A Hanging: Author’s Attitude To Capital Punishment

Just like the often-quoted line from the Bachman-Turner Overdrive song says, “And I’ll be…taking care of business every day,” the warders had a job to do and this particular day was no different, or was it for George Orwell (Bachman Turner-Overdrive)? In the essay entitled, “A Hanging,” the author, George Orwell, writes of a Hindu man preparing to be hung in a Burmese prison by the warders. Orwell, who himself was part of the warders, had to witness the dreadful hanging and later wrote this detailed essay on what he had to endure on that particular day. The author attempts to help the reader understand and experience what occurred on the morning of the hanging. As a result of what he witnessed, Orwell is overcome by the hanging. By witnessing the hanging, the author comes to a realization about capital punishment. He does not support the idea of capital punishment. Orwell’s perspective on capital punishment can be supported by the overall tone and mood he sets for the essay, the presence of the dog within the prison camp, and the men’s actions near the end of the essay.

First, the author sets the mood and tone from the beginning of the essay; leading up to his realization that he feels the hanging of the prisoner is wrong. He begins with the weather being a rainy, drenched morning, which one might consider the perfect weather for the hanging to occur. Next, he carefully describes how the prisoner only had around a 100 square feet cell and a little bowl of water to consume, quite inhumane conditions for the gentleman. He likened the conditions to enclosures for animals. Early on the reader can see hints of Orwell’s thoughts on the conditions in which the prisoners lived, and died. Orwell’s description of how the “puny wisp of a man” offered no resistance when taken out of the cell, still was handled by the six guards with bayonets and rifles sheds some insight into Orwell seeing the unnecessary force that man was exerting on the prisoner, who was cooperating to the fullest. I also think that Orwell made light of the situation when he portrayed the superintendent and jailer conversation about the need to get the hanging over, so the other prisoners can receive breakfast. These two individuals did not even seem bothered by what was going to happen, but just wanted to hurry it up. For Orwell, who was watching the entire process, the moment he was enlightened was when he watched the soon to be hung prisoner step to the side of a puddle while walking to the gallows where his life would end at the pulling of a single rope. At this moment, Orwell realized that the condemned man was just alive as anyone at the scene. It wasn’t that he just avoided the puddle; it was showing Orwell that the soon to be hanged prisoner was still full of life and thoughtfully and carefully takes time to avoid a puddle, even though he was only steps away from his death. He realized how wrong it was for this prisoner’s life to be ended at the mercy of the warders. Soon this man’s life would end at the hand of the rope snapping and there would be “one mind less, one world less.”

Another way that Orwell revealed his thoughts on capital punishment is by introducing a dog within the plot. During the most solemn moments when the prisoner was being slowly walked to his death, a large unchained and unguarded dog bounds into the prison yard and runs around happily, not knowing what was occurring only minutes away. Orwell carefully chose his language when the superintendent says, “Who let that bloody brute in here?” In Orwell’s thinking, it wasn’t the dog that was the bloody brute; perhaps it was the warders. The dog, in contrast, to the prison guards does not realize what is about to occur and runs about just trying to bark and play. He even runs up to the prisoner and tries to lick his face. For Orwell, the dog

might have been symbolic of the life that was still within the condemned prisoner. However, just like the men would soon end the prisoner's life, Orwell's own handkerchief was used to quickly cease the dog's antics, so they could proceed with the hanging. The dog does not realize he has done anything wrong, and this may be true for the prisoner's feelings too.

After the hanging, there is laughter to be heard within the prison yard, even coming from Orwell himself. These men had just witnessed a horrific hanging; however, there is laughter and even whiskey. Perhaps the hanging was so heart wrenching for the men to watch, the laughter is a sigh of relief that the hanging is finished and they would not have to witness any more for the day. Perhaps the laughter occurred to keep the warders from crying. During the actual hanging, the warders seemed very bothered by the chanting of the prisoner that continued on for what seemed an eternity. I feel it was tugging at the warders' heartstrings and emotions. Orwell even referenced how the colour seemed to drain from everyone around the gallows watching and listening to the prisoner, while a couple of the bayonets started to tremble due to the continual chanting that was probably wearing on each of the warder's conscious. Disagreeing with capital punishment, Orwell and the others are not laughing at ending another human's life; however, the laughter represents the closure of the hanging and no more haunting sounds or images for them.

In George Orwell's, "A Hanging," the warder's did manage to take care of the day's business in about eight minutes; however, that particular day forever changed George Orwell.