FINAL PAPER

VICTOR HUGO'S *THE LAST DAY OF A CONDEMNED MAN*:

A REVIEW THROUGH ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH

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In the original preface of *The Last Day of a Condemn Man,* writer Victor Hugo asks the reader to view the novel as a collection of "the last thoughts of a poor wretch" (Dow 2009, 13) who is sentenced to death for a crime that remains unknown to the reader throughout the book (13). In this paper, I review the last thoughts of this poor wretch, whom I shall call the condemned man, through the perspectives of anthropological work surrounding the topic of preparing for death. Drawing on these frameworks, I argue that the condemned man's experience of death, which involves his realization of and preparation for death, is largely shaped by his relations to other people and to the world outside of his prison cell. First, I apply Desjarlais' (2018) analysis of death among the Hyolmo people of Nepal to the condemned man's realization of his status as a dying man through other people's actions. Second, I put Sharp's (2022) concept of *death by imprisonment* and Emanuel's (1998) medical definition of a *good death* in conversation with the condemned man's thoughts to outline the impossibility of a good death in prison, a place where all ties to the outside world are cut off. Lastly, I relate Al-Mohammad's (2019) discussion of death in post-invasion Iraq to how the condemned man prepares for -or *tries* to prepare for- death by directing his last thoughts towards other people such as his loved ones and future prisoners. Moreover, I structure this review as a series of summaries of the relevant anthropological concepts followed by discussions of the novel in relation to these concepts. In writing this essay, I hope to reframe Hugo's novel in a way that opens up room for anthropological thought in artistic literature.

In his ethnography of the Hyolmo Buddhists in Nepal, Desjarlais (2018) finds that the Hyolmo people experience death in generative ways that involve the work of the living as well as the work of the dying or of the recently deceased. In order to achieve a good death, the dying must, with the help of loved ones, reach a state of calmness that emerges from a complete

detachment from life before his or her death (252). Further, to achieve a good rebirth after death, the living must remove the recently deceased from the world of the living through ritual (252). In other words, there is an "active patterning of self and the other" (253) in the process of dying that alienates the dying person (self) from the living world (other) and assigns him or her the status of the dead. For Desjarlais, the creation of new "sense and consciousness" (253) through the death of someone is an instance of *poiesis*. Poiesis refers to any acts of making, doing, or fashioning merely for the sake of the acts themselves (253). Hence, poiesis permeates the actions of a dying Hyolmo Buddhist as well as the living relatives in the process of dying. Similarly, a poiesis that involves the division between the dying self and the living other is present in the last days of the condemned man.

During the time preceding his execution, the condemned man realizes and acquires the status of a dying man as a result of his interactions with people of the outside world. In the first stages of his imprisonment, his thoughts are flooded with hopes of staying alive. As he looks through the window of the courthouse where his sentence is confirmed, he is taken aback by the "gloomy thought" (Hugo 1896, 14) of death that contaminates the aura of "the flower-venders laughing on the quay" (14) and of "a pretty little yellow plant, bathed in the sunlight" (14) surrounding him; he refuses the creeping reality of death that finally gets a grip on him after the judge's announcement. However, when the hateful chants of the court crowd that go "condemned to die!" (16) leave no room for life in his thoughts, when the jailers who are "responsible for my [his] life" (17) wrap him in linen to secure his future death, and when the prison visitors who look at him like he is "a beast in a menagerie" (23) talk about him like a "thing" rather than a living person, the condemned man accepts his status as a dying man. Here, just as the living relatives of a dying Hyolmo Buddhist severe his or her attachment to the world

of the living, the people of the outside world assign him (self) the status of a dying man by enforcing their (other) contrasting status as living. Here, poiesis acts to build "a high wall between the world and myself [the condemned man]" (16). The condemned man now knows that, as a dying man, he has "nothing left to do in this world" (19). Thus, other people replace his initial hopes of living by an inevitable acceptance of death. Having acknowledged death, the condemned man becomes concerned with *how* he will die.

Although the definition of a "good death" largely varies with time and between cultures, a combination of two specific definitions can be used to analyze the death of the condemned man. Sharp (2022) refers to death in prison as "death by imprisonment" (177). Death by imprisonment happens under circumstances such as the inability of the prisoner to have freedom, the perception of the prisoner as a failure by his or her friends and family, and the absence of people who are important to the prisoner even during the hours of death (177). Sharp states that due to these circumstances, a good death in prison is simply impossible (177). Further, in relation to disease-related illness, Emanuel (1998) argues that a good death involves the making of "the last weeks -not minutes- of life valuable and meaningful" (21) for the dying person. With these two points of view, a definition of a good death that involves freedom, redemption to loved ones, meaningful social interactions, and most importantly, the durability of these circumstances over the weeks preceding death emerges.

Confined to his prison cell, the condemned man now faces not only the impossibility of life, but the impossibility of a good death due to his interactions, or the lack thereof, with the outside world. Up to the very moment of death, the condemned man longs for freedom. When he is occasionally exposed to the outside world-when he is "surrounded by the outer air and sunshine" (Hugo 1896, 14)- he can "think of nothing but liberty" (14). Further, he spends his

days thinking of his toddler daughter, who he presumes will be ashamed of the failures of her father when she grows up. His daughter, he anticipates, will be "scorned, repulsed, despised" (54) for her father and his name. Moreover, the condemned man spends his moments of dying without anyone who "thinks of me [him] worthy of a word" (17). He spends his last weeks in prison, which he refers to as "a horrible being" who "clasps me [him] beneath its iron bolts and watches me [him] with its jailer's eyes" (39). However, during the last hour before his death, a kind priest, who addresses the condemned man as "my dear sir," visits him for consolation before the execution (39). In other words, the condemned man lives through weeks of agony up until his last hour as a living man. He hopelessly strives for freedom, lives with the disappointment he will cause his daughter, and dreams of a meaningful interaction with another person until a kind priest fills his last minutes with value and meaning. Thus, the condemned man's slow death is charged with every aspect of Sharp's (2022) *death by imprisonment* and stripped of the weeks -not minutes- of fulfillment in Emanuel's (1998) definition of a good death. The condemned man dies a *bad* death. Within the boundaries of this bad death, there is only room left for preparation.

In his discussion of death in post-invasion Iraq, Al-Mohammad (2019) outlines a process of dying where, through intense preparation, the individual outlives his or her own death. Specifically, after explaining the impossibility of adequate healthcare in post-invasion Iraq, Al-Mohammad tells the story of an Iraqi cancer patient named Oum Hussein who is unable to receive any form of treatment for her illness (798). Having accepted her inevitable death, Oum Hussein prepares for death by participating in the intensities of everyday life in order to plan a comfortable future for her loved ones (802). She arranges a marriage for her daughter, ensures that her house is properly cleaned and painted, and buys poultry from which her family can earn

a living after she passes (802-04). Thus, Oum Hussein makes sure that "her work *outlives* her death" (802). This is in sharp contrast to Desjarlais' (2018) discussion of death among the Hyolmo where the dying person is isolated from the intensities of everyday life during the moments of death. Here, the line between self and other becomes blurry, and the dying self becomes tightly entangled with the futures of the living other; the dying person's relations to the living world are strengthened through preparation. In this way, life exceeds the physical boundaries of bodies and thrives in other people's lives and movements (Al-Mohammad 2019, 803). Oum Husseini describes this process as, "when you are not being treated, your concern is not your body, it is with your family… with the world around you" (802). Hence, when there is nothing left to prevent death, one becomes concerned with leaving traces of themselves in the living world.

To *try to* prepare for death, the condemned man, just like Oum Hussein, attempts to ensure that he outlives his death not by immersing himself in aspects of everyday life but by speaking to other people in his writing. After acknowledging the limitations of his bad death, he hopes that the diary of suffering he has written thus far will "carry with it a mighty lesson" (19) for the people who condemn people to die. He writes in his diary "hour after hour, minute after minute, torture after torture" (20) in order to remind the judges that there is a slow succession of agony involved in the days leading up to execution. He hopes that through his writings, justice-makers will see the soul, intellect, and life in the men that they condemn – men who are unprepared for death (20). He argues that the fast death that justice-makers take pride in obscures the long and deep moral suffering imposed on condemned men (20). He also prays that his diary saves future "poor wretches" (20) from the misery that he has endured. The condemned man appropriates the limitations of his death to strengthen his bonds with the outside world – to

possibly create a better future for those convicted of a crime. Although he first becomes isolated from the world of the living to acquire the status of a dying man, his writings reintroduce him to the living world. Thus, reminiscent of Oum Hussein's words, when the condemned man's body becomes unsavable, his concerns shift to the world around him. If his prayer that "the wind not play in the yard with these sheets of paper [pages of his diary]" (20) comes true, his writings will let him continue to live beyond his death in the world of the living. However, is this possibility enough to prepare him? Do the limits of prison allow the condemned man to fully live beyond death just as Oum Hussein has?

Despite the fact that the condemned man's diary might help save future imprisoners, the impossibility for him to plan a future for his loved ones due to his imprisonment and sentence disrupts his preparation for death. In his writing, the condemned man repeatedly recalls his mother, his wife, and his young daughter with regret. Specifically, he worries that after the cost of the guillotine that will eventually take his life is covered, nothing valuable will remain for his family (22). He worries for his mother, who will have no coal to keep her warm, for his wife, who is ill with no means to afford a doctor, for his healthy daughter, who will grow ill when she stops eating and drinking (22, 54). In this sense, the "high wall" (16) between the condemned man and the rest of the world that was temporarily destroyed with his writings is rebuilt as he remains confined to prison – a place that prevents him from arranging ways for his family to survive. If he does live beyond death, perhaps this abstract life will be nothing but the damaging traces of his death on his loved ones. When the priest who came to console him before execution asks him if he is prepared, the condemned man responds:

"I am not prepared, but I am ready" (39).

To conclude, Victor Hugo's *The Last Day of a Condemned Man* is a brilliant novel that removes the crime from the criminal to tell a story that revolves purely around the suffering involved with the death penalty and with death itself. In this essay, I have contextualized the last thoughts of a condemned man, the protagonist of Hugo's novel, in the frameworks of the anthropology of death. Specifically, I have argued that the condemned man's death was a highly social and relational process that involved his interactions with other people and with the outside world before execution. To support my argument, I have used anthropological work that expands on the sociality of death and of preparations for death. I have shown, by drawing on Desjarlais' work on death in Hyolmo, that the condemned man's forced realization of death was guided by the people around him who severed his ties to the world of the living. I have then demonstrated, through the contributions of Sharp and Emanuel to the conversations around *good death,* that the type of death faced by the condemned man was inevitably a bad one due to his interaction, or lack thereof, with the outside world and with the people that matter to him. Lastly, I have referred to Al-Mohammad's ideas on how an individual can exceed his or her own death to argue that the condemned man prepared for his death by writing for others with hopes of achieving a life beyond death. However, I have questioned the sufficiency of this type of preparation by pointing out the shortcomings of trying to speak and to cater to others, specifically to loved ones, within the boundaries of a prison cell. In short, by discussing the stages of the condemned man's journey towards death, I have shown that his death was *relational*. Lastly, the purpose of this essay was to review this fictional, and immensely artistic, novel through anthropological realities around the topic of death to perhaps draw a parallel between fiction and non-fiction and to show how the creation of the latter may at times be highly influenced by the former, or to simply offer a fresh perspective to the reader of the novel.

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