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The Last Day of a Condemned Man

Victor Hugo · *1829* · *Arabella Ward translation (1896)*

A man under sentence of death in Paris writes a journal in prison, from the cell at Bicêtre to the scaffold at the Place de Grève. Hugo never tells us his crime, so that the reader looks at the punishment and not at the offense. The book is a plea against the death penalty, and its preface of 1832 makes the argument openly.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

Can a society that kills in the name of justice defend what it does to a man in his last hours?

Hugo does not argue from the man's innocence. He gives us the man's fear, his love for a little daughter, and his hours of waiting, and lets the reader judge. The fixed thought of the guillotine returns in every chapter, and the final journal entry breaks off at four o'clock. The preface adds a historical case against public executions, and the short play that follows mocks those who cannot bear to be reminded of the scaffold.

KEY CHARACTERS

the condemned man
The narrator, whose crime is never named.

Marie
His little daughter, who does not know him.

the priest
The prison chaplain.

the turnkey and the bailiff
Officials who deal with him.

the fellow prisoner
A convict who tells his story in slang.

Grades 11–12
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01

The Preface and the Comedy

PREFACE (1832); A COMEDY

Hugo declares that the book is a plea against the death penalty and answers the usual arguments. A short play shows a drawing-room audience that finds the book disagreeable.

- The preface is a reasoned argument.
- The play satirizes comfortable opinion.
- Hugo ends on a hope for mercy in the law.

02

Bicêtre

CHAPTERS I–XXI

The condemned man writes in his cell. He remembers the trial, thinks of his wife, mother, and daughter, copies the scrawls on the walls, and sees the chain of convicts leave for the galleys.

- The crime is never named.
- The scrawls on the walls are voices of earlier prisoners.
- The departure of the chain is a public spectacle.

03

The Conciergerie

CHAPTERS XXII–XXXIV

He is carried to the Conciergerie, meets a fellow prisoner who tells his story in thieves' slang, and receives visits from the priest and from officials.

- The slang song is a showpiece.
- The priest's visit is gentle and awkward.
- The officials treat him as a case.

04

The Last Hours

CHAPTERS XXXV–XLVII

He counts the hours and tries to take hold of the thought of death. He dreams of an old woman in his house, and his daughter Marie is brought in and does not know him.

- The count of hours is a clock inside the story.
- The dream is a strange interlude.
- The scene with Marie is the book's cruelest.

05

The Hôtel de Ville and the Scaffold

CHAPTERS XLVIII–XLIX

He is led to a room in the Hôtel de Ville, prays, and is carried to the Place de Grève. The journal breaks off at four o'clock.

- The wait in the room is the last stage of the journey.
- The cart ride to the square is told in fragments.
- The ending is an abrupt silence.

Mercy · Justice · Fear · Family

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Hugo never states the crime. Ask why.
2. The journal form puts you inside the man's head. Notice how the style changes.
3. The preface is an argument and the book is a story. See how each does its work.
4. Pay attention to the way time is counted.

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