The Lowness of Humanity in “A Hanging”

Humanity is the characteristic human has such as sympathy, kindness that it makes human to be different from other animals. Without the faith of humanity, chaos, jealousy and selfish would conquer the world. In the story, George Orwell wrote about the man got hang at the gallows because of his capital punishment. However, Orwell does not agree with this punishment and think it is wrong. He also shows how the characters in the story treat each other in the wrong way by the construction of mood and tone, characterization, symbol, and literary devices through the expression of setting and characters. In the story “A Hanging”, George Orwell illustrates the lowness of humanity.

Firstly, Orwell uses symbolism to elaborate how low of humanity to execute the man. Orwell uses the symbols, which are tide and water puddle to make the recognition that he does not agree with the punishment. In the story, the prisoner does not step directly to the water puddle; an action of the prisoner reveals the meaning of water puddle in here. As in the quote, “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 a full tide.” (p.1) Orwell uses water puddle to symbolize life. Further, he also uses the water puddle to reflect the prisoner’s attitude towards himself. His attitude is that the prisoner still cares about his body, and doesn’t want to be wet even it is futile. It also tells that the prisoner still love his body and doesn’t want to be dead. Apart from that, the action of the prisoner that he steps aside could also be viewed in another way. In a symbolic level, the action that prisoner doesn’t step on to the puddle shows the recognition that his life is about to be finished. On the other hand, the sentence “cutting a life short when it is in full tide.” As in a sentence, the narrator means that execution cuts the prisoner’s life before the time he should die. The word “full tide” symbolizes the prisoner’s lifetime. The way Orwell uses symbolism illustrates the prisoner’s life like the tide is flowing. The way Orwell uses the word “cut” to show the cruelty of capital punishment since he does not agree with the penalty of death.

 Furthermore, he uses the dog to symbolize conscience to show the humanity of friends of the dead prisoner. In the quote, “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” (p.1). From the dog’s action, at first, it acts friendly to the prisoners and the narrator. Compare with the action of the prisoner’s friend, they act concern, afraid and worry about the execution. Conversely, After the prisoner got hang, in the quote “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” (p.2). From the quote, the dog acts completely different between the time before and after the hanging. After the hanging, the dog goes away from the crowd. Same as the dead man’s friend, they don’t act concern or afraid anymore. Even more, they start to laugh and making jokes, which they completely forgot what they have seen. Their actions show that they don’t care much about their friend’s death, which it is not right in terms of humanity.

Thirdly, Orwell describes a gloomy, uncomfortable mood and the lifeless tone of the setting. The setting of the story is in Burma. In first part of the story, the narrator describes about the jail conditions by the creation of mood and tone. From the quote, “A sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard.”(p.1) The narrator makes use of the word “rain” to effect the overall mood of the setting by create dark atmosphere in the jail yard. He also uses the word “sodden” and “sickly” to describe how gloomy the environment in the jail is. In addition, the narrator uses the lifeless tone to show that he thinks the capital punishment to hang the prisoner is not correct. He describes the tone as the capital punishment is nervous and he feels concern about it.

More than that, Orwell shows the warder’s humanity by the used of simile to compare the jail with the animal cage that he arrest the prisoner in. He uses the simile in the quote, “We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a roll 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.” (p.1) He illustrates how the prisoners are treated and explains how poor the conditions in the jails are like. This also refers to what the narrator thinks about the warders, which he thinks it is immorality to treat the prisoners this way.

Thirdly, Orwell reveals the character’s thought through the characterization of the jailer, the dead man and the prisoner’s friend. The jailer doesn’t look anxious even they know that they have to kill the man. In addition, “The man ought to have been dead by this time. Aren’t you ready yet? ...The prisoners can’t get their breakfast till this job’s over.”(p.1) According to the quote, it showed that the superintendent looks at the man’s death as his duty. He does not seem to be depressed about the prisoner’s death at all. Further, his actions reveal his lowness of humanity since he looks at the man’s death as a normal condition. The superintendent view that his duty is more important than human conscience. After the prisoner died, his friend acts normally like nothing has happened. From the quote, “Everyone was laughing. Even the superintendent grinned in a tolerant way. You’d better all come out and have a drink,”(p.3) According to the superintendent’s action, he feels nothing after he have just killed someone. Same as the prisoner’s friend, at first, they act afraid but after he died they started to laugh. The action of both superintendent and the prisoner’s friend showed that they don’t value human life and does not care about the dead man’s feeling before he died. On the other hand, the prisoner doesn’t show that he is afraid of being executed.

All in all, “A Hanging” reflects the lack of morality through the way warders treat the prisoners and setting of the story. The first person’s perspective helps to show the narrator’s thought towards immorality that the warders and superintendent have. Using symbolism, mood and tone, characterization and literary devices, Orwell demonstrates the idea that people’s life should not be taken away by others. Additionally, the negative view and cruelty in the story helps to indicate people’s humanity and the understanding of others in the real world.