A Hanging

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE ORWELL

Orwell was born in India in 1903, where his father worked as a British colonial official. He and his family moved back to England and he was sent to boarding school in 1911, where he was a social outcast for his relative brilliance *and* relative poverty. Orwell won scholarships and studied at Eton under Aldous Huxley, but instead of going to college, he decided to serve as an assistant district superintendent of the Indian Imperial Police in Burma (present-day Myanmar). He learned of the cruelty of British colonial rule and moved back to Europe to become a writer. He published his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, in 1933, and his first novel, *Burmese Days*, in 1934. Orwell was often a political writer and his two most famous novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *1984* (1949), both explore the dangers of various forms of political structures. *Animal Farm* is a fable based on the Russian Revolution and the following rise of Stalinism, and *1984* philosophically reflects on the dangers of totalitarianism. Orwell worked on the latter novel while battling tuberculosis, which eventually took his life. He died at only 46.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Orwell served in the Indian Imperial Police for five years, from 1922–1927. He was part of the colonial system that kept Burma (present-day Myanmar) under British control for 62 years. Orwell's service took place towards the end of British rule in the area, and he would have been part of a rising sentiment against global imperialism. Writing in the Modernist tradition, Orwell was concerned with exploring new (or previously taboo) topics in new ways, and much of the fiction of the time commented on the changing political landscape in and around Europe. Though Orwell wrote "A Hanging" after returning to Europe, the essay exemplifies how Modernist thinkers and writers were willing to explore the cruelty of European colonialism in ways that were more honest, reflective, and unforgiving than previous literary traditions.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Much of Orwell's work, like "A Hanging," was politically driven, and his two most famous novels epitomized this genre of writing during the 20th century. *Animal Farm* is a crushing fable, retelling the story of the Russian Revolution and explaining the mechanisms by which Stalin took power through a cast of farm animals, each of which is a metaphor for a figure or class in early 20th-century Russia. Like "A Hanging," the novel is concerned with the ways that corruption festers within established political systems. is another political novel, but one that examines entire political thought systems rather than specific regimes. It describes the rebellion of Winston, a man who lives under Big Brother, an all-seeing and all-knowing political entity that controls memory, history, and agency. This book, too, interrogates the flaws deliberately hidden by corrupt political structures. While being a political statement piece, "A Hanging" also explores the extent of cruelty humans are capable of, especially when encouraged to conform. Similarly, Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" describes a traditional and conformist community that ritualistically carries out acts of tremendous violence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Hanging
- **When Written:** 1931
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** August 1931
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, Realism
- **Genre:** Creative Nonfiction Essay
- **Setting:** Burma (present-day Myanmar)
- **Climax:** The prisoner is hanged.
- **Antagonist:** Inhumanity and Imperialism
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Fact or Fiction. Orwell never confirmed whether the events of "A Hanging" were fictional or an event he witnessed. When pressed, he denied comment, but it is likely that Orwell watched something similar, if not identical, to the execution described in the story.

Borrowed Namesake. Though his given name was Eric Arthur Blair, George Orwell was better known by his pen name by the end of his life. He adopted "Orwell" from the river in East Anglia, a region of England north of London.

PLOT SUMMARY

Early in the morning, Orwell, the narrator, waits outside of a few prison cells in Burma (present-day Myanmar). A group of guards are preparing the prisoner, a Hindu man, for his hanging. They are careful with him, though he doesn't seem inclined to resist. The superintendent of the prison, a British man, urges Francis, an indigenous man, to hurry the execution.

As the guards and Orwell march the prisoner to the gallows, a stray **dog** breaks into the prison yard and jumps on both the guards and the prisoner. After a brief chase, Orwell uses his handkerchief to restrain the dog, and he holds it as the group continues its march. A few feet later, the prisoner side-steps a **puddle**, and Orwell is struck by the man's small display of agency. He examines the cruelty of the hanging about to take place and reflects on the active life, growth, and reasoning of the prisoner, becoming upset by the idea that the healthy man's life is about to be forcibly ended.

The prisoner is led to the gallows, where a fellow prisoner serves as hangman. When the noose is tightened, the condemned prisoner begins to chant "Ram," a call to his god. Orwell notes that it is not a prayer or a nervous action, but a steady rhythm. The prisoner continues chanting and the small crowd grows uncomfortable, but the superintendent waits for a while before ordering the execution. The chant is cut short, and Orwell releases the dog, which runs around the gallows and seems shocked by the hanging body.

The execution group moves to breakfast with the rest of the guards and prisoners, and together they feel immensely relieved. A young boy shares with Orwell the story of the late prisoner hearing his sentence and details how the man peed himself. Francis and the superintendent join the meal and men laugh freely, despite what has just occurred. Francis shares a story of a man who clung to the bars of his cell to delay his hanging, and the men find this hilarious. Finally, the superintendent invites the entire group, indigenous and colonial alike, to his car for a drink. They laugh at Francis's story while they drink whisky, mere feet from the hanging body of the prisoner.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Orwell – Orwell is the essay's author and narrator. Orwell narrates "A Hanging" without revealing whether the events of the morning actually took place. It's true that the author was serving as a member of the Indian Imperial Police and likely saw executions, but Orwell famously refused to comment on whether "A Hanging" was a real experience or a fiction inspired by events that took place during his service. In the essay, Orwell is a young man working at a prison in Burma (present-day Myanmar). At the beginning of the piece, Orwell reports what he sees objectively, but after the **dog** breaks into the prison yard and the prisoner steps around the **puddle**, he begins to express thoughts on the cruelty of the execution taking place. He is moved by the humanity of the prisoner and feels decidedly uncomfortable when the superintendent delays the moment of death. In this way Orwell stresses the immorality of both colonialism and capital punishment. He feels relief when the prisoner is dead, though it is a relief tinted by guilt; his peers, it seems, share the feeling. Orwell then finds safety in communal feeling: amidst their discomfort, he and his fellow prison workers share horror stories about prisoners sentenced to death, and they laugh. Eventually, Orwell joins the guards, the superintendent, and Francis at the superintendent's car, where they drink whisky together, both the colonizers and the indigenous men. It is not a moment of optimism, but, Orwell seems to suggest, one in which the men agree to ignore the horror of what has just occurred.

The Prisoner – The prisoner is a Hindu man who faces execution on the morning the story takes place. He is quiet and surprisingly submissive, despite the guards' obvious nerves as they restrain him. He does not fight back, nor does he try to escape. At first the men working at the prison treat the prisoner and his execution as a burden and chore, but when a **dog** breaks into the prison yard and treats everyone the same, the men grow uneasy. The prisoner is no different from them in the eyes of the dog, and when he side-steps a **puddle**, he demonstrates his capacity to think and reason, which affects Orwell deeply. On the gallows, the prisoner exacerbates his captors' discomfort by chanting "Ram!" repeatedly. The prisoner's apparent calm and acceptance further jars everyone, including the superintendent, who allows the prisoner time to continue his chant. Even after his death, the prisoner's hanging body serves as a reminder of the colonizers' injustice. At one point, a prison worker attempts to share a humiliating story about the late prisoner, and though Orwell and his peers laugh at the man's reaction to his sentencing, it is clear the weight of what they have done bothers their consciences.

The Superintendent – The superintendent is a British man who runs the prison. He is both Orwell's superior and the man who orchestrates the hanging. At the beginning of the essay, the superintendent appears impatient to get the execution over with so that he and the rest of the prisoners can eat breakfast. But after the **dog** treats all the men equally and the prisoner steps onto the gallows and begins to chant, the superintendent allows him to do so for a prolonged moment. Orwell doesn't portray his hesitation as cruel but instead as reflective, as though the superintendent regrets being the one who must order the prisoner's death. At the end of the essay, the superintendent and all the other hanging witnesses drink some of his whisky together.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Francis – Francis is the indigenous liaison between the prison and the British colonizers. He tells one of the unfortunate stories of condemned prisoners which the rest of the prison workers laugh at.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE CRUELTY OF COLONIALISM

"A Hanging" is fundamentally concerned with the mechanisms of imperialism, and it suggests that colonialism is cruel not only for the viciousness of its practices, but also the mindset it encourages among the colonizers. Orwell, narrating the story of the hanging of an Indian prisoner in British-occupied Burma (present-day Myanmar) in the first person, does not question the death penalty or the subjugation of the indigenous people at the beginning of the story: he reports what he sees objectively, and he, like the superintendent, is only waiting for the hanging to be over. When a **dog** runs into the prison yard and fails to recognize any difference between the prisoner and the white authorities, Orwell begins to more directly question the superiority his fellow colonizers assumed they commanded. Then, when the prisoner side-steps a **puddle**, Orwell begins to press home for readers just how human the condemned man is. The prisoner's decision to step around the puddle proves that he is a living, thinking, and reasoning person, and Orwell highlights how terrible it is that this man's life is about to end at his oppressors' hands. By calling attention to the prisoner's humanity and then focusing on the imminent end of that life, Orwell offers readers a glimpse into the inhumanity of the imperial system.

Ultimately, then, Orwell uses the episode of the hanging to prick readers' consciences not just about this specific instance of the death penalty, but about the system of colonialism more broadly. By zeroing in on moments that highlight the condemned man's humanity, like the incidents with the dog and the puddle, Orwell suggests that colonialism is built upon and sustained by dehumanizing colonized peoples and urges readers to recognize the same.

MORTALITY AND DENIAL

In exploring the death of the prisoner, "A Hanging" suggests that humans' innate fear of death can make illogical behaviors seem sane. The story revolves around the anticipation and aftereffects of hanging a prisoner, and on either side of the event, Orwell and his comrades behave in ways that allow them to distance themselves from the reality of what is taking place. In the early stages of the story, the superintendent rushes the hanging to get to breakfast, apparently indifferent to the cruelty of the punishment; once the deed is done, the whole prison laughs at horrifying stories over a shared drink, just feet from the hanging body. In each case, people react to the horrifying reality of death with seeming detachment and dark humor. Orwell and his peers are at first desensitized to the prisoner's murder, but when their ignorance is disrupted by moments like a friendly **dog** greeting the prisoner or the prisoner's religious chanting, they cannot return to their insensitivity comfortably, as they're forced to recognize that a human being is being killed. Rather than dwelling on that fact, however, the men become desperate to put the prisoner and his death behind them. Orwell himself realizes, in an epiphany just before the man is hanged, how outrageous it is to take a human life; the realization disgusts him. And yet he does not protest the death; like the rest of the onlookers, he only wishes it to be over faster ("the same thought was in all our minds: oh, kill him quickly, get it over"). Their laughter after the hanging suggests the regiment has moved on from the event, but it is likely a failing attempt to distract themselves from the reminder of their own mortality (and their roles in executing a man). The story suggests that rather than facing death honestly, people more often react with callous denial—itself a way of pretending, for a time, that they aren't under a death sentence themselves.

BYSTANDERS, GUILT, AND AVOIDANCE

"A Hanging" investigates the experience of the bystander and suggests that bystanders are avoidant in two ways: they avoid acting in a moment of injustice, and then avoid their feelings of guilt after the fact. Orwell—who at the time was serving as a member of the Imperial Police Force in Burma (present-day Myanmar)—feels both guilt and extreme clarity when he reflects on the humanity of the prisoner who hangs. Orwell, who was in a position to resist the prisoner's execution, feels disgust at "cutting a life short when it is in full tide," and yet he stands idly by as the superintendent orders the prisoner's death. After the fact, Orwell and the rest of the men in the prison laugh at terrible anecdotes, other horror stories of men who went to the gallows, and they seem to deliberately avoid acknowledging the inhumanity of the death penalty, which they carry out with some regularity. The essay seems to suggest that bystanders must remove themselves from unfortunate situations in both a physical and an emotional sense: not only do Orwell and his peers refuse to act to change the system in which they are complicit, but they also refuse to acknowledge their guilt. In this way, the essay assigns even more blame to bystanders than might be expected: though bystanders are usually portrayed as passive, the essay suggests that their emotional avoidance is an active choice. Orwell and his peers cannot cope with their roles in the hanging, but they avoid their guilt rather than confronting it; this, the story demonstrates, makes them culpable, as they neither stop the hanging nor

confront their guilt.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DOG

The dog that makes its way into the prison yard symbolizes the equality of all people regardless of social or political institutions segregating them. Until the dog arrives in the yard, the separation between the colonizers (Orwell and the superintendent, namely) and the prisoner is clear. Orwell, the superintendent, and the rest of the guards go through the routine preparation for the prisoner's execution without much reflection, but when the dog arrives it treats everyone, including the prisoner, indiscriminately. In behaving just as excitedly about interacting with both the guards and the condemned man, the dog indirectly highlights the common humanity of all the men present. The dog thus draws Orwell's, and the reader's, attention to the cruelty of what is taking place.

The men must chase the dog around the yard, and some even try to stone it. The chase can be read as the jailers' attempt to rid themselves of this unwelcome reminder of the prisoner's humanity. The dog, though, cannot be scared away, and the men settle, instead, for catching the stray, which Orwell holds through the hanging. The dog is briefly tamed, as are the men's feelings of guilt, though discomfort troubles them while they wait for the prisoner's death. Finally, when the prisoner hangs, the dog runs to see the body and barks at it, confused. It does not understand the violence done by some men to another. To the dog, all people are the same.

THE PUDDLE

The puddle represents the prisoner's humanity and his desire for self-preservation in the face of imminent death. When the prisoner steps around the puddle on his way to be hung, Orwell reflects on the decision-making that small action took, and much of the rest of the essay explores the full capacity of the human life that is about to be cut short. Whether the prisoner has wet feet doesn't matter, given his impending death, but his desire to keep himself dry demonstrates his fully intact human instincts despite the fact that he will be dead within minutes. The act makes Orwell immensely uncomfortable with both the execution and the system in which he, as an officer, operates, as that system has so dehumanized the prisoner that it became easy to forget his humanity. By stepping around the puddle, the prisoner reminds his colonizers that he is rational, thinking, and feeling, the same as they are. The puddle, in this way, forces Orwell, and readers, to reckon with the weight of the execution that is about to occur.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *The Orwell Reader* published in 1961.

A Hanging Quotes

❝ 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 for 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.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening of Orwell's essay, he establishes the British colonial presence in Burma (present-day Myanmar) by describing a prison. The effect is twofold: first, Orwell's description shows the larger scale, highlighting that the Indian Imperial Police (a British institution) have established themselves as the authority in Burma; second, it shows how the dynamics of the prison and between the men is based on the larger British colonial presence, which then has very practical applications. Orwell equates the cells to "animal cages," suggesting that the power dynamic between the colonial prison system and the indigenous people it has imprisoned is (problematically) similar to the power dynamic between owners and pets.

This passage also establishes Orwell's position relative to the events of the essay. He is, here, a passive presence, reporting what he sees objectively. He delivers the specifics of the prison cells mathematically, as mere fact rather than a subjective value-judgment. He seems to separate himself, the narrator, from the people around him and their acts. This gives the impression that Orwell was less than keen on the imperial agenda.

> [The guards] crowded very close about [the prisoner], 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.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker), The Prisoner

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Orwell brings the doomed prisoner into focus in this passage and continues the previously established dehumanization that equates the indigenous prisoners with animals. In this case, the prisoner is compared to a fish, further emphasizing the extremely unequal power dynamics at play in the prison and—for that matter—more broadly in a society that has been colonized by British forces.

There is also a developing anxiety around the morning's scheduled execution. The guards' nervousness has no clear source, especially given the prisoner's calmness, but readers can intuit that executions set everyone on edge. It's likely, then, that the prisoner's levelheadedness is particularly upsetting to the guards: to refrain from panic on the morning of one's death, without explanation, would cause worry among observers. Here, Orwell, still reporting objectively, demonstrates the building tension any hanging might have at this colonial prison. Even though executions are routine here, they are not necessarily something the men are desensitized to.

> 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. [...] 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.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker), The Prisoner

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Orwell's description of the dog's arrival as "dreadful" refers to the effect that the dog has: it reminds the men that the prisoner is human like they are. Until this point, they (and Orwell's narrative comparisons) have been equating the prisoner with an animal, but here, when an animal actually arrives, they cannot deny that the prisoner is a person. The prisoner, who was previously compared to a fish, is now one of a group of "human beings." The dog sees no difference between the prisoner and his guards, and the excitement with which it approaches the prisoner makes his humanity even more obvious.

The description of the event as "dreadful" is juxtaposed against the dog's joy at seeing the group of people. In other circumstances, it's likely the men would have been just as happy to see the animal, but here they know that its presence can only undermine their affected beliefs about their superiority over the prisoner. As such, they view the animal as "dreadful" and a poor omen.

> 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.
>
> It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker), The Prisoner

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

This is the moment that pushes Orwell out of his position as an objective reporter, as he suddenly allows his subjective observations to trickle into the essay. When the dog recognizes the prisoner for what he is, Orwell is forced to reckon with the man's humanity; now, as he watches the man "step slightly aside," he is forced to acknowledge the full scope of the execution. The "slight" step is suggestive of the prisoner's remaining nuance and agency: it connotes his desire (not to be wet) and his control (he only has to move a

little bit to achieve what he wants). To kill a person who has desires and control is a cruel act, and Orwell, in this passage, is faced with the gravity of the hanging.

Orwell here uses "destroy" in juxtaposition with "healthy" and "conscious" to stress again his revelation. To destroy something healthy feels inherently upsetting, and to destroy something conscious invokes a similar feeling. Orwell realizes that an execution is more complicated than just following orders: it is a mortal, final, and devastating act.

> And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out to his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of "Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!" not urgent and fearful like a prayer or a cry for help, but steady, rhythmical, almost like the tolling of a bell. The dog answered the sound with a whine.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker), The Prisoner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

The prisoner's chant is "steady" as opposed to "fearful," suggesting that, at this point, he has accepted his fate. To the observers, however, each chant serves as a reminder of the prisoner's vivacity and the cruelty of what they are about to passively participate in. The prisoner's chant humanizes him and works indirectly against the colonial penal process that had, until the dog and the puddle, effectively dehumanized him.

Orwell then plays the dog's whine off of the chant. The dog senses that something unnatural is about to take place, and its whines create a sense of shared suffering. The being that recognized the prisoner as a human before any of the other people in the prison here reprises that role.

Finally, the prisoner's chant to his god serves as yet another humanization. He, in calling to his god, again stresses his own humanity. He can do nothing about his death, but his god may yet be able to. Even if Ram (Rama) cannot help, the man is chanting to a higher power in his final moments, illustrating his own smallness and self-awareness. By chanting, the prisoner ensures that his death will be dignified rather than dehumanized.

> We looked at the lashed, hooded man on the drop, and listened to his cries—each cry another second of life; the same thought was in all our minds: oh, kill him quickly, get it over, stop that abominable noise!

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker), The Prisoner, The Superintendent

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Orwell and his peers have accepted their roles as bystanders to the prisoner's execution, and the superintendent stalls in giving the kill order. This suggests that he, too, feels guilty for what is about to happen, and that Orwell's previous reservations about the cruelty of capital punishment and colonialism have reached him as well. It is significant that this is the moment during which the superintendent chooses to pause: the prisoner is lashed and hooded, totally restrained and concealed. This is the most dehumanized position he could be in, and still the prison authorities reflect on their actions. Through the combination of the dog, the puddle, and the chanting, the prisoner has made himself so immutably human that there is no disguising his humanity anymore.

This humanity drives the prison staff to near-madness. Given the inevitability of the execution and the prisoner's humanity, they wish only for it to be over, and they grow cruel again in the final seconds of the prisoner's life; Orwell calls his shouts "abominable" and demotes it to "noise" instead of "chanting" or "prayer." Here, the language of the essay comes full circle: these descriptors once again dehumanize the prisoner, but once Orwell and his peers have noticed his humanity, their dehumanization can never again be fully effective. Now they only revert to cruelty in the hopes that the prisoner's death will end their own discomfort.

> [Breakfast] seemed quite a homely, jolly scene, after the hanging. An enormous relief had come upon us now that the job was done. One felt an impulse to sing, to break into a run, to snigger. All at once everyone began chattering gaily.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

After the body has been inspected and the death confirmed, the language of Orwell's essay transforms again; it eases into a tone that is more relaxed and relieved than tense and frustrated. Orwell himself steps back into the position of an objective reporter and communicates the general gaiety with which the prison moves on from the hanging. This segue from morbidity to joy happens very abruptly, suggestive of the prison staff's desire to repress and forget any of the complicated feelings they had towards the execution. The "impulse to sing, to break into a run, to snigger" feels almost grotesque so quickly after the prisoner's death; the emotional pivot leaves readers suspicious about how quickly the men have apparently moved past the execution.

Further, the note that everyone at breakfast began to chatter "all at once" continues Orwell's suggestion that the group collectively absolves itself of its cruelty. As no individual stepped in to help the prisoner, each man must ignore both his peers' passivity in order to ignore his own. They avoid a sense of communal culpability by pivoting quickly and together into jokes and banter. It also allows each man to avoid reflecting on his own mortality, brought to his attention at the inspection of the hanging body.

> "Do you know, sir, our friend [he meant the dead man] when he heard his appeal had been dismissed he pissed on the floor of his cell. From fright. Kindly take one of my cigarettes, sir. Do you not admire my new silver case, sir? From the boxwalah, two rupees eight annas. Classy European style."

Related Characters: Francis (speaker), The Prisoner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

A young boy tells Orwell the story of the prisoner hearing his death sentence, and though Orwell and the other men find the story funny, it's worth noting that the story itself actually contains a number of humanizing details about the prisoner. For instance, the prisoner's peeing on the floor of his prison cell feels primal and animalistic, thus emphasizing the prisoner's fear and making it quite visceral. This moment retroactively humanizes the prison staff's initial attempts to dehumanize the prisoner by comparing him to an animal. And yet, the callous way that the boy tells this story seems to have the opposite effect: instead of humanizing the prisoner, the story somehow invites the men to laugh at him.

The boy's reference to his cigarette case reminds readers of the implicit power dynamic at play between colonizer and colonized, but it also shows how the hanging has (temporarily) made that dynamic moot. The boy has a cheap cigarette case built in an imitation of European fashion, and the suggestion is that cross-cultural participation is, after such a violent death, not only allowed but encouraged. Orwell, who could have been dismissive or rude to the boy, simply allows him his small luxury and moves on. There is no cultural boundary, for the time being.

> We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis' anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably. The dead man was a hundred yards away.

Related Characters: Orwell (speaker), The Prisoner, The Superintendent, Francis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Although just minutes ago, before the hanging, Francis was scolded by the superintendent, now he tells the story that wins an audience at the superintendent's car. The borders between men of different cultures and positions of power have been totally lost since the prisoner's execution: Orwell makes a point to stress the fact that "native and European alike" share the moment of drinking and merriment at the superintendent's invitation.

Together, this group cultivates its collective denial of what has just occurred and the fear of their own mortality that naturally stems from it. In some ways, they put into practice the lessons learned during the prisoner's execution: they recognize one another as human. The superintendent shares liquor, a luxury, with the rest of the men; they laugh together at a story that minimizes the horror of death. And yet, as they laugh, the proximity of the prisoner's corpse serves as a reminder that the sense of community cultivated in the wake of his execution is temporary: eventually they will have to deal with his body, and eventually they will return to their former state of top-down power, where position, race, and nationality stratify the men.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A HANGING

One rainy morning, Orwell waits outside of a makeshift prison in Burma (present-day Myanmar) and observes a Hindu prisoner who has been brought out of his small, cage-like cell to be hanged. The man has a shaven head and a moustache that strikes Orwell as comically oversized. The small man does not resist when six Indian guards, two of them armed with bayoneted rifles, surround and restrain him. As the guards guide him towards the gallows, he remains calm, but they seem uneasy about his cooperation, handling the prisoner as if they're afraid he will slip from their grasp.

As a member of the Indian Imperial Police, Orwell holds a position of power, and his feelings about the Hindu prisoner reflect his relative comfort in that position. He's a colonizer helping run a small prison, and though he observes most of the goings-on objectively, his few subjective quips come at the expense of the prisoner: he pokes fun at the man's facial hair and emphasizes his submissiveness. Though Orwell's judgments are few, he seemingly makes them without further reflection. The prisoner, on the other hand, seems the opposite of what the crowd expects. He has accepted his death sentence, and his calmness stresses the relative uncertainty of the entire prison system (and thereby the colonial one).

At eight o'clock, a "desolately thin" bugle call sounds. The prison superintendent irritably pressures Francis, the head jailer, to get the hanging over with quickly, as the rest of the prisoners must wait until then to eat breakfast. A "Dravidian" in gold spectacles, Francis hastily assures the superintendent that everything is ready and waiting.

The superintendent and Francis are a microcosm of the colonizers' presence in Burma (present-day Myanmar). The superintendent, a British man, is known by his title and his duties, but Francis is described by his ethnicity ("Dravidian" refers to people who speak the languages used in southern India and Sri Lanka); he seems panicked by the presence of the superintendent and embarrassed that he hasn't already completed the task at hand.

On the walk to the gallows, a "dreadful thing" occurs: a **dog** appears in the prison yard. It is energetic and happy and runs directly to the party guiding the condemned prisoner to his death. It jumps at the prisoner and tries to lick his face. Everyone is too stunned to try to catch the dog, but eventually they pursue it. After various attempts to drive the stray away, someone catches the dog, gives it to Orwell to guide, and the procession continues. Through all this, the prisoner looks on impassively.

Orwell's description of the dog's appearance as "dreadful" suggests that it's upsetting to him, likely because the dog serves as a reminder to both Orwell and the rest of the prison that the man about to hang is no different from them. The dog is ignorant of the circumstances and thus treats the prisoner the same as it treats the guards and Orwell, and this creates a deep discomfort among the men about to carry out an execution. Until this point, Orwell and his peers had a sense of unchallenged superiority over the prisoner, but the dog demonstrates how fallacious that superiority is.

As Orwell follows and watches the prisoner, he experiences a moment of lucidity, noting many physical details about the man who is going to hang. Then, the prisoner steps around a **puddle**, and Orwell is overwhelmed with the true gravity of killing a living human being. He is reminded that the prisoner is still thinking, reasoning, and growing, and he dreads the coming moment when the man will be removed from the world.

As Orwell is forced to confront the prisoner's humanity, he begins to panic about taking a life. It's clear that he's been shaken, as he's fallen out of his objective reporting and into a more subjective commentary on the execution. Still, however, it never occurs to Orwell to say something or try to stop the hanging.

The guards lead the prisoner to the gallows, where another prisoner serves as hangman. The hangman greets the group "with a servile crouch." Two guards half lead and half push the prisoner onto the gallows. When the noose is fastened, the prisoner begins a steady chant to his god, calling out "Ram!" over and over but without emotion. The **dog** whines in response. The hangman covers the prisoner's face with a cotton bag while the prisoner continues repeating "Ram," muffling his chant.

The expected solidarity between prisoners is absent when the sentenced man approaches the gallows, only to find that another prisoner will be the one to hang him. Once the noose is fastened and his death is all but certain, the prisoner's chant serves not as a plea but as a statement of life. He may be calling out to his god simply because he still can, but Orwell has retreated into his objective reporting and refuses to divulge more than the discomfort he feels. Even when the prisoner's face is masked and his voice muffled, he lives and therefore continues to chant.

The superintendent waits quietly; the crowd grows uneasy and almost desperate for him to give the kill order and stop the chanting. Everyone's faces have changed color as they watch and listen to the hooded man, "each cry another second of life." Finally, the superintendent shouts the order, and the prisoner disappears from sight. Orwell releases the **dog**, which runs around the gallows and seems surprised at what it sees.

The prison's power dynamics become explicit when everyone must wait for the superintendent to order the prisoner's execution, despite the event's inevitability. Orwell, the other British colonist present, has his last chance to speak out, but he only sits with his fellow guards and feels the same discomfort that they feel. This sense of passivity becomes communal, and the superintendent must make clear his distinction from that community when he gives the kill order. He is the only bystander who takes an active role in the execution. All the while, the prisoner continues his life-claiming chant, highlighting that he is human, alive, and aware of what is happening. Finally, after the death, the dog once again seems to express the compassion that the surrounding men are incapable of or unwilling to show.

Orwell joins the others behind the gallows and observes the prisoner dangling and slowly revolving. The superintendent checks the body by poking it with his stick and confirms death, saying "He's all right." No longer looking moody, the superintendent leads the party away. The **dog** follows as the group walks past cells of other condemned prisoners and joins the other convicts at breakfast.

After the prisoner is dead, his body and the execution become both a spectacle and a routine. Observing him after the fact, the group can marvel at what they've done without fearing it or feeling so explicitly uncomfortable: they've made it past the chanting and are, briefly, only relieved that the hanging is complete. The superintendent even minimizes the death, which seconds ago was devastating for them all. Together, the group moves past it, silently forgiving one another for their complicity in the imperial cruelty. Even the dog leaves the body behind, recognizing it, finally, as different from the other men.

Orwell and his peers feel an immense relief, now that the man is dead; indeed, the meal is "jolly," and they start to chat "gaily" as though nothing happened. A Eurasian boy tells Orwell about the prisoner's terrified reaction when he heard about his sentence, and many laugh. Francis shares a story about a man who wouldn't let go of the bars of his cell to be hanged, and how it took six men to pull him off. He recalls that they tried to reason with the prisoner about how much trouble he was causing them. The whole prison crew finds Francis's story hilarious, guards and Englishmen alike. Orwell finds himself laughing loudly along with the rest.

The group's collective identity shifts once they reach breakfast and the task of the execution is totally behind them. They seem almost to forget the events of the morning, and even when the prisoner comes back up, it is as a comedic object. The men laugh, relieved to have a feeling about the late prisoner other than discomfort and guilt. Eventually, the sharing of morbid stories becomes a trend, and Francis shares another anecdote that is horrifying but that the group again treats as comedy. The group has been affected by the hanging and clearly does not know how to process what has happened, but they have safety in their numbers, and so they rely together on humor to move past the event together. This, it might be said, is quite literally gallows humor.

The superintendent invites them all to his car for a drink of whisky. The indigenous guards and the European warders share a drink, still laughing at the "extraordinarily funny" anecdote, only one hundred yards away from the hanging body of the unfortunate prisoner.

When the essay ends, the men are all—indigenous and colonial alike—briefly equal. They share a drink, and Orwell emphasizes the diverse makeup of the group. It's almost as if they've learned from their experience with the prisoner not to devalue one another. This, of course, is pure posturing, and readers know the colonial power structure will return once things settle. The group is still laughing (and therefore still collectively processing what has happened) when the essay ends, but the prisoner's hanging body serves as the reminder that things must soon return to the way they were when the morning started, with a clear and cruel colonial structure in place.

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