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# Death sentences

BOB BLAISDELL

More tales from a New York writing class

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THE AXE split two ways: half of us against the death penalty, half for it. This I found out by asking the remedial writing-and-reading class to explain on paper how and when they arrived at their current opinion on capital punishment. With most of the students being from overseas, I thought it was important for each to explain his or her culture's or religion's or country's views on the death penalty. Then we read – with those opinions and histories staring us in the face – *Claude Gueux*.

## 1 Victor Hugo's *Claude Gueux*

To argue against France's readoption of the death penalty, Victor Hugo fictionalized the true story of Claude Gueux, a prisoner executed in 1832 for murdering his jailer. Hugo's hero – quite a bit nobler than the real Claude Gueux (the translator Geoff Woollen tells us in his introduction) – is a charismatic man who steals 'something,' so that for a few days his family can eat and be warm, but is caught for that theft and sentenced to five years in prison. After Gueux establishes himself as the leader of the prisoners, a boyish young man named Albin offers half his ration to Gueux, who has a tremendous and unsatisfied appetite. (Either Hugo was squeamish about homosexuality or he knew his audience would be, but in any case he modified the ages and circumstances of the two real men so that he could insist that the friendship and love that develop between Gueux and Albin are like father to son.)

The jailer and workshop superintendent, Monsieur D., resentful of the sway Gueux holds over the inmates, removes Albin from Gueux's cell-block. When Claude humbles himself to ask Monsieur D. for Albin's return, Monsieur D. refuses. Tormented by hunger and enraged by the jailer's cruelty (Monsieur D. tells Gueux that Albin was transferred simply 'because I felt

like it'), Gueux 'sentences' the jailer to death.

At this point in the story, neither I nor my students became self-conscious. We knew the issue we were supposed to be thinking about was capital punishment, but we were caught up in the narrative, and Gueux's sentencing of the jailer seemed 'right' – or at least understandable. Gueux then gives the jailer repeated warnings (somewhere between pleadings and threats) about the need for returning Albin to him. Before Gueux even makes his case against Monsieur D. to his fellow prisoners, he asks them for an axe (these men have such tools in the workshop):

'What for?' he was asked.

He replied: 'To kill the workshop superintendent this evening.'

He was given several axes to choose from. . .

The students laughed with pleasure (yes, pleasure!) at the inmates' ready response, and I realized how pleased I was as well. What an exciting story! But when I finished reading aloud the rest of that paragraph, I said, glancing at the clock and knowing we didn't have enough time to get to the end of the story, 'Okay, that's it – read the rest for tomorrow.'

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'You can't stop now!' came the chorus from the students.

'That's a good place to stop, because now maybe you'll finish the reading on your own,' I said. 'We have to work on another project.' Divided as we were on the death penalty, we were all keen to see Gueux carry out his death sentence on Monsieur D. – which Gueux knows is simultaneously his own death sentence.

I tried to point out this problem in class the next day when we started talking about the rest of the story: 'How can I be against the death penalty and yet be cheering on Claude Gueux? – "Get him, get him!"?' How can those of you who are for the death penalty be wanting him to do something that will bring on that punishment? Why do we all want him to kill the jailer?'

'It's exciting?' offered Stacey-Ann.

Maybe I was barking up the wrong tree, but I persisted in my attempt to get at the contradiction between our opinions and our feelings.

'Yes, it's exciting. But why are we sympathetic to Claude? Why do we like him?'

'Everybody likes him.'

Many of the death penalty advocates were adamant that Gueux deserved the death penalty for what he did. And yet they too had been rooting him on.

'Some of you have argued that capital punishment is good because it's a deterrent – right?'

'It is!' called out Jasmine.

'But in this story it's not – no matter what you think otherwise,' I said. 'Claude Gueux knew killing Monsieur D. meant his own death sentence. But he didn't want to get executed – he knew they'd convict him – so he tries to kill himself as soon as he's murdered Monsieur D.'

I paused and asked again the question that had been nagging at me: 'So why did we want him to kill the jailer?'

The students either shook their heads at my accusation or ignored it.

'You did want him to!' I laughed.

Only Jasmine, nodding, smiled and spoke up, 'Yeah, I confess, I did. But even so, he knew what was coming, just like you said, so that's why he's got to face it too.'

Bernadine chipped in, 'You kill, you die.'

'But he was provoked! – Here. Here, look at page one-twenty-two.'

'What?' cried Claude, 'You say I was not provoked? So this is what you call justice, and now I understand. If a drunken man strikes me and I kill him, I was provoked, but you pardon me and send me to the galleys. Yet for four years a man of sober and rational disposition can attempt to break my spirit, for four years humiliate me, for four years goad me every day, every hour, and every minute, in some unprotected spot. I had a wife for whom I stole, and he uses this woman to torture me; I had a child for whom I stole, and he uses this child to torture me; I have not bread enough to eat, but a friend gives me some and he takes away my friend and my bread. I ask for my friend back, and he locks me up in a solitary cell. I say *vous* [formal 'you'] to this police sneak, and he calls me *tu* [informal 'thou']. I tell him that I am suffering, and he tells me that I am boring him. 'So what do you expect me to do? I kill him. Very well, I am a monster, I killed the man, it was unprovoked, and you must cut off my head. Then what are you waiting for?'

'I have to admit that's a good point,' said Jasmine.

'If you were on the jury could you have convicted him of first-degree murder?'

'Probably not,' she conceded with a sigh. Then, brightening, she said, 'But for other murders – because it depends what happened – I would.'

Claude Gueux was a divisive story, at least in my classes. Was it worth it? Where did it get us? Well, it allowed us to talk – mostly without arguing – about the relativity of laws; the prejudices of law enforcement; the variations of laws, how they don't necessarily extend across geographical borders; taking the law into our own hands; the sacredness of life; various religions' views on the death penalty – two of the most articulate students about this issue were Muslims, who patiently explained to us Christians, Jews, and atheists for which sins the Quran mandates the death penalty. Hugo's five-page epilogue to the twenty-page story is an essay full of wild, wonderful flourishes:

Take the common man's head, cultivate it, weed it, water it, sow it, enlighten it, moralize it, and put it to good use; then you will have no need to cut it off.

Hugo is used to veering between narrative and

essay in his novels, but in this short story, which contains a larger portion of pathos and heroism per page than *Les Misérables* or *Notre-Dame*, Hugo's otherwise persuasive concluding argument is at odds with his own story. Of course the great author had to know his murderous hero would gain our sympathy – so much sympathy that, whatever we say our opinions on capital punishment are, Claude Gueux acted with our sympathy in carrying out a death sentence on the jailer! His revenge and subsequent execution ennoble him – and our most primitive artistic and moral demands are satisfied (and, for some of us, our political views take a holiday).

After the story, the students wrote again, using it as a source for defending, complementing, or countering our original opinions. I questioned the logic or inconsistency of their religious beliefs (if they gave their religions as a defense of their positions), and I pushed them to return to their first confirmed position on the death penalty. If they talked about their brother having been murdered (two students did write about this!) and how that tragedy had altered their beliefs about capital punishment, I as sensitively as possible (which was, no matter what, too clumsy and intrusive) tried to get them to explain why.

A young woman from Russia wrote that as a girl she had been shocked that the death penalty existed in America; she was very proud to say that Russia – and the USSR before it – hadn't had the death penalty. I asked her in a written comment to ask her parents about the GULAG prison camps. She did and was kind enough to tell me afterwards, 'I had no idea before. I wasn't taught about it. One of my dad's uncles was dead because of it. But I never knew why till my dad told me the other day.'

Students from Haiti explained that the death penalty didn't exist there; I asked them about the execution squads of Tontons Macoutes, and they said, Well, yes, but that wasn't legal capital punishment. One of the two Islamic students who had explained to the class the laws of the Quran on capital punishment later confessed in her paper that she herself was against capital punishment, and that she and her father had discussed her objections to it. Thanks to her and other students, I learned a bit about various cultural and national views on capital punishment.

And what did my students learn? Maybe only this: an uncomfortable awareness that our

convictions are sometimes different from our feelings.

## 2 D.H. Lawrence's *The Prussian Officer*

'Any questions, comments about "The Prussian Officer?"'

'I wish the guy, the young guy, didn't die,' says Kevin.

'Yeah,' I say, 'It's too bad.'

'At least he killed the officer,' says Leon.

'Yep.'

'I like that part,' says Kevin.

A few of the other guys nod and murmur agreement.

Diana, making a face of caution, her eyes narrowing, says, 'I'm not just reading something into it, am I? I mean, the officer guy is sexually attracted to the orderly, isn't he? – I know he is, because it's described exactly like that.'

'I know!' exclaims Tanya. 'Following him around with his eyes! All obsessed with his scar on his thumb! Watching his physique, how he moves!'

The men in the class look confused. They suddenly don't know what to think. They had just been expressing their approval of the story, their interest, and now a couple of the women are saying it's about homosexuality! They look at me, hoping I'll set it all, literally, straight.

'Yeah,' I say, 'You're right, Diana. Lawrence never says it's love. He just describes the physical attraction.'

'But, you know,' says Aimee. 'It's not what you say, it's what it is, in reality. And in reality, that man loves the other man.'

I say, 'But he won't let himself love the other man.'

'So he beats him, kicks him, does everything to him instead!' says Tanya. 'You can't fool Mother Nature.'

'How do you mean?'

'If you're in love with somebody, you're in love with somebody. Whoever they are. Whatever their sex is. You can pretend, but you can't not have that feeling. That's what I think,' she

says laughing. 'Anyway, that's what I know, from experience.'

'So, professor,' says Leon, trying to recover, 'what you're saying is, that the officer is in love with the orderly?'

'Yes.'

'All right,' he says slowly, considering it. 'I can see that. But, now, the orderly, he ain't in love with the officer.' He pauses, waiting for me to answer. I don't, so he says, nervously, 'Right?'

'There's no indication the orderly's in love with the officer. He doesn't think of the officer except as his officer, and as someone who's physically abusing him.'

'But does he know?'

'Know that the officer's in love with him?'

'Yes!' says Tanya.

'No!' I say.

'He has to know,' insists Tanya. 'I would know. I would know if a guy is looking at me like that.'

'I don't think this innocent orderly knows. The officer himself hardly knows. Lawrence tells us the officer doesn't want to know what he's feeling. And the orderly can't understand.'

'Too innocent, huh?' says Tanya. 'You're saying I'm not?'

I think a second.

'No,' I answer. 'You're not. – In a good way, you're not.'

'I think it's good not to be blind when someone's being a fool about you.'

'I think so too.'

'But you know what I think?'

'What, Tanya?'

'I think, and I don't mean to offend no one, but I don't think the men in this class would've known if the officer was doing this to them, that he was really in love with them.'

She turns and smiles at any man who'll lift his head.

'Maybe guys have less experience being pursued?' I wonder aloud.

Diana speaks again. 'Women know what men are like. While men, about other men, are . . . let me find the right word . . .'

'Stupid?' says Tanya.

'No, not that,' says Diana. 'Oblivious. They're more oblivious to the fact that a man could be after them – in that way.'

'Fair enough,' I say.

'Right, guys?'

They don't know which way is safe, so I don't get an answer. And we go back to the story. ■

## References

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