“Good. Be sure that you do. I tell you this in all seriousness. Anything else?”

“I have bad thoughts, Father.”

“Yes. Well,” he said, “why don’t we save those for next time. You have enough to work on.”

The priest gave me my penance and absolved me. As I left the confessional I heard his own door open and close. Sister James came forward to meet me again, and we waited together as the priest made his way to where we stood. Breathing hoarsely, he steadied himself against a pillar. He laid his other hand on my shoulder. “That was fine,” he said. “Just fine.” He gave my shoulder a squeeze. “You have a fine boy here, Sister James.” She smiled. “So I do, Father. So I do.”

Just after Easter Roy gave me the Winchester .22 rifle I’d learned to shoot with. It was a light, pump-action, beautifully balanced piece with a walnut stock black from all its oilings. Roy had carried it when he was a boy and it was still as good as new. Better than new. The action was silky from long use, and the wood of a quality no longer to be found.

The gift did not come as a surprise. Roy was stingy, and slow to take a hint, but I’d put him under siege. I had my heart set on that rifle. A weapon was the first condition of self-sufficiency, and of being a real Westerner, and of all acceptable employment—trapping, riding herd, soldiering, law enforcement, and outlawry. I needed that rifle, for itself and for the way it completed me when I held it.

My mother said I couldn’t have it. Absolutely not. Roy
took the rifle back but promised me he’d bring her around. He could not imagine anyone refusing him anything and treated the refusals he did encounter as perverse and insincere. Normally mute, he became at these times a relentless whiner. He would follow my mother from room to room, emitting one ceaseless note of complaint that was pitched perfectly to jell her nerves and bring her to a state where she would agree to anything to make it stop.

After a few days of this my mother caved in. She said I could have the rifle if, and only if, I promised never to take it out or even touch it except when she and Roy were with me. Okay, I said. Sure. Naturally. But even then she wasn’t satisfied. She plain didn’t like the fact of me owning a rifle. Roy said he had owned several rifles by the time he was my age, but this did not reassure her. She didn’t think I could be trusted with it. Roy said now was the time to find out.

For a week or so I kept my promises. But now that the weather had turned warm Roy was usually off somewhere, and eventually, in the dead hours after school when I found myself alone in the apartment, I decided that there couldn’t be any harm in taking the rifle out to clean it. Only to clean it, nothing more. I was sure it would be enough just to break it down, oil it, rub linseed into the stock, polish the octagonal barrel and then hold it up to the light to confirm the perfection of the bore. But it wasn’t enough. From cleaning the rifle I went to marching around the apartment with it, and then to striking brave poses in front of the mirror. Roy had saved one of his army uniforms and I sometimes dressed up in this, together with martial-looking articles of hunting gear: fur trooper’s hat, camouflage coat, boots that reached nearly to my knees.

The camouflage coat made me feel like a sniper, and before long I began to act like one. I set up a nest on the couch by the front window. I drew the shades to darken the apartment, and took up my position. Nudging the shade aside with the rifle barrel, I followed people in my sights as they walked or drove along the street. At first I made shooting sounds—kyoo! kyoo! Then I started cocking the hammer and letting it snap down.

Roy stored his ammunition in a metal box he kept hidden in the closet. As with everything else hidden in the apartment, I knew exactly where to find it. There was a layer of loose .22 rounds on the bottom of the box under shells of bigger caliber, dropped there by the handful the way men drop pennies on their dressers at night. I took some and put them in a hiding place of my own. With these I started loading up the rifle. Hammer cocked, a round in the chamber, finger resting lightly on the trigger, I drew a bead on whoever walked by—women pushing strollers, children, garbage collectors laughing and calling to each other, anyone—and as they passed under my window I sometimes had to bite my lip to keep from laughing in the ecstasy of my power over them, and at their absurd and innocent belief that they were safe.

But over time the innocence I laughed at began to irritate me. It was a peculiar kind of irritation. I saw it years later in men I served with, and felt it myself, when unarmed Vietnamese civilians talked back to us while we were herding them around. Power can be enjoyed only when it is recognized and feared. Fearlessness in those without power is maddening to those who have it.

One afternoon I pulled the trigger. I had been aiming at two old people, a man and a woman, who walked so slowly that by the time they turned the corner at the bottom of the hill my little store of self-control was exhausted. I had to shoot. I looked up and down the street. It was empty. Nothing moved but a pair of squirrels chasing each other back and forth on the telephone wires. I followed one in my sights. Finally it stopped for a
moment and I fired. The squirrel dropped straight into the road. I pulled back into the shadows and waited for something to happen, sure that someone must have heard the shot or seen the squirrel fall. But the sound that was so loud to me probably seemed to our neighbors no more than the bang of a cupboard slammed shut. After a while I sneaked a glance into the street. The squirrel hadn't moved. It looked like a scarf someone had dropped.

When my mother got home from work I told her there was a dead squirrel in the street. Like me, she was an animal lover. She took a cellophane bag off a loaf of bread and we went outside and looked at the squirrel. "Poor little thing," she said. She stuck her hand in the wrapper and picked up the squirrel, then pulled the bag inside out away from her hand. We buried it behind our building under a cross made of popsicle sticks, and I blubbered the whole time.

I blubbered again in bed that night. At last I got out of bed and knelt down and did an imitation of somebody praying, and then I did an imitation of somebody receiving divine reassurance and inspiration. I stopped crying. I smiled to myself and forced a feeling of warmth into my chest. Then I climbed back in bed and looked up at the ceiling with a blissful expression until I went to sleep.

For several days I stayed away from the apartment at times when I knew I'd be alone there. I resumed my old patrol around the city or fooled around with my Mormon friends. One of these was a boy who'd caught everyone's notice on the first day of school by yelling, when a classmate named Boone had his name read out. "Hey!—any relation to Danci?" His own name was called soon after, and this turned out to be Crockett. He seemed puzzled by the hoots of laughter that followed. Not angry, just puzzled. His father was a Vocalar man who liked children and used to take mobs of us swimming at the Y and to youth concerts given by the Tabernacle Choir. Mr. Crockett later became a justice of the state supreme court, the same one that granted Gary Gilmore his wish to die.

Though I avoided the apartment, I could not shake the idea that sooner or later I would get the rifle out again. All my images of myself as I wished to be were images of myself armed. Because I did not know who I was, any image of myself, no matter how grotesque, had power over me. This much I understand now. But the man can give no help to the boy, not in this matter nor in those that follow. The boy moves always out of reach.

One afternoon I walked a friend of my mine to his house. After he went inside I sat on his steps for a while, then got to my feet and started toward home, walking fast. The apartment was empty. I took the rifle out and cleaned it. Put it back. Ate a sandwich. Took the rifle out again. Though I didn't load it, I did turn the lights off and pull down the shades and assume my position on the couch.

I stayed away for several days after that. Then I came back again. For an hour or so I aimed at people passing by. Again I teased myself by leaving the rifle unloaded, snapping the hammer on air, trying my own patience like a loose tooth. I had just followed a car out of sight when another car turned the corner at the bottom of the hill. I zeroed in on it, then lowered the rifle. I don't know whether I had ever seen this particular car before, but it was of a type and color—big, plain, blue—usually driven only by government workers and nuns. You could tell if it was nuns by the way their headgear filled the windows and by the way they drove, which was so slowly and anxiously. Even from a distance you could feel the tension radiating from a car full of nuns.

The car crept up the hill. It moved even slower as it approached my building, and then it stopped. The front door on the passenger side opened and Sister James got
out. I drew back from the window. When I looked out
again, the car was still there but Sister James was not. I
knew that the apartment door was locked—I always
locked it when I took the rifle out—but I went over and
double-checked it anyway. I heard her coming up the
steps. She was whistling. She stopped outside the door
and knocked. It was an imperative knock. She continued
to whistle as she waited. She knocked again.

I stayed where I was, still and silent, rifle in hand, afraid
that Sister James would somehow pass through the locked
door and discover me. What would she think? What
would she make of the rifle, the fur hat, the uniform, the
darkened room? What would she make of me? I feared
her disapproval, but even more than that I feared her
incomprehension, even her amusement, at what she
could not possibly understand. I didn’t understand it
myself. Being so close to so much robust identity made
me feel the poverty of my own, the ludicrous aspect of
my costume and props. I didn’t want to let her in. At the
same time, strangely, I did.

After a few moments of this an envelope slid under the
doors and I heard Sister James going back down the steps.
I went to the window and saw her bend low to enter the
car, lifting her habit with one hand and reaching inside
with the other. She arranged herself on the seat, closed
the door, and the car started slowly up the hill. I never
saw her again.

The envelope was addressed to Mrs. Wolff. I tore it
open and read the note. Sister James wanted my mother
to call her. I burned the envelope and note in the sink and
washed the ashes down the drain.

Roy was tying flies at the kitchen table. I was drinking
a Pepsi and watching him. He bent close to his work,
grunting with concentration. He said, in an offhand way,
“What do you think about a little brother?”

“A little brother?”

He nodded. “Me and your mom’ve been thinking
about starting a family.”

I didn’t like this idea at all, in fact it froze me solid.
He looked up from the vise. “We’re already pretty
much of a family when you think about it,” he said.

“I said I guessed we were.

“We have a lot of fun.” He looked down at the vise
again. “A lot of fun. We’re thinking about it,” he said.
“Nothing like a little guy around the house. You could
teach him things. You could teach him to shoot.”

I nodded.
George Orwell

Although probably best known for his novels Animal Farm (1945) and 1984 (1949), George Orwell (1903–1950) was also a renowned essayist on language and politics. Two of his most famous essays, "Shooting an Elephant" and "Politics and the English Language," are among the most frequently reprinted. Orwell was born in Bengal, India, and was educated in England. He traveled a great deal during his life and spent five years serving with the British colonial police in Burma.

The following essay is a product of his experience in Burma, and first appeared in Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays (1950). Notice how Orwell’s narrative emphasizes his attitude toward events in which he is both an observer and a participant and brings his readers to some provocative insights.

Reflecting on What You Know

Throughout history, people have gone out of their way to witness events in which someone was certain to be killed, such as fights between gladiators, jousting tournaments, and public executions. Why do you think such events fascinate people?

It was in Burma, a sodden morning of the rains. A sickly light, like yellow tinfoil, was slanting over the high walls into the jail yard. We were waiting outside the condemned cells, a row 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. In some of them brown silent men were squatting at the inner bars, with their blankets draped round them. These were the condemned men, due to be hanged within the next week or two.

One prisoner had been brought out of his cell. He was a Hindu, a puny wisp of a man, with a shaven head and vague liquid eyes. He had a thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man in the films. Six tall Indian warders were guarding him and getting him ready for the gallows. Two of them stood by with rifles with fixed bayonets, while the others handcuffed him, passed a chain through his handcuffs and fixed it to their belts, and lashed his arms tight to his sides. They crowded very close about him, with their hands always on him in a careful, caressing grip, as though all the while feeling him to make sure he was there. It was like men handling a fish which is still alive and may jump back into the water. But he stood quite unresisting, yielding his arms limply to the ropes, as though he hardly noticed what was happening.

Eight o’clock struck and a bugle call, desolately thin in the wet air, floated from the distant barracks. The superintendent of the jail, who was standing apart from the rest of us, moodily prodding the gravel with his stick, raised his head at the sound. He was an army doctor, with a gray toothbrush moustache and a gruff voice. “For God’s sake hurry up, Francis,” he said irritably. “The man ought to have been dead by this time. Aren’t you ready yet?”

Francis, the head jailer, a fat Dravidian in a white drill suit and gold spectacles, waved his black hand. “Yes sir, yes sir,” he babbled. “All is satisfactorily prepared. The hangman is waiting. We shall proceed.”

“Well, quick march, then. The prisoners can’t get their breakfast till this job’s over.”

We set out for the gallows. Two warders marched on either side of the prisoner, with their rifles at the slope; two others marched close against him, gripping him by arm and shoulder, as though at once pushing and supporting him. The rest of us, magistrates and the like, followed behind. Suddenly, when we had gone ten yards, the procession stopped short without any order or warning. A dreadful thing had happened—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. It was a large woolly dog, half Airedale, half pariah. For a moment it pranced round us, and then, before anyone could stop it, it had made a dash for the prisoner, and jumping up tried to lick his face. Everyone stood aghast, too taken aback even to grab at the dog.

1Burma: a country in Southeast Asia, formerly part of Britain’s Indian empire, now known as Myanmar.

2Hindu: a person whose beliefs and practices are rooted in the philosophical and religious tenets of Hinduism, which originated in India.

3Dravidian: someone who speaks one of the twenty-three languages belonging to the family of languages known as Dravidian, which is spoken in South Asia.

4pariah: a social outcast.
“Who let that bloody brute in here?” said the superintendent angrily. “Catch it, someone!”

A warder, detached from the escort, charged clumsily after the dog, but it danced and gamboled just out of his reach, taking everything as part of the game. A young Eurasian jailer picked up a handful of gravel and tried to stone the dog away, but it dodged the stones and came after us again. Its yaps echoed from the jail walls. The prisoner, in the grasp of the two warders, looked on incuriously, as though this was another formality of the hanging. It was several minutes before someone managed to catch the dog. Then we put my handkerchief through its collar and moved off once more, with the dog still straining and whimpering.

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.

It is curious, but till that moment I had never realized what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. 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 full tide. This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working—bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the gray walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world; and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less.

The gallows stood in a small yard, separate from the main grounds of the prison, and overgrown with tall prickly weeds. It was a brick erection like three sides of a shed, with planking on top, and above that two beams and a crossbar with the rope dangling. The hangman, a gray-haired convict in the white uniform of the prison, was waiting beside his machine. He greeted us with a servile crouch as we entered.

At a word from Francis the two warders, gripping the prisoner more closely than ever, half led, half pushed him to the gallows and helped him clumsily up the ladder. Then the hangman climbed up and fixed the rope round the prisoner’s neck.

We stood waiting, five yards away. The warders had formed in a rough circle round the gallows. And then, when the noose was fixed, the prisoner began crying out to his god. It was a high, reiterated cry of “Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!” not urgent and fearful like a prayer or a cry for help, but steady, rhythmical, almost like the tolling of a bell. The dog answered the sound with a whine. The hangman, still standing on the gallows, produced a small cotton bag like a flour bag and drew it down over the prisoner’s face. But the sound, muffled by the cloth, still persisted, over and over again: “Ram! Ram! Ram! Ram!”

The hangman climbed down and stood ready, holding the lever. Minutes seemed to pass. The steady, muffled crying from the prisoner went on and on, “Ram! Ram! Ram!” never faltering for an instant. The superintendent, his head on his chest, was slowly poking the ground with his stick; perhaps he was counting the cries, allowing the prisoner a fixed number—fifty, perhaps, or a hundred. Everyone had changed color. The Indians had gone gray like bad coffee, and one or two of the bayonets were wavering. We looked at the lashed, hooded man on the drop, and listened to his cries—each cry another second of life; the same thought was in all our minds: oh, kill him quickly, get it over, stop that abominable noise!

Suddenly the superintendent made up his mind. Throwing up his head he made a swift motion with his stick. “Chalo!” he shouted almost fiercely.

There was a clanking noise, and then dead silence. The prisoner had vanished, and the rope was twisting on itself. 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 the corner of the yard, where it stood among the weeds, looking timorously out at us. We went round the gallows to inspect the prisoner’s body. He was dangling with his toes pointed straight downwards, very slowly revolving, as dead as a stone.

The superintendent reached out with his stick and poked the bare body; it oscillated slightly. “He’s all right,” said the superintendent. He backed out from under the gallows, and blew out a deep breath.

\textsuperscript{2}gamboled: leaped about playfully; frolicked.

\textsuperscript{5}timorously: timidly; fearfully.

\textsuperscript{7}oscillated: swung back and forth.
The moody look had gone out of his face quite suddenly. He glanced at his wristwatch. “Eight minutes past eight. Well, that’s all for this morning, thank God.”

The warders unfixed bayonets and marched away. The dog, sobered and conscious of having misbehaved itself, slipped after them. We walked out of the gallows yard, past the condemned cells with their waiting prisoners, into the big central yard of the prison. The convicts, under the command of warders armed with lathis, were already receiving their breakfast. They squatted in long rows, each man holding a tin pannikin, while two warders with buckets marched round ladling out rice; it seemed quite a homely, jolly scene, after the hanging. An enormous relief had come upon us now that the job was done. One felt an impulse to sing, to break into a run, to snigger. All at once everyone began chattering gaily.

The Eurasian boy walking beside me nodded towards the way we had come, with a knowing smile: “Do you know, sir, our friend (he meant the dead man), when he heard his appeal had been dismissed, he pissed on the floor of his cell. From fright.—Kindly take one of my cigarettes, sir. Do you not admire my new silver case, sir? From the boxwallah, two rupees eight annas. Classy European style.”

Several people laughed—at what, nobody seemed certain.

Francis was walking by the superintendent, talking garrulously: “Well, sir, all has passed off with the utmost satisfactoriness. It was all finished—flick! like that. It is not always so—oah, not I have known cases where the doctor was obliged to go beneath the gallows and pull the prisoner’s legs to ensure decease. Most disagreeable!”

“Wriggling about, eh? That’s bad,” said the superintendent.

“Ach, sir, it is worse when they become refractory!” One man, I recall, clung to the bars of his cage when we went to take him out. You will scarcely credit, sir, that it took six warders to dislodge him, three pulling at each leg. We reasoned with him. ‘My dear fellow,’ we said, ‘think of all the pain and trouble you are causing to us!’ But no, he would not listen! Ach, he was very troublesome!”

I found that I was laughing quite loudly. Everyone was laughing. Even the superintendent grinned in a tolerant way. “You’d better all come out and have a drink,” he said quite genially. “I’ve got a bottle of whisky in the car. We could do with it.”

We went through the big double gates of the prison, into the road. “Pulling at his legs!” exclaimed a Burmese magistrate suddenly, and burst into a loud chuckling. We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis’s anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably. The dead man was a hundred yards away.

Thinking Critically about This Reading

Orwell goes to some pains to identify the multicultural nature—Hindu, Dravidian, Eurasian, European, Burmese—of the group participating in the hanging scene. Why is the variety of the participants’ backgrounds important to the central idea of the essay?

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. In paragraph 6, why is the appearance of the dog “a dreadful thing”? From whose point of view is it dreadful?

2. The role of the narrator of this essay is never clearly defined, nor is the nature of the prisoner’s transgression. Why does Orwell deliberately withhold this information?

3. In paragraphs 9 and 10, the prisoner steps aside to avoid a puddle, and Orwell considers the implications of this action. What understanding does he reach? In paragraph 10, what is the meaning of the phrase “one mind less, one world less”?

4. In paragraph 22, what is ironic about Francis’s story of the “troublesome” prisoner? (Glossary: Irony)

5. Throughout this essay, Orwell uses figurative language, primarily similes, to bring a foreign experience closer to the reader’s understanding. Find and explain three or four similes that clarify the event for a modern American reader.

6. What words would you use to describe the mood of the group that observed the hanging before the event? Afterward? Cite specific details to support your word choice. Why are the moods extreme?

Classroom Activity Using Narration

The number of words or paragraphs a writer devotes to the retelling of an event does not usually correspond to the number of minutes or hours the event took to happen. A writer may require multiple paragraphs to recount an important or complex 10–15 minute encounter, but then pass over several hours, days, or even years in several sentences.
In narration, length has less to do with chronological time than with the amount of detail the writer includes, and that’s a function of the amount of emphasis the writer wants to give to a particular incident. Identify several passages in Orwell’s essay where he uses multiple paragraphs to retell a relatively brief encounter and where he uses only a paragraph or two to cover a long period of time. Why do you suppose Orwell chose to tell his story in this manner?

**Suggested Writing Assignments**

1. Are the men who carry out the hanging in Orwell’s essay cruel? Are they justified in their actions, following orders from others better able to judge? Or should they question their assigned roles as executioners? Who has the right to take the life of another? In this context, consider the message in the cartoon below, which highlights the great irony that is inherent in capital punishment. Write an essay in which you either condemn or support Orwell’s role in the hanging. Was it appropriate for him to have participated, even as a spectator? What, if anything, should or could he have done when he “saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide” (10)?

2. Recall and narrate an event in your life when you or someone you know underwent some sort of punishment. You may have been a participant or a spectator in the event. How did you react when you learned what the punishment was to be? When it was administered? After it was over?

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**Momma, the Dentist, and Me**

**Maya Angelou**

Best-selling author and poet Maya Angelou was born in 1928. She is an educator, historian, actress, playwright, civil rights activist, producer, and director. She is best known as the author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), the first book in a series that constitutes her recently completed autobiography, and for *On the Pulse of Morning*, a characteristically optimistic poem on the need for personal and national renewal that she read at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993. Starting with her beginnings in St. Louis in 1928, Angelou’s autobiography presents a life of joyful triumph over hardships that test her courage and threaten her spirit. It includes the titles *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for My Journey Now* (1993), and *Heart of a Woman* (1997). The sixth and final book in the series, *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*, was published in 2002. Several volumes of her poetry were collected in *Complete Collected Poems* of Maya Angelou in 1994.

In the following excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou narrates what happened, and what might have happened, when her grandmother, the “Momma” of the story, took her to the local dentist. As you read, consider how vital first-person narration is to the essay’s success, particularly as you gauge the effect of the italicized paragraphs.

**Reflecting on What You Know**

When you were growing up, were you ever present when one or both of your parents were arguing with another adult about a matter concerning you? What were the circumstances? Narrate the events that brought about the controversy, and show how it was resolved. Were you embarrassed by your parents’ actions or happy that they stood up for you?

The angel of the candy counter had found me out at last, and was exacting excruciating penance for all the stolen Milky Ways,
Mounds, Mr. Goodbars, and Hersheys with Almonds. I had two cavities that were rotten to the gums. The pain was beyond the bailiwick of crushed aspirins or oil of cloves. Only one thing could help me, so I prayed earnestly that I’d be allowed to sit under the house and have the building collapse on my left jaw. Since there was no Negro dentist in Stamps, nor doctor either, for that matter, Momma had dealt with previous toothaches by pulling them out (a string tied to the tooth with the other end looped over her fist), pain killers, and prayer. In this particular instance the medicine had proved ineffective; there wasn’t enough enamel left to hook a string on, and the prayers were being ignored because the Balancing Angel was blocking their passage.

I lived a few days and nights in blinding pain, not so much toying with as seriously considering the idea of jumping in the well, and Momma decided I had to be taken to a dentist. The nearest Negro dentist was in Texarkana, twenty-five miles away, and I was certain that I’d be dead long before we reached half the distance. Momma said we’d go to Dr. Lincoln, right in Stamps, and he’d take care of me. She said he owed her a favor.

I knew there were a number of white folks in town that owed her favors. Bailey and I had seen the books which showed how she had lent money to Blacks and whites alike during the Depression, and most still owed her. But I couldn’t aptly remember seeing Dr. Lincoln’s name, nor had I ever heard of a Negro’s going to him as a patient. However, Momma said we were going, and put water on the stove for our baths. I had never been to a doctor, so she told me that after the bath (which would make my mouth feel better) I had to put on freshly starched and ironed underclothes from inside out. The ache failed to respond to the bath, and I knew then that the pain was more serious than that which anyone had ever suffered.

Before we left the Store, she ordered me to brush my teeth and then wash my mouth with Listerine. The idea of even opening my clamped jaws increased the pain, but upon her explanation that when you go to a doctor you have to clean yourself all over, but most especially the part that’s to be examined, I screwed up my courage and unlocked my teeth. The cool air in my mouth and the jarring of my molars dislodged what little remained of my reason. I had frozen to the pain, my family nearly had to tie me down to take the toothbrush away. It was no small effort to get me started on the road to the dentist. Momma spoke to all the passers-by, but didn’t stop to chat. She explained over her shoulder that we were going to the doctor and she’d “pass the time of day” on our way home.

Until we reached the pond the pain was my world, an aura that haloed me for three feet around. Crossing the bridge into white folks’ country, pieces of sanity pushed themselves forward. I had to stop moaning and start walking straight. The white towel, which was drawn under my chin and tied over my head, had to be arranged. If one was dying, it had to be done in style if the dying took place in white folks’ part of town.

On the other side of the bridge the ache seemed to lessen as if a white breeze blew off the white folks and cushioned everything in their neighborhood—including my jaw. The gravel road was smoother, the stones smaller, and the tree branches hung down around the path and nearly covered us. If the pain didn’t diminish then, the familiar yet strange sights hypnotized me into believing that it had.

But my head continued to throb with the measured insistence of a bass drum, and how could a toothache pass the calaboose, hear the songs of the prisoners, their blues and laughter, and not be changed? How could one or two or even a mouthful of angry tooth roots meet a wagonload of powhitetrash children, endure their idiotic snobbery, and not feel less important?

Behind the building which housed the dentist’s office ran a small path used by servants and those tradespeople who catered to the butcher and Stamps’s one restaurant. Momma and I followed that lane to the backstairs of Dentist Lincoln’s office. The sun was bright and gave the day a hard reality as we climbed up the steps to the second floor.

Momma knocked on the back door and a young white girl opened it to show surprise at seeing us there. Momma said she wanted to see Dentist Lincoln and to tell him Annie was there. The girl closed the door firmly. Now the humiliation of hearing Momma describe herself as if she had no last name to the young white girl was equal to the physical pain. It seemed terribly unfair to have a toothache and a headache and have to bear at the same time the heavy burden of Blackness.

1 bailiwick: a specific area of interest, skill, or authority.

2 calaboose: a jail.
It was always possible that the teeth would quiet down and maybe drop out of their own accord. Momma said we would wait. We leaned in the harsh sunlight on the shaky railings of the dentist's back porch for over an hour.

He opened the door and looked at Momma. "Well, Annie, what can I do for you?"

He didn't see the towel around my jaw or notice my swollen face.

"Momma said, "Dentist Lincoln. It's my grandbaby here. She got two rotten teeth that's giving her a fit."

She waited for him to acknowledge the truth of her statement. "I made no comment, orally or facially."

"She had this toothache purt near four days now, and today I said, 'Young lady, you going to the Dentist?"

"Annie?"

"Yes, sir, Dentist Lincoln."

He was choosing words the way people hunt for shells. "Annie, you know I don't treat nigger, colored people."

"I know, Dentist Lincoln. But this here is just my little grandbaby, and she ain't gone be no trouble to you ..."

"Annie, everybody has a policy. In this world you have to have a policy. Now, my policy is I don't treat colored people."

The sun had baked the oil out of Momma's skin and melted the Vaseline in her hair. She shone greasily as she leaned out of the dentist's shadow.

"Seem like to me, Dentist Lincoln, you might look after her, she ain't nothing but a little mite. And seems like maybe you owe me a favor or two."

He reddened slightly. "Favor or no favor. The money has all been repaid to you and that's the end of it. Sorry, Annie." He had his hand on the doorknob. "Sorry." His voice was a bit kinder on the second "Sorry," as if he really was.

Momma said, "I wouldn't press on you like this for myself but I can't take No. Not for my grandbaby. When you come to borrow my money you didn't have to beg. You asked me, and I lent it. Now, it wasn't my policy. I ain't no moneylender, but you stood to lose this building and I tried to help you out."
dentist I ever laid my eyes on."  (She could afford to slip into the vernacular because she had such eloquent command of English.)

"I didn't ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don't want her to know my power, but I order you, now and here-with. Leave Stamps by sundown."

"Mrs. Henderson, I can't get my equipment..." He was shaking terribly now.

"Now, that brings me to my second order. You will never again practice dentistry. Never! When you get settled in your next place, you will be a veterinarian caring for dogs with the mange, cats with the cholera, and cows with the epizootic. Is that clear?"

The saliva ran down his chin and his eyes filled with tears. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you for not killing me. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson."

Momma pulled herself back from being ten feet tall with eight-foot arms and said, "You're welcome for nothing, you varlet.  I wouldn't waste a killing on the likes of you."

On her way out she waved her handkerchief at the nurse and turned her into a crocus sack of chicken feed.

Momma looked tired when she came down the stairs, but who wouldn't be tired if they had gone through what she had. She came close to me and adjusted the towel under my jaw (I had forgotten the toothache; I only knew that she made her hands gentle in order not to awaken the pain). She took my hand. Her voice never changed.

"Come on, Sister."

I reckoned we were going home where she would concoct a brew to eliminate the pain and maybe give me new teeth too. New teeth that would grow overnight out of my gums. She led me toward the drugstore, which was in the opposite direction from the Store. "I'm taking you to Dentist Baker in Texarkana."

I was glad after all that I had bathed and put on Mum and Cashmere Bouquet talcum powder. It was a wonderful surprise. My toothache had quieted to solemn pain, Momma had obliterated the evil white man, and we were going on a trip to Texarkana, just the two of us.

On the Greyhound she took an inside seat in the back, and I sat beside her. I was so proud of being her granddaughter and sure that some of her magic must have come down to me. She asked if I was scared. I only shook my head and leaned over on her cool brown upper arm. There was no chance that a dentist, especially a Negro dentist, would dare hurt me then. Not with Momma there. The trip was uneventful, except that she put her arm around me, which was very unusual for Momma to do.

The dentist showed me the medicine and the needle before he deadened my gums, but if he hadn't, I wouldn't have worried. Momma stood right behind him. Her arms were folded and she checked on everything he did. The teeth were extracted and she bought me an ice cream cone from the side window of a drug counter. The trip back to Stamps was quiet, except that I had to spit into a very small empty snuff can which she had gotten for me and it was difficult with the busumping and jerking on our country roads.

At home, I was given a warm salt solution, and when I washed out my mouth I showed Bailey the empty holes, where the clotted blood sat like filling in a pie crust. He said I was quite brave, and that was my cue to reveal our confrontation with the peckerwood dentist and Momma's incredible powers.

I had to admit that I didn't hear the conversation, but what else could she have said than what I said she said? What else done? He agreed with my analysis in a lukewarm way, and I happily (after all, I'd been sick) flounced into the Store. Momma was preparing our evening meal and Uncle Willie leaned on the door sill. She gave her version.

"Dentist Lincoln got right uptight. Said he'd rather put his hand in a dog's mouth. And when I reminded him of the favor, he brushed it off like a piece of lint. Well, I sent Sister downstairs and went inside. I hadn't never been in his office before, but I found the door to where he takes out teeth, and him and the nurse was in there thick as thieves. I just stood there till he caught sight of me." Crash bang the pots on the stove. "He jumped just like he was sitting on a pin. He said, 'Annie, I done tol' you, I ain't gonna mess around in no niggah's mouth.' I said, 'Somebody's got to do it then,' and he said, 'Take her to Texarkana to the colored dentist' and that's when I said, 'If you paid me my money I could afford to take her.' He said, 'It's all been paid.' I tol' him everything but the interest been paid. He said, 'Twasn't no interest.' I said, 'Tis now. I'll take ten dollars as payment in full.' You know, Willie, it wasn't no right thing to do, 'cause I lent that money without thinking about it.

"He tol' that little snippety nurse of his'n to give me ten dollars and make me sign a 'paid in full' receipt. She gave it to me and I..."
signed the papers. Even though by rights he was paid up before, I figger, he gonna be that kind of nasty, he gonna have to pay for it."

Momma and her son laughed and laughed over the white man’s evilness and her retributive sin.

I preferred, much preferred, my version.

Thinking Critically about This Reading

What does Angelou mean when she states, “On the other side of the bridge the ache seemed to lessen as if a whitebreeze blew off the whitefolks and cushioned everything in their neighborhood—including my jaw” (paragraph 6)? How long did Angelou’s pain relief last? Why?

Questions for Study and Discussion

1. What is Angelou’s purpose? (Glossary: Purpose)
2. Compare and contrast the content and style of the interaction between Momma and the dentist that is given in italics with the one given at the end of the narrative. (Glossary: Comparison and Contrast)
3. Angelou tells her story chronologically and in the first person. (Glossary: Point of View) What are the advantages of first-person narration?
4. Identify three similes that Angelou uses in her narrative. (Glossary: Figure of Speech) Explain how each simile serves her purpose. (Glossary: Purpose)
5. Why do you suppose Angelou says she prefers her own version of the episode to that of her grandmother?
6. This is a story of pain—and not just the pain of a toothache. How does Angelou describe the pain of the toothache? What other pain does she tell of in this autobiographical piece?

Classroom Activity Using Narration

One of Angelou’s themes in “Momma, the Dentist, and Me” is that cruelty, whether racial, social, professional, or personal, is difficult to

Suggested Writing Assignments

1. Using Angelou’s essay as a model, give two versions of an actual event—one the way you thought or wished it had happened and the other the way events actually took place. You may want to refer to your journal entry for this reading before you begin writing.
2. Every person who tells a story puts his or her signature on it in some way—by the sequencing of events, the amount and type of details used, and the tone the teller of the story employs. (Glossary: Tone) If you and a relative or friend experienced the same interesting sequence of events, try telling the story of those events from your unique perspective. (Glossary: Point of View) Once you have done so, try telling the story from what you imagine the other person’s perspective to be. Perhaps you even heard the other person actually tell the story. What is the same in both versions? How do the renditions differ?

\(^{8}\text{retributive}: \text{demanding something in repayment, especially punishment.}\)