

To Kill a Magpie

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The negligence of people as individuals and as nation states throughout history is responsible for many disasters and the deaths of millions. People most often do not think things through and even if they do think it through they might not care. When we do these awful things to each other we are usually acting on our primitive instinct of survival of the fittest. Our blatant disregard for others is not some new phenomenon; we have been destroying each other for centuries; people start wars, kill each other or enslave each other. This nonchalant way of viewing important things is very childish and selfish of us. These selfish human qualities can be seen in the painting *Don Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga* by Francisco de Goya (see Figure 1).

At first glance, the painting seems very innocent and you suspect nothing bad from it – just a boy with his pet magpie. Although, when you look into the shadows you will see that there are cats that are waiting to pounce on the bird and slaughter it. The young boy seems to be unaware of the cats or he might not understand the consequences if he is to let the cats get the bird. In Christian art, the bird would represent the soul, and the cats are going to destroy it. There are also caged birds and that would sometimes represent innocents. The seemingly innocent painting contains sinister undertones and it is even a possibility that the child in the painting was dead at the time it was created. This painting was intended to show the frail boundaries that separate a child's world from the ever-present forces of evil. When you first look at it this painting you don't even see the cats in the shadows, they blend into the background. The brightest part of the painting is the boy's face, which means that you will see it first. His face looks very pale but it also seems to glow. This brightness makes the boy look very innocent and pure. From that you develop an idea of the painting that it is an innocent boy with his pet but that is

shattered when you finally discover the cats. (*Via Artis*) (*Web Gallery of Art*)

The painting is very symmetrical with Don Manuel separating the two sides. To his left you have the evil or the cats and to his right are the innocent caged birds. Even though the bird on the string is to the boys left, it would still represent innocents. The bird is a tease for the cats and they cannot wait for the boy to leave the bird alone so they can destroy the innocent world that it represents. The boy is being very negligent having his magpie out of a cage in the presence of the cats. Because he so innocent if something was to happen to the bird while he was away he would not be blamed. (*via artists*)

This struggle of good and evil is timeless because evil and carelessness are ever present in any human society. People are often negligent and don't see the consequences of their actions. A perfect example of this is the colonization of Rwanda by the Belgians. Rwanda was awarded to the Belgians after World War I. Rwanda was taken from Germany (at this time Rwanda was considered a colony of Germany) and Belgium received it as a spoil of war. Rwanda went from being colonized by Germany to being colonized by Belgium, they were being tossed around and the elite countries at the time had no regard for how the Rwandans felt about it. (*Leave None to Tell the Story*)

Before and during the period of colonialism by the Belgians the two tribes, the Hutus and the Tutsis, were in were in conflict with each other. The Hutus and the Tutsis have never gotten along and when the boundaries for Africa were decided the two tribes' land were sectioned as one country. Through their history one tribe or the other has been in power and of course they suppressed the other. While Belgium was colonizing the area the Tutsis were the majority elite and since the Belgians favored the Tutsis they changed the Tutsis to the sole elite. It was like childish favoritism, the Tutsis were lighter skinned

than the Hutus which played a role in which tribe the Belgians chose because the Tutsis would have been the closest to white or “European”. This gave the Tutsis privileged status in the colony and an opportunity to suppress the Hutus. The Belgians had colonial power over Rwanda until their independence in 1962. Preceding the Belgian pull out, elections brought the Hutu nationalist Party of the Hutu Emancipation Movement to power in 1959. Even though the Hutus were not the favorite of the Belgians there were more of them therefore they would win in an election. This created a power shift once the Belgians left. Tension built up until the largest massacre of the Tutsis in 1994. This was not a spur-of-the-moment thing; it was well organized by radical Hutu groups that were funded by members of the government. They started to amass weapons and conduct training programs – all they were waiting for was a time to strike. (Jones)

There are many parallels between the Rwandan genocide and the painting of Don Manuel. The boy in the painting would be representative of Belgium. The boy is well dressed in a strikingly ornate red jumpsuit and is obviously very wealthy. Belgium being one of the first world countries would be very wealthy. The boy has in his possession a bird on a string, it is not caged which means it should be free but it can only fly so far because the boy is holding the string. The bird would represent the Tutsis, they were the favorite of the Belgians but they were still controlled by the Belgians. That control is paralleled in the string, it allows for enough freedom to keep the bird content. The cats have to put up with the boy carelessly dangling the bird in front of their faces and all they can do is plot against it. The cats are waiting and planning, they same thing that the Hutus did. The power that the Tutsis were awarded by the Belgians and the fact that some of them abused it to get at the Tutsis was the Hutus motive. Although while the

boy is still around the birds are safe and that was the case with Rwanda as well. Once Belgium pulled out, the country was no longer stable and it would only be a matter of time before someone snapped. As soon as the boy leaves the side of the bird the cats have nothing stopping them and no foreseeable consequences if they killed the bird. The really innocent ones are the birds in the cage because they are not flaunting their freedom and privileges in front of the cats. If the cats kill them it would be an unprovoked attack. The caged birds would be the Tutsi people that didn't abuse their power over the Hutus but were killed anyway. Not saying that the Tutsis deserved what they got only that the Hutus believed the Tutsis deserved it. The thousands of Tutsi children that were killed in the massacre would be caged birds as well.

Although the two situations parallel each other the consequences are very different. The death of a bird because a child wasn't paying attention would be sad but when you are looking at the massacre of 800,000 Tutsi men women and children in the span of 100 days the two are suddenly very different. The Rwandan genocide shows how people abuse power and how the negligence of a country can cause disaster. When the actions of a country can be accurately compared with the mindset and actions of a child there is something seriously wrong with whom we put our trust in to run things. Belgium as a nation state probably did concern themselves with what was going on in Rwanda one they left because it was no longer their problem and that is the same way a child would think if they left a bird alone with cats. The child would get distracted and be very selfish.



Figure 1: Don Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga (1784–1792),
Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (Spanish, 1746–1828)
Oil on canvas; 50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.6 cm)
The Jules Bache Collection, 1949 (49.7.41)

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