The reward of cruelty, by William Hogarth
Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne

William Hogarth (1697–1764)
The reward of cruelty, 1751
from series Four stages of cruelty
engraving
38.8 x 31.8 cm (plate)
66.5 x 47.5 cm (sheet)
Purchased 1995
Baillieu Library Print Collection
University of Melbourne
1995.3210

The reward of cruelty is the dramatic finale to Hogarth’s moralising series Four stages of cruelty, based around fictional character Tom Nero.

In Nero’s early years, he tortures and beats animals, and in the penultimate scene, Cruelty in perfection, he commits murder and theft. The reward of cruelty (a reworking of the frontispiece to the 1543 medical book On the fabric of the human body) shows the body of Nero, who has been tried, found guilty and hanged, being dissected in public. This sarcastic ‘reward’ – denial of a proper burial and mutilation of the body – was in line with Britain’s new Murder Act, introduced in the same year as this print.

This new legislation sought to have murderers executed almost immediately upon being found guilty, at which point, ‘in order to impress a just horror in the mind of the offender’, the perpetrator’s body was to be anatomised or hung in chains, but ‘at no point whatsoever ... to be buried’.

Nero’s final fate would be similar to that of the skeletons in the niches behind. His remains would be boiled down (indicated by the cadaver’s left hand pointing towards the steaming cauldron) and reassembled as an anatomical specimen, and thus refused a burial altogether.
Teaching ideas

The University of Melbourne’s curriculum is rich and varied, and changes from year to year. For more teaching ideas, contact a collection manager.

Animal Law

“The Four Stages of Cruelty” were done in hopes of preventing in some degree that cruel treatment of poor Animals which makes the streets of London more disagreeable to the human mind, than anything what ever, the very describing of which gives pain.’ (William Hogarth)

With animal law a relatively recent discipline, historically situate Hogarth’s views on animal cruelty. Was he unique in his strong stance in the 18th century?

Young People, Crime and Justice

Studies have found that murderers and serial killers often have a history of violence towards animals at a younger age, usually recounting it as their first violent act. Using the character Tom Nero from The reward of cruelty and the other works from The four stages of cruelty as an early example of this, outline the development or descent of the character from cruelty to murder.

Punishment and Social Control

Discuss the new Murder Act 1751 as illustrated in The reward of cruelty and its changes to punishment for those found guilty of such a crime, redirecting their bodies away from burial towards public dissection, thus not allowing their remains to rest.

Graphic Narratives

Examine Four stages of cruelty, Beer Street and Gin Lane alongside the more playfully humorous Marriage a-la-mode, A harlot’s progress and A rake’s progress, all in the Baillieu Library Print Collection. In this form of 18th-century comic-strip, how does the artist carry the narrative almost entirely within the pictures?

Body, Mind and Medicine: A Dissection

Situ ate The reward of cruelty in the history of anatomical study.

The Print Room

Discuss how successfully William Hogarth’s narrative series translate into a contemporary print exhibition setting. For works imbued with moral messages, jokes, homages and symbols, to what extent do today’s audiences need to be informed about contemporaneous political and social events in order to properly appreciate the artist’s vision?
Intersecting objects

Johannes Pieter de Frey (Dutch, 1770–1834) after Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669)
**The anatomy lesson**, 1798
etching
28.1 × 36.2 cm (sheet trimmed to image)
Gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959
Baillieu Library Print Collection
University of Melbourne
1959.4361

Attributed to David Wilkie (Scottish, 1785–1841)
**Academy study of a male nude**, 19th century
black chalk on paper
30.8 × 49.3 cm (sheet)
Baillieu Library Print Collection
University of Melbourne
1995.2007.002

To learn more, visit the website of the [Baillieu Library Print Collection](#).

References

Further reading


*A body of knowledge: The University of Melbourne in celebration of 150 years of Melbourne Medical School 1862–2012*, University of Melbourne, 2012.

Andreas Vesalius, *[De humani corporis fabrica](#)* (On the fabric of the human body, 1543), digitised interactive version, with interpretive rollover text.