

His Excellency

Indro Montanelli

FOCUS: CHARACTERIZATION; IRONY

What is the setting for the opening scene?
What is taking place?

2 There it is, lined up with the other sixty-four coffins from the Fossoli concentration camp,* and the crowd has sprinkled it, like the others, with flowers. Among all these people gathered here in the silence of the Milan* cathedral, surely I am not the only one to know. Yet there has been no protest. Truly, men are as lenient to the dead as they are harsh with the living. The coffin will now pass like the others between the reverent throngs, like the others it will be buried and, on June 22 of each year, will receive its quota of rhetoric* spilled over the common grave. Fair enough ... Who are we to judge?

Which lines create an immediate sense of mystery and suspense?

3 His Excellency, General Della Rovere, army corps commander, intimate friend of Badoglio's and "technical adviser" to General Alexander,* was locked up by

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Judging from the last line of the first paragraph, what is the narrator's attitude toward his subject?

the Germans in the San Vittore prison of Milan in the spring of 1944 when the Allied armies were still fighting their slow way up the Italian peninsula. He had been captured near Genoa* while trying to land at night from an Allied submarine to take command of the resistance movement in the north. A soldier to his finger tips, he had impressed even Franz, the German warden,* who would stand at attention when addressing him and had gone so far as to have a cot placed in his cell. So the Italian guard, Ceraso, informed me as he passed my spy hole with a rose in a glass, picked expressly for His Excellency. Later Ceraso returned to say that the General wished to see me, and, letting me out, escorted me to his cell.

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

Fossoli concentration camp — a Nazi-run concentration camp near the town of Carpi in northern Italy, which housed military prisoners of war, as well as many Jews who were subsequently deported to death camps such as Auschwitz.

Milan — a city in northern Italy.

rhetoric — here, flowery eulogies, using exaggerated, affected language.

General Alexander — Harold Alexander (1891-1969), British field marshal who was commander in chief of the Mediterranean theater of war during World War II. He directed the campaign in Italy against the Nazis.

Genoa — a city on the northwest coast of Italy.

warder — an official in charge of prisoners.

Who is General Della Rovere, and how has he distinguished himself?

Why does the German warden stand at attention when addressing the general?

110 IMPLICATIONS OF LITERATURE / UNIT ONE

2 The opening paragraph creates a strong sense of immediacy and introduces a number of mysteries. It is a prelude to a flashback. Its first words, "There it is," create a dramatic sense of focus on a coffin whose occupant commands attention even in death, but who is not the person everyone assumes him to be: "... surely I am not the only one to know. Yet there has been no protest." He suggests that the dead man may not deserve the honors accorded him. The statement "Truly, men are as lenient to the dead as they are harsh with the living" should be a springboard for class discussion.

3 It is a reasonable assumption that General Della Rovere is the man in the coffin, whose story will now be told.

4 Students should be aware that the resistance movement was comprised of those loyal to the Allies during the Nazi and Mussolini regimes. They fought guerilla campaigns featuring lightning strikes against German and Italian forces in Italy.

What is the setting for the opening scene?
What is taking place?

A. The opening scene is set in a cathedral in Milan. A funeral service for sixty-four prisoners of an Italian concentration camp is in progress.

Which lines create an immediate sense of mystery and suspense?

A. a. The line "...surely I am not the only one to know" indicates that some important piece of information in the story is known to only a select few, including the narrator.

b. "Yet there has been no protest." For some reason, this piece of unknown information would arouse protest from the onlookers.

Judging from the last line of the first paragraph, what is the narrator's attitude toward his subject?

A. The narrator assumes the perspective of a nonjudgmental reporter. He will not judge the dead man or the events in the story, but will simply relate them and allow his readers to draw their own conclusions.

Who is General Della Rovere, and how has he distinguished himself?

A. General Della Rovere is an Italian army corps commander. He is described as an "intimate friend of Badoglio's and 'technical adviser' to General Alexander," indicating that he has had close contact with people in high positions, both in the government and in the British army. He was captured "while trying ... to take command of the resistance movement in the north."

Why does the German warden stand at attention when addressing the general?

A. The fact that Franz stands at attention indicates that the general has earned his respect as the quintessential military man.

“Cavalry officer”* was written all over those arched legs, that slight build, and aristocratic profile. Tight-corseted, he wore a monocle* and false teeth, and the thought struck me of how convincing, after all, is our racial destiny. What else could a man like that become if not a general? With steely grace he could give an order and make it sound like a plea, and even now, weeks after his capture, his cheeks were clean-shaven, his trousers miraculously pressed, while one could almost detect on his polished shoes a pair of invisible spurs.*

“Montanelli, I presume?” he said with a slight drawl, polishing his monocle without giving me his hand. “I already knew of your presence here before landing. Badoglio in person had informed me. His Majesty’s Government is following your case with the utmost sympathy. Let it be understood, however, that the day you face the firing squad you will have done no more than your duty. Please stand at ease.” Only at these last words did I realize that I was standing heels joined, thumbs touching the seams of my trousers just as the drill book* says. “We are all on temporary duty here, right?” he continued, cleaning the nail of one little finger with the nail of the other. “An officer is at all times merely on temporary duty, he is a *novio del la muerte*, as the Spaniards say, a bridegroom of death.” He smiled at me, paced leisurely up and down the cell flexing his slim, arched legs; then, stopping again before me, cleaned and replaced his monocle. “We

two are very near our wedding day,” he continued. “My sentence has already been pronounced. And yours?”

“Not yet, sir,” I answered almost *mortified*.

“It will be,” he went on. “You will have the honor of being shot in the chest, I hear. Splendid. There is no better proof of your conduct under interrogation. The Germans are rough in obtaining confessions but *chivalrous* toward those who abstain. Good. Your orders are to continue. In case of torture, if you feel you must utter a name — I cast no doubt on your spiritual endurance, but there is a limit to the physical — utter mine. I have nothing to lose. Actually, I had nothing to hide even from my old friend, Marshal Kesselring,* when he questioned me. I did, however, explain that I hardly expected the British submarine captain to be such a fool as to answer the decoy signals* of a German patrol boat. ‘You trust the English?’ Kesselring smiled. ‘Why not? We even trusted the Germans once,’ I smiled back. ‘Sorry!’ he said, ‘I have no choice but to shoot you.’ ‘No hard feelings,’ I concluded. But to come back to your case: when you are up for questioning again, stick to your line. After all, we have such a simple duty left: to die like gentlemen. What is your indictment?”

I explained my case fully. His Excellency listened with his eyes to the ground like a confessor, nodding *approbation* from time to time.

“A clear case,” he concluded. “Captured in the performance of duty. It’s

Being shot in the chest was the preferred means of execution, a “clean” death as opposed to being hanged or killed by torture.

What is the effect of the use of the author’s name?

How does the general’s behavior help create a sense of his personality?

How does the general expect soldiers to comport themselves under duress?

What does the general mean when he says that an officer is always “on temporary duty”?

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

- cavalry officer** — an officer of a division of troops who fight on horseback.
monocle — an eyeglass for one eye.
spurs — spiked metallic wheels attached to a rider’s boots, used to urge the horse forward.
drill book — a military training and disciplinary manual.
Marshall Kesselring — Albert Kesselring (1887-1960), German general during World War II.
decoy signals — signals used to entice or mislead.

What is the effect of the use of the author’s name?
A. The use of the author’s name as narrator helps create the authentic atmosphere of the story.

How does the general’s behavior help create a sense of his personality?

A. By not shaking hands, the general shows his haughty attitude toward the lower ranks. His behavior is very subtle. Although he does not shake hands, he is not overtly rude: his hands are occupied in polishing his monocle, so the caller is not offended by rudeness. Although he is amiable, he is not companionable. Allowing Montanelli to “stand at ease” emphasizes his friendly attitude, while the act of cleaning his nails indicates his complete nonchalance in the face of imminent execution. He is thus seen to be aloof yet friendly, military yet casual. These seeming contradictions will be clarified by the end of the story.

What does the general mean when he says that an officer is always “on temporary duty”?

A. He means that a soldier must expect to die or be killed in the line of duty and that his term of service is therefore “temporary.”

How does the general expect soldiers to comport themselves under duress?

A. The general expects no less than complete loyalty and endurance in the face of capture and torture. For example, he says that it will be an “honor” for Montanelli to be shot in the chest by his captors, for this will be a proof of his valiant conduct under interrogation. He also expects his soldiers to behave with the utmost dignity: “We have such a simple duty left: to die like gentlemen.”

- 5 The statement implies that some people, by virtue of their physical and constitutional endowments, seem to be destined for their positions in life. Responses will vary. This issue will be of particular relevance at the end of the story.
- 6 The general increases his prestige in the eyes of both the narrator and the reader through his extensive knowledge of war-related information.
- 7 The general refers to his “old friend,” Marshal Kesselring, whom he apparently knew from the early days of the war, when Italy was allied with Germany. He implies that he makes friends in high places wherever he goes.
- 8 Students should understand the complicated political/military situation of the time. Part of Italy was still in the hands of Germany at the time of this story, even as the Allies were invading from the South. Thus, while the official government of Italy had surrendered, Germany still had control of part of the country.