



A Hanging

Personal Essay by GEORGE ORWELL

*"Till that moment
I had never
realized what
it means to
destroy a healthy,
conscious man."*

Connect to Your Life

Crime and Punishment Do you believe that some crimes merit the death penalty, or do you oppose any use of capital punishment? With a small group of classmates, discuss your views on capital punishment.

Build Background

British Burma Orwell's essay is set in Burma, a Southeast Asian country now known as Myanmar. In a series of wars in the 19th century, the British gradually gained control of the country, which in 1886 was made a province of British India. The Burmese people deeply resented British rule, under which they endured poverty, a lack of political freedom, and religious restrictions. It was into this atmosphere of discontent that Eric Blair—later to assume the pen name George Orwell—came in 1922.

Born in India but educated in England, Orwell arrived in Burma as an assistant superintendent in the Indian Imperial Police. He and his fellow British officers, many of whom were inexperienced in police work, led a native-born police force 13,000 men strong. Orwell became increasingly disillusioned with his role as a police officer and with British colonialism in general, and he later gave a scathing account of British society in Burma in his novel *Burmese Days*. His classic essays "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant" also focus on his experiences of and reactions to British colonial rule.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

anecdote	oscillate
formality	timorously
genially	

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS PERSONAL ESSAY

Personal essays allow writers to express their viewpoints on subjects by reflecting on events or incidents in their own lives. Such essays tend to contain more descriptive details than formal and objective essays do—like this detail in "A Hanging":


And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he [the prisoner] stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.

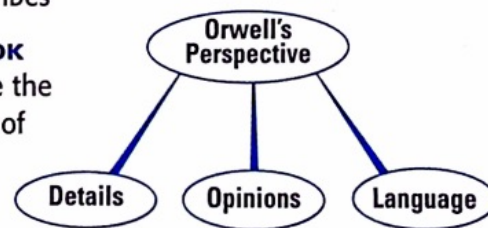
As you read Orwell's essay, look for other descriptive passages that reveal the writer's observations.

ACTIVE READING INFERRING THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

A writer's view of his or her subject is called the **author's perspective**. A perspective can be a result of a political standpoint or of an attitude, a belief, or a feeling that affects a writer's treatment of a topic. To identify the author's perspective in a personal essay, you have to **infer** it from clues such as the following:

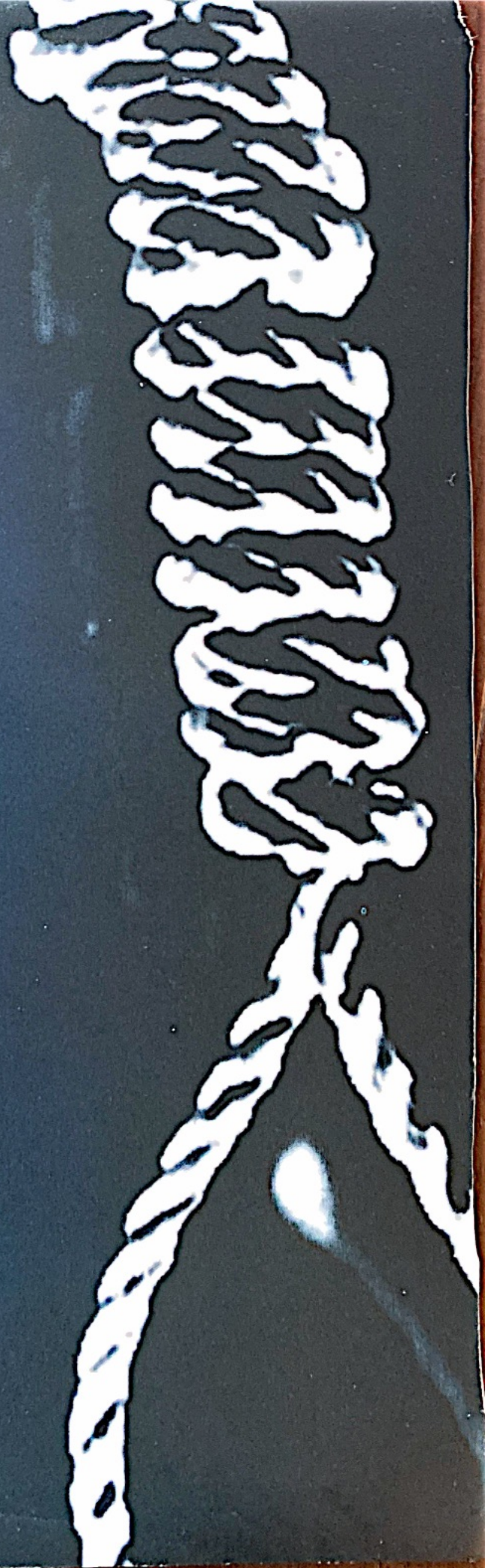
- **details** that the author chose to include
- **opinions**, as when Orwell says that he suddenly realized the "unspeakable wrongness" of the execution
- **language** that reveals the author's emotions about the events he or she describes

 **READER'S NOTEBOOK**
Use a cluster diagram like the one shown to keep track of details, opinions, and language that reveal Orwell's perspective.



A Hanging

George Orwell



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.

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 warders¹ 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.

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 Dravidian² 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."

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, wooly dog, half Airedale, half pariah.³ 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!"

A warder, detached from the escort, charged clumsily after the dog, but it danced and gamboled⁴ 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

1. warders: prison guards.

2. Dravidian (drə-vīd'ē-ən): a member of a dark-skinned people of southern India.

3. pariah: a wild or domesticated mongrel dog.

4. gamboled (gām'bōld): jumped about playfully.

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.

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.

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, 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.

The gallows stood in a small yard, separate from the main grounds of the prison, and overgrown with tall prickly weeds. It was a brick erection like three sides of a shed, with planking on top, and above that two beams and a cross-bar with the rope dangling. The hangman, a grey-haired convict in the white uniform of the prison, was waiting beside his machine. He greeted us with a servile⁵ crouch as we entered.

5. servile: slavelike; cringing.

George Orwell at the police training school at Mandalay, Burma, in 1922. Photo courtesy of Roger Beadon. Orwell is circled.



steady, muffled crying from the prisoner went on and on, “Ram! Ram! Ram!” never faltering for an instant. The superintendent, his head on his chest, was slowly poking the ground with his stick; perhaps he was counting the cries, allowing the prisoner a fixed number—fifty, perhaps, or a hundred. Everyone had changed color. The Indians had gone grey like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering. 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!

Suddenly the superintendent made up his mind. Throwing up his head he made a swift motion with his stick. “Chalo!”⁷ he shouted almost fiercely.

There was a clanking noise, and then dead silence. The prisoner had vanished, and the rope was twisting on itself. 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. We went round the gallows to inspect the prisoner’s body. He was dangling with his toes pointed straight downwards, very slowly revolving, as dead as a stone.

The superintendent reached out with his stick and poked the bare body; it oscillated, slightly. “He’s all right,” said the superintendent. He backed out from under the gallows, and blew out a deep breath. The moody look had gone out of his face quite suddenly. He glanced at his wristwatch. “Eight minutes past eight. Well, that’s all for this morning, thank God.”

The warders unfixed bayonets and marched away. The dog, sobered and conscious of having misbehaved itself, slipped after them. We walked out of the gallows yard, past the condemned cells with their waiting prisoners, into the big

central yard of the prison. The convicts, under the command of warders armed with lathis,⁸ were already receiving their breakfast. They squatted in long rows, each man holding a tin pannikin,⁹ while two warders with buckets marched round ladling out rice; it 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.

THE

Eurasian boy walking beside me nodded towards the way we had come, with a knowing smile: “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 boxwallah,¹⁰ two rupees eight annas.¹¹ Classy European style.”

Several people laughed—at what, nobody seemed certain.

Francis was walking by the superintendent, talking garrulously:¹² “Well, sir, all hass passed off with the utmost satisfactoriness. It wass all finished—flick! like that. It iss not always so—oah, no! I have known cases where the doctor

7. Chalo! (chālō) *Hindi*: Go!

8. lathis (lā'tēz): heavy bamboo sticks bound with iron, used as weapons by the police in India.

9. pannikin: a small pan or shallow cup.

10. boxwallah: in India, a peddler.

11. rupees (rōō-pēz') . . . annas (ā'nəz): Indian units of money. (Annas, which are no longer used, were coins worth 1/16 of a rupee.)

12. garrulously (gār'ə-ləs-lē): in a wordy, long-winded manner.

wass obliged to go beneath the gallows and pull the prisoner's legs to ensure decease. Most disagreeable!"

"Wriggling about, eh? That's bad," said the superintendent.

"Ach, sir, it iss worse when they become refractory!¹³ One man, I recall, clung to the bars of hiss cage when we went to take him out. You will scarcely credit, sir, that it took six warders to dislodge him, three pulling at each leg. We reasoned with him. 'My dear fellow,' we said, 'think of all the pain and trouble you are causing to us!' But no, he would not listen! Ach, he wass very troublesome!"

I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing. Even the superintendent grinned in a tolerant way. "You'd better all come out and have a drink," he said quite genially. "I've got a bottle of whisky in the car. We could do with it."

We went through the big double gates of the prison, into the road. "Pulling at his legs!" exclaimed a Burmese magistrate suddenly, and burst into a loud chuckling. We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably.¹⁴ The dead man was a hundred yards away. ♦

13. refractory: hard to manage; stubborn.

14. amicably: in a friendly manner.