

**IRONY IN *A HANGING***  
**ESSAY WRITTEN BY GEORGE ORWELL**  
**(Allusion to the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ)**

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**Abstract**

This article identifies and studies Ironies found in the essay *A Hanging* written by George Orwell, an English writer. It is about an execution of a prisoner in Burma and is narrated by Orwell himself. Influenced by colonialism, Burmese people do not show any remorse on the plight of the condemned man. To identify and study Ironies in the story, the New Criticism approach is used. The story contains substantial ironies. And all events throughout the execution are investigated. The results show that at least nine major ironies that can be identified, and most of them can be alluded to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospel.

Key words: *irony, execution, hanging, Crucifixion*

**Introduction**

*A Hanging* is a short Essay written by Eric Blair, better known by pseudonym George Orwell. It is about an execution of a prisoner in Burma. Orwell was an English writer born in India. He worked for the English Imperial Police, positioned in Burma with the position of a Sub-divisional Police Officer. To understand the story, the following quotation concerning imperialism is given:

Some colonialists felt they were helping the indigenous population by bringing them Christianity and civilization. However, the reality was often subjugation, displacement, even death. to ([http. / en. Wikipedia.org/wiki/colonialism](http://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/colonialism)):

According to the quotation above people see colonialism differently. Naturally, of course, the natives who see the brighter side of it will become staunch adherents of colonialism, and will fight hard for it to continue. Those who see dark side of it, on the other hand, will fight equally hard for it to stop. Frequently, this gives rise to ironic situations, as the people of the colony may become closer to the imperialist than to fellow citizens or fellow oppressed. What is more, they can spy their own people for the colonials. It becomes more ironic whenever the officials of the imperialist secretly turn abhorrent to the imperialist and sympathetic to the oppressed people. Orwell painfully experiences such a situation in his other essay *Shooting an Elephant*. He ruefully complains:

I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing. ... . Theoretically - and secretly of course - I was all for the Burmese and against the oppressors, the British. ("Shooting an Elephant" Lexington Reader 335)

Most of the events in *A Hanging* have allusions to the plight of Jesus Christ when facing his crucifixion as revealed in the Gospel.

### **Methodology**

The language of science and the language of literature are quite contradictory in nature. The language of science seeks for precision and avoids ambiguities, whereas the language of literature seeks for multiple interpretations or ambiguities. The more ambiguous an expression is, the more it is valued (Roberts in M. Nababan, *Studies on Imageries in the Eagle* 1977:77)

Ironies are among other means used by writers to achieve various interpretations. At its simplest

Irony involves a discrepancy between literal and the intended meaning. (The Concise Reader 1129). At its most complex, like in dramatic irony, an utterance is more meaningful to the audience than to a particular character in the story. Still there is another type of irony which dominates this paper, called irony of situation. It is a discrepancy between what is expected to happen and what really happens. It is clear for Indonesians, when one evening the former Police Chief assured Indonesians that the country was secure and in order, but turned out chaotic only the following day.

The story is analyzed on the light of New Criticism, with its close reading technique. This approach examines nothing but the words in the text. (Roberts 1977:77) Reference to colonialism simply to show background to the ironies. The events analyzed are those happening from the time the convict is led to the gallows, left dangling, abandoned, and people “celebrating” the conclusion of the execution. Throughout this article citations refer to “A Hanging” in *Insight: A Rhetoric Reader*. The first figure refers to paragraph, the second to line. Elsewhere, sources are stated.

### **Findings**

- 1. The convict was submissive, not revolting, posing no harm, but precaution against his escape is very strict and heavy.**

As usual convicts or criminals are hard to handle. They are illusive, may attack and harm people handling them. Therefore, attempts are sought to prevent these from happening. This particular convict is handcuffed. Six tall Indians are escorting him. Through the handcuffs, a chain is passed and tied to the belts of the warders flanking him (2: 4-7). The warders’ hands are on the convict’s shoulders to make them sure that he is still there. That is not enough. His hands are tied to his sides. Four other warders, two on either side, also march along with bayonets fixed.

- 2. Fellow human beings extend no kindness, whereas an animal offers solace.**

During the procession to the gallows, suddenly there is commotion as unexpectedly from

nowhere, appears a dog. The dog gallops, wagging its tail. Though chased, it tries to lick the convict's face (6: 7). To some cultures, dogs are dirty and despised beasts, and to be licked by one is unbearably offending and humiliating. On the contrary, to other cultures dogs are true companions. So true is this idea that a contributor to Reader's Digest (edition forgotten) entitled his article "My Dog is my Mirror", for the reason that the owner can tell his own psychological condition by looking at his own dog's appearance and behavior. If his dog was lively, it turned out that he was elated; when gloomy, he too was gloomy. So the dog's attempt to lick the convict's face is taken as a gesture of sympathy, the thing the convict really needs but is denied of by the so-called sociable, sensitive men.

### **3. Avoiding trivial annoyance, while fatality is at hand.**

Still on the way to the gallows, although firmly flanked by the warders, the prisoner easily pushes and pulls them to avoid a puddle (9: 6). What kind of trouble can a puddle inflict compared to that by the awaiting gallows? What an irony! Besides being protected by the conscious mind, one is also protected by his sub-conscious. As Orwell says it: ... "all the parts of the body are still growing and working by the second he drops" (10: 7). I strongly believe 'parts of the body' implies consciousness and subconscious.

Another irony is also discernible in this short scene. Flanked by two strongest warders, as it is  
nan pushes easily the man on one side and pulled the other to  
the other (6: 3). In that situation the two warders should have been like big boulders to the convict, making him barely twitch, but it is proved otherwise. He could have caused them trouble if he wants to.

### **4. The convict has died, but the superintendent says, "He's all right"**

Minutes after the condemned man is fallen off the platform, the superintendant examines the suspended body to make sure the body is really lifeless. When he finds it is, he says "He's all right" (16: 2), a remark that sounds painful and sarcastic to the sound mind, especially to those of the

diseased side. How can one be justified to say such a remark in that situation? Comforting remarks might be: “What a pity!”, “What a brutal punishment!” etc

Judging from the overly preventive measures mentioned before, one can be aware that such a duty - one’s execution, is a tedious and an averted job. Once the task is done well - taking one’s life - it is deemed a good job. So “all right” here should be understood from the prospective of the executioners. Their mission is well accomplished.

#### **5. A doctor who is supposed to know about life and death pulls the prisoner’s legs to assure death.**

When relieved after the successful execution, a warder vehemently relates his experiences about a case that was not running smoothly. He says a doctor had to pull the convict’s legs to assure death (22: 1-3). One is hanged to take life from his body. Sooner or later, the prisoner will surely die. It is therefore foolish and useless to pull the legs. That that it is done by a doctor, who is knowledgeable about life and death makes it more ironic. He should be able to do it by taking the pulse or other medical detections.

#### **6. Warders plead to be understood and pitied by a dreaded convict**

In the talk mentioned above concerning how hard and tedious an execution can be, a warder is said to have witnessed another convict being taken out of his cell in preparation for his execution. Upon learning what was going to happen to him, the man clung to the bar of his cell. His clasping the bar is so fast that six people have to work hard to pull him free, three on each leg. It is not enough, he had to be lured first. They said, “My dear fellow, think of the pain and trouble you are causing to us!” (22: 1-5). Again, basic human nature made the convict clasp the bar firmly. No one taught him to do so. But rather than being pitied which he needed in that dreadful situation he was, on the contrary, asked to apologize for having caused the officials much trouble. They should have realized that the firmer the grip meant the more horrible the convict felt. In that situation, it was the

condemned man that deserved solace and tolerance. Appropriate remarks then should have been comforting, like: “We know it is horrible for you. May pain desert you.” What is more, six warders, who are supposed to be strong, had to work together to free him is another irony.

#### **7. Meals are served after the execution**

The rest of the convicts are denied of breakfast until the hanging is over (5: 1). As a sign of sympathy to the poor man’s execution, people may go on hunger strike, or lock themselves up in their cells. But after the execution “... the convicts were receiving their breakfast (17: 21) Having meals in that situation may be understood as a celebration, welcome to the execution. In one occasion the superintendent says, “You’d better all come out and have a drink (23: 2-3).

#### **8. People laugh for reason which they do not know**

Overwhelmed with joy because they are no longer preoccupied by the past hanging, people exchange talks here and there. The superintendent, warders and other viewers should be better off: they should be more knowledgeable about what they are doing. But in the story people in their merriment are seen laughing - at what, nobody seemed certain” (19: 1).

#### **9. People are psychologically terrorized by their deliberate infliction of the prisoner.**

In spite of all the things befalling the condemned man, he is submissive. He only “cries to his god not urgent and fearful like a cry for help ‘Ram, Ram’”, (12: 14-15). But the ensuing effect is unbearable to the people witnessing and causing it. “Everyone had changed color. The Indians has gone grey like black coffee” (13: 6-7). Even the bayonets were wavering, meaning unsteady. Those cannot bear witnessing the scene cry in their mind “oh, kill him quickly, get it over. Stop that abominable noise (13: 9-10)

## **II. Allusions to Crucifixion of Jesus Christ**

Allusion is a part of imagery used by writers to help readers understand his point. As Lynn Z. Bloom in Lexington Reader says “it is a writer’s reference to a person, place, thing, literary character or

quotation that a reader is expected to recognize (811). Roberts in “writing Themes about Literature” explicitly says that Allusions are made to other works, such as the classics or the Bible (150)

Following are some allusions of *A Hanging* to the story of the *Crucifixion of Jesus Christ* as related in the Gospel.

1. The submissive attitude of the prisoner with the otherwise overly strict precaution lest he should escape can be alluded to Jesus’ unresisting behavior. He is heavily guarded, flogged, and abused. He is stripped until He is barely clothed. He is “crowned” with sharp thorns (Mark 15: 16)
2. The convict aversion of a puddle while death is imminent is like Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his arrest. The two events are drawn by basic human nature: governed by the consciousness and the subconscious. The convict does so because he is a human being, unconsciously avoids detectable inconveniences.

Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane also shows that Jesus Christ is a human being. Although he really knows that he will die in the cross as prophesied in the Holy Book, and that it is the will of his Father, the Lord, he, too, dreads the impending doom. In his prayer Jesus pleads: Father, father, everything is possible for you. Take away this cup (destiny) from me. Yet I want your will, not mine (Mark 14: 36). About the two cases, common people deserve to ask: “What should the convict avoid the puddle for, he is going to die in a minute?; What is Jesus scared about. He is the son of God?”

3. The dog which tries to jump to lick the convict’s face is just like the helpless, weeping Galilean women who trail behind Jesus when shouldering the cross to Golgotha. Galileans are considered people of low esteem. From time to time these women wipe dirt out of Jesus’ face out of piety (Luke 23: 28).
4. To the mass the convict’s cry “Ram”, “Ram” continuously and constantly is a sign that he feels horrible. Bystanders and officials cannot stand hearing this lament, until they have to cover his head to muffle the disturbing sound. This does not stop the situation as the man is continuous crying. This scene is alluded to Jesus’ cry in the cross when in agony: ”Eli, Eli, lama Sabachthani” which means “My God, my god, why have you deserted me?” (Luke 16: 34).

5. When the man is hanging lifeless, the superintendent pokes the body with his stick. This reminds readers when Jesus' side was pierced with a spear in the cross "... and blood and water flowed out (John 19: 34).
6. When the superintendent and the warders are quite relieved now that they are no longer preoccupied they chat, laugh, about past experiences concerning troublesome inmates. Ironically, however, some of them laughed "at what, nobody seemed certain" (19.1). This condition brings to mind when Jesus is dangling nailed in the cross and pleads to God about the people trying him:" Father, forgive these people, for they don't know what they are doing" (Luke 23: 34)

### III. Conclusions:

The story "A Hanging" by George Orwell is an essay consisting of 24 paragraphs, 150 lines and about 1670 words. In spite of its shortness, it contains at least 9 major ironies, verbal and ironies of situation. The situations depict show no remorse on the flight of the prisoner. Almost all the events that bare ironies can be alluded to Jesus' affliction when facing his crucifixion, thereby understanding of the story is enhanced.

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