

## George Orwell's "A Hanging" and the Question of Death Penalty

**Braja Kishore Sahoo**

*Lecturer in English, P.N.College(Autonomous), Khurda, District : Khurda- 752055, Odisha,*

"A Hanging" is indeed a compelling criticism of capital punishment, using an example of an execution of a prisoner, to convey the inhumanity of such a condemning act. In the story, the execution is seen from a warden's point of view, detailing the events prior to the execution. George Orwell, who served for a while in the British Imperial Police, described the execution of an unidentified prisoner in this 1931 essay. The barbarity and "unspeakable wrongness" of capital punishment — of "cutting a life short when it is in full tide" — has rarely been brought out powerfully and movingly in this essay. Published in 1931 in *The Adelphi*, a British literary magazine, this journalistic gem describes the execution of a criminal in Burma — where Eric Arthur Blair, which was Orwell's real name, served in the British Imperial Police between 1922 and 1927. The clinical tone of the narration of the forced march to the gallows serves as a perfect foil to the moral revulsion and horror that Orwell wanted his readers to experience. There are several crucial points in the prose, that clearly and prominently convey Orwell's criticisms on capital punishment: the convict's actions before execution, the insensitivity of the superintendent, and the actions of the wardens after the execution.

Orwell portrays the convict as being a conscious and rationale man, still capable of understanding the err of his ways, if given the chance to reform and redeem himself. This is most clearly shown in the convict side-stepping the puddle of water on the way to the gallows. This clearly identifies the convict as a man conscious of his surroundings, and one that is capable of taking action to avoid trouble. Through this allegorical portrayal, Orwell serves to highlight the negative aspect to the severity of capital punishment : it condemns a person to death, without giving him any second chance at redemption. On the other hand, such severe condemnation only makes the convict even more defiant than before, as seen in the repetitive and never wavering invocation by the convict, before the death sentence, of his god. On a harsher note, it may even make a martyr out of the executed, inspiring others of a similar belief to conduct disruptive activities. On the apathy of the executors, Orwell wants to show how, to conduct the inhumane act of killing another, the executors lose their own sense of morality. This is shown in the insensitivity of the superintendent to the hanging, where when confronted with the loss of life, all he can dredge up is an apathetic and emotionless "He's all right". Furthermore, after the hanging, Orwell continues to show that, in the process of conducting rote executions, the wardens' own humanity becomes warped, so much so that they joke about the execution instead of adopting a sombre and mournful mood. Thus,

through the prose, Orwell wants to put forth his idea of capital punishment, and the consequences of such a unforgiving law. Firstly, Orwell implies that a second chance to redemption is taken away from the condemned ; secondly, capital punishment has an adverse effect on the executors themselves, making immoral monsters out of them. He does this by being very descriptive with tone and mood but not with actual details. He has a meager amount of details, all aimed toward showing how capital punishment is wrong. This piece of literature has many fallacies and has a stylized argument meant to persuade. He does so by only focusing on the negative, by creating a mood that is very depressing, and creating character profiles modeling certain characters to seem either really bad or heartless, or really innocent. He also has very specific word choice that makes the reader feel a certain way toward one thing or another. The lack of detail but the descriptive words make it so the reader still thinks what Orwell intends for the reader to think while not attacking directly anything. An argument is composed of four parts: The subject, claims, evidence, and assumptions. Orwell presents all of these things; but he does so not as clearly as to say it is an argument. He argues his claim that capital punishment is wrong by presenting it as a narrative, not as an argumentative paper. This makes it harder to see his argument and to analyze it as an argument, which seems to be what Orwell intended it to be, subtle. He makes the argument subtle, and that is the style of writing he has; the subtle use of words for description is what carries his narrative, not evidence. The subject isn't the prisoner, but the hanging, just as the title suggests. The claim, as it wasn't a directly argumentative paper, was hard to find. But it was in paragraph eight; it was the epiphany that Orwell had that illustrated his claim best; saying "I saw.. the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short..." The evidence was few. The only real evidence was in the fact that it was a narrative. This first-hand experience creates a credibility that could be considered evidence. The whole argument is evidence in itself because it is a narrative. The assumption is that killing a human life is wrong under any circumstances. Orwell has presented this in a unique way and has achieved a valid argument. Although He has created a valid argument, there are many things that are not good in his argument; such as lack of hard evidence and a very emotionally charged narrative that uses a very biased word choice. The word choice was excellent in terms of persuasion, and Orwell chose his very carefully. But they were very biased and led to unwarranted assumptions for the reader. They weren't real facts, but very strong words for his argument; all descriptive. One example is how Orwell described the setting, "a sodden morning... sickly light, like yellow tinfoil." If this were a justified hanging, the tone would not be so gloomy, and Orwell sets it very gloomy. This has nothing to do with the argument, making it a red herring. The morning's mood has no relation to the hanging, but Orwell describes it for the emotion it brings , the sadness it portrays which adds to the emotional appeal for the argument. He goes on to show the conditions of the cells, how small they were and with meager furnishings. This has nothing to do with the claim that capital punishment is wrong but Orwell sets the stage using the scene to make the hanging a very sad day. The morning's mood has no relation to the hanging, but Orwell describes it for the emotion it brings; the sadness it portrays which adds to the emotional appeal for the argument. He goes on to show the conditions of the cells, how small they were and with meager furnishings. This has nothing to do with the claim that capital punishment is wrong but Orwell sets the stage using the scene to make the

hanging a very sad day. The contrast of descriptions of the prisoners to the prisoner workers also contrasts a tone that makes more of an appeal Orwell's view. He views the Superintendent as an almost uncaring person. He just wants to get it over with, and he has a harsh character, being unsympathetic to the prisoners, and later, to the dog. To describe the Superintendent, Orwell says he has "a gruff voice... He said irritably. "The man ought to be dead by this time." Also, with the warders, he described their actions as very clumsy. And the warders just followed orders, and did what the Superintendent told them to do. They were described as big men, tall men, "Six tall Indian men were guarding him..." while the prisoners were small men. Orwell describes the prisoners as "brown, silent men". And then "He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man... shaven head... vague liquid eyes." Orwell likens the prisoner about to be hanged to a comic man, "rather like... a comic man on the films." This implies innocence, that a funny, light-hearted character Orwell likened him to, couldn't have done anything so wrong. This makes him seem so much more innocent without any evidence at all. The contrast also to the tall guards to the small prisoners makes it seem all the more unlikely that they could commit crimes. The prisoner to be hanged, Orwell never chooses words that would hint to guilty. If he were to, then it would bring in the reader's moral judgment; but to Orwell, that is of no consequence, so he avoids giving us the power of moral judgment. He constructs his narrative to be free of that, and to direct us in the path that argues only that taking a life is wrong, no matter what the crime. In order to do this, he needs to use more descriptions than facts. That is the style that he writes in but gives the reader non-relevant descriptions of things and uses red-herrings and non-sequitur. Such is that in the description of the prisoner to be hanged. First, he describes him as "a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man...", and then "rather like... a comic man on the films." These two descriptions give the prisoner more of a likable personality without any actual facts to who he is. This plays into his strategy of making you feel for the character and then leading to his death which makes you feel for him more. But this has nothing to do with the validity of his claim, "Capital punishment is wrong"; this is a red herring. The incident of the dog; It provided a break in action, something that momentarily forgets the hanging, for a seemingly small event. This provides the Orwell with a meaningful scene. "It had made a dash, for the prisoner... trying to lick its face." Of course, Orwell goes on having the prison guards "charge clumsily after the dog" and the Superintendent bark orders to catch it, adding to his already rough personality. But this break was another attempt to show a moral argument. The dog, indifferent and unbiased, gave a pure judgment and went to the prisoner, and tried to be nice, by licking the prisoner's face. This shows that even a dog can see that a life is a life. And to go further, it can be assumed, since a life is a life, it shouldn't be taken away. This is an example of non-sequitur, just because a dog can see you as friendly, doesn't mean the prisoner is not guilty. Orwell never mentions the crime. He does this with the exact purpose to take any moral judgment away from the reader. This is his goal seeing that moral judgment means nothing toward his claim; and this only complicates his claim. But this leaves the reader to a disadvantage. The reader cannot make a pure judgment on his claim because the facts are missing. This skews the reader's decision; which was Orwell's goal. If the crime was very serious, such as a mass homicide, or if it were as small as stealing a piece of fruit; to Orwell, it does not matter. Because, under any circumstances, it is wrong to murder, and for the reader to understand

that, the crimes do not matter. So Orwell chooses to not mention the crime because it is second nature to make a moral judgment when we do know the extent of the crime. So Orwell means to take the facts out of the story. This still, leaves the reader to naturally think what Orwell wants the reader to think, making it more difficult for the reader to make their own judgment. Orwell's lack of facts and his use of description pollute any real judgment reading this narrative. He presents his argument very carefully and words it even more carefully. The whole story is written very well, and has great power to influence against capital punishment. But it is too biased with the use of description. The use of red herrings and non-sequitur are everywhere. The only solid paragraph is in his claim . To a small degree, Orwell has an appeal to the readers' pity; for the "condemned" prisoners. Orwell writes beautifully but subtly uses very strong words meant to persuade. How he presented it isn't right. He has no real facts to support his claim, but he builds his characters very well. "A Hanging" written by George Orwell is dark and gloomy. This story is about capital punishment which is a very controversial topic. The idea of killing one man because he caused the death of another seems a little ironic. Most people believe two wrongs do not make a right, but they usually change their mind when the crime is committed in their community or family. When, in this story, the Hindu who was a very small man was guided gently down the long path to his death still seems to step to the side to avoid a puddle, it shows this man is a cognitive thinker and should be given the chance to redeem himself. The inmates and the staff of the prison seem to act as if there no one was just killed. They carried on as if they were not affected or will not be affected by it in the future. Criminals deserve to have a voice and when the dog in this story came up to the Hindu the warders should have let him pet the dog for just a last bit of tranquility. He may have committed a crime that may not have warranted this type of punishment or he may have committed the most heinous crime ever recorded, we do not know. He does not seem to be too strong to have injured another so bad or overpowering the guards who are gently guiding him to his death so why are they punishing him with such a horrible, slow death? Studies show capital punishment does not stop future attacks on a society. It possibly slows down the statistics, but those people who would commit such a heinous crime do not think they will be caught so they get away with whatever crime they commit. Killing another and calling it justice is just a way of saying we have now taken care of the wrong and now it is right. Wrong! Now there are two families that have one less family member to care about and mourn over. Most crimes committed in a nature that entails capital punishment are not always justified. Wardens kill criminals because a group of people called jurors find him guilty of a crime and the judge give the discipline. I know that killing another individual to justify the death of another is ludicrous. George Orwell's "A Hanging" is nothing but an ironic contradiction of the law. Capital punishment needs a makeover and it needs to be evaluated so our people die less and less from such horrible acts of "justice". I am for capital punishment, but the laws giving it power need to be re-evaluated. Capital punishment in this story was taken as a joke because the crew and criminals were all so jovial and laughing shortly after the Hindu's death. This story was well written but dark. I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man." After reading and understanding George Orwell's feelings through his experiences in his essay "A Hanging." We come to realize that George Orwell, a visitor from the European establishment, gets the opportunity to



participate in the execution of a Hindu man. The author is degraded by what he has witnessed and experienced, and decides to share his feelings with the rest of the establishment through his writings. We understand that the author's purpose is to show how degraded he feels by the events that took place that morning in Burma. Throughout his essay the author shows, that the prisoners are treated like animals. We see this when the author is describing the cells, he states, "We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row of sheds fronted with double bars, like small animal cages." We also see this evident when he is describing the way it took six guards to escort a "puny wisp of a man." He says, "It was like men handling a fish which is still alive and may jump back into the water." The author's purpose is to also allow the audience to understand the way the guards and superintendent felt towards the prisoners. We see this when the superintendent is upset because the execution is running late, and says, "For God's sake hurry up, Francis." And "The man ought to have been dead by this time." Orwell uses the example of a hanging to show how human beings can become insensitive to the horror of taking life, through day-to-day repetition of murder. By using examples of the character's varying reactions at having to perform the unpleasant deed, he also explores how people deal with the concept of taking another's life. Particular care is taken by Orwell not to reveal the nature of the condemned man's crime, which places the focus of the piece on the action of taking the man's life, and not on the moral judgment of whether or not his punishment is fitting his crime. By doing this, Orwell succeeds in placing the reader's thought process squarely upon the issue at hand: How would I deal with the concept of having to watch another man die? Orwell starts this piece by giving a description of the environment in which the prisoners live, but intentionally stays away from describing any of them directly, instead, he lumps them all together with the phrase, "In some of them (cells) brown, silent men were squatting at the inner bars, their blankets draped around them". I feel that he has done this, in order to focus the tone of the story at the steady, day to day feel that what is about to happen is a regular occurrence, that nothing special is about to occur. As the story continues, the reader is given a purely physical description of the captive about to be executed, again, no clue is given about the state of his mind, or of what kind of man he may be. As the story continues, we are introduced to the first character the superintendent of the jail. The description of the superintendent is primarily noteworthy, because of his positioning from the rest of the group. He is standing a short distance from the rest of audience of the hanging, and seems to symbolize that he has crossed over a bridge of some sort; the hangings are of no consequence to him, just another duty to be performed in the course of his day.

For the narrator in this essay/ story/non-fiction account, self-exploration appears throughout, and he realizes it as an execution occurs. In this matter, it is the narrator who finds himself a prisoner inside the walls, even if he indeed is free. Having the ability to execute is considered benign by most of the warders, but the commentator distinctly comes to a realization within this tale. In this story, George Orwell captures the essence of what it means to be human and feel. This realization comes to fruition in the narrator's thoughts. "It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man" (Orwell, 1931). Here, the narrator demonstrates empathetic feelings that cast aside all judgments, punishments, and sentences and simply cause his

mind to shift to another location away from the prison. As the setting is created for the essay, descriptive elements paint a dark overtone that centers on the execution of prisoners. While the act of putting people to death on its own a foreboding storyline, description such as, "...a sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard," exposes the readers senses, and lays the backdrop for this tale. Once in this ominous environment, the reader is further transmitted into what takes place on a day-to-day basis within the jail. Visual representation of each cell is depicted by Orwell writing, "...each cell measured ten feet by ten and was quite bare within except for a plank bed and a pot of drinking water" (1931). While the narrator himself was not a prisoner, the entire process of executing a man seems alien to him. Even though the prisoner could have very well been a mass murderer, the thoughts that we as readers are privy to suggest that the narrator becomes void of all emotion.

George Orwell's *A Hanging* is indeed a piece of non-fiction that is emotionally provocative. It is set in Burma during the 1920s and it deals with a raw eyewitness account of an execution that the author witnessed whilst serving as a police officer. He uses all of his creative genius to universalize his thoughts and in using structure and style effectively, he achieves his main concern by creating a compelling and atmospheric mood throughout his essay. Orwell challenges the reader's views and questions the execution of a human life and the place of authority in it and in this essay I will show how the author swayed my feelings and influenced my thoughts on this subject. No as the title suggests Orwell's concern in his essay is an event. The event the author witnesses is the execution of a man who, for whatever reason, received the death penalty and was sentenced to be hanged. Orwell, who was very much against both imperialism and capital punishment, focuses his essay on the subject of capital punishment and successfully universalizes his thoughts about his experience. He describes what he sees as the prisoner approaches the gallows, when the prisoner receives his fate and what he sees and feels after the hanging. The people around Orwell see it as a job well done but the author does not and he attempts to persuade the reader to adopt his views on the event. This is done in an oblique fashion and Orwell does not involve himself in dogma but instead he uses a process of osmosis to influence the reader's thoughts. Not the crime the man commits is unimportant. Orwell chose not include the man's crime for this reason. He also does not linger on the fact that the condemned man was brown. His genuine response is evident in his descriptions of the man and the conditions. Even the weather takes on an added poignancy. He paints a rather unnatural and unpleasant picture. From the outset the reader's sympathy is aroused. The condemned men are silent; they know their place and await their fate. We are also directly made aware of Orwell's stance, or it may be inferred rather than overly stated, implicit rather than explicit. His stance is to challenge our received ideas and preconceived notions and brings us face to face with a new situation in order to make us really think.

George Orwell: 'A Hanging'

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