ≠ “a warder . . . charged clumsily”, l. 37, another contrast) and beauty

⁴ It might be a way for the speaker to implicitly reflect upon in his own silent acceptance of and passive involvement in the hanging, since he failed to intervene when he witnessed the event and even laughed with the others when they indulged in gallows humour after the hanging (see the end of the essay: “I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing. Even the superintendent grinned in a tolerant way”).

⁵ The irony here lies in the syllepsis on “brute”, meaning both “an animal, as opposed to a human being” and “a violent person (or animal)”, meaning that the word might as well apply to the guards themselves. Another layer of irony is probably added by having the “army doctor” utter that sentence, since a doctor is arguably supposed to cure people, but here, as the superintendent of the jail, he oversees the preparations of the hanging and makes sure things are running as smoothly as possible (which explains why the irruption of the dog is “dreadful” → possible use of free indirect speech to capture the thoughts of the superintendent).

(“danced”, l. 47). What stands out in the speaker’s analysis of the innocuous gesture the prisoner makes to “avoid a puddle” (l. 48-49) is that his all too common, almost reflexive decision to “ste[p] slightly aside” (l. 48) shows that he is still of this world despite his apparent capitulation. The speaker implicitly recognizes that the prisoner is still submitted to the laws of physics and gravity (“the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down”, l. 46-47), just as he still makes a mark on the world (“his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel”, l. 47), leaving a trace that proves his presence (≠ idea that the prisoner might disappear in l. 13) and profound humanity (≠ animalization). Hence the speaker’s concluding that, despite all appearances to the contrary, hanging him is tantamount to “destroy[ing] a healthy, conscious life” (l. 50), which is why the speaker’s final, epiphanic reflection on death is underpinned by the question of the **morality** (“unspeakable wrongness”, l. 51-52) of causing a death that would not otherwise have been caused by disease or accident. In that perspective, the phrase “solemn foolery” suggests that the speaker tries to underline how pointless it is that the prisoner’s organs should be working even as he is about to die (e.g., “His nails would still be growing...”, l. 54-56), which would implicitly pit his futile organic persistence against his unavoidable deathly fate, thus colouring the final paragraph with decidedly tragic undertones (see also “due to be hanged within the next week or two”, l. 6). All the more so since his life is exceedingly fragile (“with a sudden snap”, l. 58). Yet, this text does not read as a political diatribe against the death penalty; rather, the speaker focuses on the value of life and the profound, almost primordial equality of all human beings (“he was alive just as we were alive”, l. 52-53) which exists before society imposes differences and hierarchies on nature. Since there is no difference between the prisoner and the other participants (“one of us”, l. 58), his death means that the world will be all the poorer for the prisoner’s being executed. The simple poetic phrasing of the concluding sentence of the extract, “one mind less, one world less” (l. 59), with the parallel structure (and symploce) equating “mind” and “world”, captures this simple truth and the sadness it should cause. As the speaker waxes elegiac, he pinpoints that killing the prisoner will deprive the world of his individuality, of his idiosyncratic complexity by eliciting an emotional response in the reader rather than a purely intellectual one.

⇒ “In his best writings about Burma, the novel *Burmese Days* (1934) and the essays ‘Shooting an Elephant’ (1936) and ‘A Hanging’ (1931), one can follow the development not only of Orwell’s disenchantment with Empire, but also his growing radicalism.” (John Rossi & John Rodden, “A Political Writer”, in J. Rodden (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*)