Analysis of Onlookers’ Cold-hearted Images in Turgenev’s “The Execution of Tropmann”

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Abstract

The ethical issues of the death penalty and public execution have aroused a widespread public concern. These ethical difficulties were addressed by Turgenev in his essay "The Execution of Tropmann". As academics pay closer attention to Turgenev's viewpoint, this article focuses on the images of onlookers and is divided into five sections: an introduction to the essay's basic content, the crowd's binary opposite images, the reasons behind cold-hearted behaviors, the artistic construction of the crowd of onlookers, and the reality reflection and literary significance. Upon witnessing Tropmann's execution, Turgenev expressed his anguish and remorse about being there, and drove readers to reflect on the decency of the death penalty and public execution. When the guillotine is employed as a prop for amusement by everybody and the execution is transformed into a carnival feast, barbarism will replace civilization and justice will be overthrown by evil. However, no matter what choice a country makes, respecting judicial sovereignty counts most.

Keywords

Execution, Ivan Turgenev, onlookers, ethics, death penalty

1. Introduction

A landmark work of literature on the ethics issue of the death penalty and public execution is Ivan Turgenev’s “The Execution of Tropmann”. Jean Baptiste Tropmann, a French aged 22 being accused of sensational butchery on account of murdering eight members of the Kinck family, was publicly guillotined before an eager crowd of 25,000 Parisians in January 1870. Russian realistic author Ivan Turgenev was temporarily residing in Paris. Turgenev attended Tropmann's execution after being invited by local authorities. Turgenev revealed his uncomfortable feelings of anxiety, shame, and guilt toward public execution by describing the event through a 12-part sketch, which included the events of the arrival at the prison, the installation of the guillotine, the rehearsal of the event on the square, the final trial of Tropmann, to the formal execution itself. It drove readers to reflect on the decency of the death penalty and public execution. While most witnesses found the public execution to be an uplifting spectacle, the author found it to be an object of compassion. As a writer, Ivan Turgenev confronted the challenge of observing and describing death.

2. Onlookers’ Binary Opposition Images

This article analyzed the unique images of bystanders and the conflicting identities they represented. Contrary to Tropmann, they were both law-abiding civilized witnesses to the execution, and bloodthirsty barbarians yelling and celebrating at the killing scene.
2.1 Law-Abiding and Justice-Upholding

As murdering 8 persons, Turgenev was a sinner and culpable of punishment. He served as a warning that killing would finally end in death with his boots on, as well as a representation of the devil to the onlookers. They resented individuals who threatened personal safety and upset social order, hence they yearned for criminals to suffer the most heinous penalty possible, which would not only exact revenge for the victims but also soothe their animosity of criminals. The entire process of Tropmann's execution adhered to routine and legal criteria. Turgenev portrayed the execution's successive stages in precise detail, including the rites, attire, and rehearsal that the crowd had fervently accepted as reflecting the progress of civilization.

Before the execution, Tropmann was given the opportunity to confess just as a rite (Turgenev, qtd. in Lopate 318) and accompanied by a priest to the guillotine. The executioners were dressed in formal and ceremonial apparel:

The executioner, looking for all the world like a diplomat or a protestant pastor. He was followed by a short, fat old man in a black coat, his first assistant, the hangman of Beauvais. The old man held a small leather bag in his hand (ibid. 319).

The relationship between the executioners and Tropmann was that of the perpetrators and the victim. Doing almost the same job as butchers but dressing like elegant gentlemen, the executioner and his assistant performed the act of upholding justice sanctioned by officials. The crowd excitedly shouted “There he is-there he is-it's him!” (ibid. 308) to Turgenev just because he was mistaken for the executioner. The public supported and yearned for all these civilized customs, practices. However, behind the civilized and legal procedures was the desire for bloodlust and killing.

2.2 Numbness and Bestiality

The onlookers gathered outside the prison and square ready to witness Tropmann's execution drew Turgenev's notice, demonstrating the numbness and savage bestiality concealed beneath the human appearance. Although the execution of Tropmann took place at seven o’clock, almost all the people were going, and some, especially women, running along in the same direction (ibid. 307), enthusiastic and joyful. They shouted, whistled, and exclaimed the name of the condemned prisoner (ibid. 311), and they looked forward to the execution of this violent act, obsessed with Tropmann's death and even the blood that flowed from him.

Two men took advantage of the first moments of unavoidable confusion to force their way through the lines of the soldiers and, crawling under the guillotine, began wetting their handkerchiefs in the blood that had dripped through the chinks of the planks (ibid. 323).

To some extent, this scene proves a saying in KJV Bible edited by Carroll and Prickett: “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed” (Gen. 9.6). The purpose is to warn people to respect life and not to kill, as blood represents life, and bleeding is actually murder (Jiang, 2012, p. 127). When it is disclosed that the target of that sadism and depravity is not even truly an adult yet, in anything except possibly the strictest legal sense, the intrinsically perverted, sadistic nature of public execution is even less tolerable. From this perspective, Tropmann is a sinner, executioners are sinners, and all people witnessing this gory execution are indirect murderers. The collection of Tropmann’s blood in two men’s handkerchiefs, and the desire of the crowd to witness violence and blood, indicate the fact that humans have a natural tendency toward bloodlust. The image of archaic and primal practices—the complete antithesis of modern ways—is supported by this sight. Bloodlust is regarded as a prehistoric remnant that humans fought for survival in primitive times. In a sense, this execution of Tropmann resembled an extremely cruel and barbaric sacrifice in the violent past, as people cheered and whistled wildly, with all procedures and dresses associated with civilization. The identity of the barbarian and the civilized shifted between Tropmann and the crowd. The savage and violent man who once killed 8 people had become a calm and sensible victim, without howling or weeping, but at the sight of that composure, simplicity, and modesty (Turgenev, p. 318). However, the crowd shouted, laughed, and cheered for the violence and blood, forming a huge and manifest contrast between the two.

3. The Reason Behind Cold-Hearted Behaviors of Onlookers

A large number of historical facts attest that throughout the history of public beheadings, the majority of people who came to see them were enthusiastic or, at best, immovable. And even if people find it disgusting or terrifying, it doesn't always stop them from coming out and watching. The reason for onlookers’ psychology desiring violence
and blood may be concluded in two aspects.

3.1 Succumbing to the Sense of Survival and Curiosity

When Tropmann was killed, people cared and watched. On the one hand, it might be due to the sense of righteousness, but on the other hand, it was self-congratulatory, using the example of Tropmann's death as a caution to warn themselves not to make mistakes. The mistreatment of others was witnessed by onlookers in a context that contrasted sharply with their own existing circumstances, creating an impulse. This impulse was the fluke that they were still alive, and they used these emotions to relax and to see others’ misfortune to appease their hearts.

While most witnesses watched the execution with great interest, Turgenev attributed participation in Tropman's execution to inappropriate curiosity. Curiosity, a drive that does not respect boundaries, is inherently transgressive (Lieber, p. 673). There was some subtle connection between the execution and perverted and misplaced interest. For people who are still alive, death is unknown and mystery thus bringing about curiosity which, unluckily, drives them to push their personal ethical boundaries and arouses their desires to test and explore their sense of shock.

3.2 Affected by Animal Instinct

Men are beasts in the shackles of law wearing the cloak of civilization (Schopenhauer, 2005, p. 373). Violence is a survival trait that has evolved in animals over millions of years to slaughter and eat other species. What really affects the development of human behavior is not consciousness, but unconsciousness. It is the existence of unconsciousness that human beings, like other animals, have savage and bestial thoughts. According to Freud's personality theory, the id is the unconscious thought including primitive desire and anger (qtd. in Lear, 2007, p. 185). People experienced pressure and personal threats instinctively when Tropmann, an eight-person serial killer, was still alive, and this led to impulses and needs for self-protection. People's biological requirements and desire to avoid pain spurred the original impulse, which led to the emergence of bestial attitudes and behaviors. To preserve societal order, law and order restrained people's irrational primal instincts. The assembly of individuals in the plaza to see the gruesome execution of Tropmann scenario was the unleashing of the bestiality in their unconscious minds and the manifestation of their true selves. When the victim of decapitation was bound and defenseless, he essentially become a pawn in their killer’s show. The scene of Tropmann's beheading was somewhat reminiscent of the scene in prehistoric times when barbarians gathered around the slaves and the age of ignorance when people thought some of their fellow creatures were sacrifices to the gods. The ego, charged with perception and reality testing, is the conscious part of the individual (ibid.) and the agent of personality. The reality principle obliged bestial thoughts to be concealed when they appeared in onlookers' minds. Under the guise of upholding and enforcing justice, the crowd was bestial. The Superego, or the ego ideal, represents the internal world of a person (Freud, 1990, p. 32). It works by shaping one's moral nature in order to maintain their sense of morality and steer clear of taboos. Owing to his inner superego, which exacerbated him to feel guilty and ashamed, Turgenev considered that witnessing a cruel execution left a traumatic impression and favored to cease the death penalty and public executions.

4. Artistic Construction of Images of Onlookers

Turgenev used both temporal and spatial order to portray the scene of onlookers. Before midnight, there were barely any people around the statue of Prince. Nevertheless, the streets became intensely congested the closer one approached the prison. The crowd was relatively silent, but when Turgenev was mistaken for the executioner, the noise level abruptly escalated. In order to create suspense and emphasize the crowd's expectation of public execution, the author used these details to establish two sets of comparisons: the first was the level of street congestion, and the second was the volume of bystanders. Besides, the description of the huge contrast produced by the crowd's noise also made the essay has mot literary tense.

Only the street urchins were already weaving round us; with their hands thrust in the pockets of their trousers and the peaks of their caps pulled over their eyes, they sauntered along with that special lolling, flitting gait (Turgenev, p. 308).

The images of some viewers were depicted in this statement. Readers were able to more vividly perceive the inner contentment and comfort of the crowd when they went to watch the public execution due to the perspective switch from the group to the individual. The crowd's noise level gradually climbed from half past twelve until three
in the morning. Twenty-five thousand people had assembled in the square at about three in the morning. Turgenev vividly described the sight of the "carnival" by the aural sense, highlighting the thrill in people's hearts as if they were celebrating a magnificent "gala" rather than a cruel and merciless death:

The noise struck me by its resemblance to the distant roar of the sea: the same sort of unending Wagnerian crescendo, not rising continuously, but with huge intervals between the ebb and flow; the shrill notes of women’s and children's voices rose in the air like thin spray over this enormous rumbling noise (Turgenev, p. 312).

As time passed, the noise of the crowd became louder and louder, reaching its peak before the public execution began, bringing the atmosphere to the climax. The frenzy of the crowd is in stark contrast to Tropmann's calmness, modesty, and silence. Turgenev once again zoomed the perspective from the whole to the part, describing the two men pouncing on Tropmann before the public execution and the two men dipping Tropmann’s blood on handkerchiefs after he died. Through the use of artistic devices, Turgenev established a sense of intimacy and sympathy with Tropmann, highlighting the crowd's bestiality, indifference, and cold-heartedness, and establishing a foundation for the author's appeal for the abolishment of public executions. Turgenev also shared this trauma by constantly creating an atmosphere of suspense, and bit by bit, readers were brought closer to the final event. He used the description of the onlookers who had assembled to observe the execution to heighten the suspense.

5. Reality Reflection and Literary Significance

The essays may be subjective if the author discusses a controversial subject just based on his or her own experiences. Furthermore, personal philosophies, religious beliefs, and values may drastically clash with those of the larger society. The articles in this case are quite likely to face moral judgment from the general public. Balancing the scale between art and ethics not only requires the writer to use appropriate literary means to express personal ideas, but requires readers to have a certain ability to unerringly understand the author's views.

Turgenev is a very skilled writer, yet there were several flaws in the chapter. Despite the fact that Turgenev had never even met Tropmann before that day and had no personal relationship to him, the author felt sympathy for the guy who had allegedly killed several victims. This individual, according to Turgenev, was just a young man in his early 20s. As Tropmann seemed to be innocent, Turgenev could identify with him, making him blind. The author believed that Tropmann should not be punished by the death penalty and public execution based on the prisoner's young age, zero confession, calmness before dying, inappropriate carnival of the crowd, and gory execution scenes. This is undoubtedly one-sided. Any illegal act must be determined after a thorough analysis of the criminal facts and the criminal motive. The only benefit of zero confessions to the prisoner is that there might be insufficient evidence to convict the criminal suspect. In other words, Tropmann still denied that he had committed crimes even though the facts of the crime were well established. This was undoubtedly an act of unrepentance, and he never realized his mistakes. Turgenev put aside the facts of the crime and defended Tropmann, and shifted readers' sight to the indifference of the crowd and the brutality of the execution site. Insofar as the aforementioned is concerned, it is unjust. In other words, this article successfully arouses readers to think about the ethics of capital punishment and public execution, but it is also a misleading article that attempts to cover up the fact of Tropmann's crime.

Ethical dilemmas are very common in literary creation. In this paper, there are two dilemmas. One is whether public execution should be abolished, and the other is whether the death penalty should be barred.

Public executions were first designed to warn off potential troublemakers, stopped them from disrupting the peace, and instilled a sense of fear among those who might otherwise breach the law or violate the rules. While crime has progressively decreased in modern era, people's awareness of adhering to the law has strengthened. When enforcing the laws and regulations, nations pay greater consideration to the humanitarian aspects. Public executions have thus been barred in the majority of nations.

The death sentence may not deter some heinous criminals, but it will unquestionably bring a halt to their criminal conducts and alleviate the agony of the victim's family. Countries that have abolished the death penalty cite concerns about human rights as justification. The necessity to respect a criminal's human rights deserves more contemplation if he disregards, despises, or even destroys the rights of others. The ethical question of whether to abolish the death penalty is an ethical dilemma. Respecting judicial sovereignty and putting an end to moral kidnapping matter greater than whether it is maintained or not.
References

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