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The Heart in the Steel Blade: A Comparison of Compassion in Balzac's *An Episode Under the Terror* and Harrison's *Rollerball* (1975) vs. AI Analysis

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Abstract

A comparison of the motivations, humanity and even kindness of two main characters in two very distinct and different stories and timeframes, from both human and machine perspectives. At first glance, either character may be observed as more antagonist than protagonist, indeed what has become known as an antihero. Yet against the backdrop of each of their environments and the societal norms of their times, their characters both exude more compassion and indeed conscience than the civilizations that bore them. This is often the irony of those in life who, as literature attempts to illustrate, have been involved in violence. For often it is that they are the ones who can most deeply appreciate peace and even redemption when they find it. This is of primary importance for the student of storytelling in character development, in fiction reflecting the reality of the human condition and struggle. Google's Gemini AI, while an excellent aid in research, at this writing is unable to analyze at this depth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rollerball is a film directed by Norman Jewison and screenplay written by William Harrison, based on his short story "Roller Ball Murder", originally published in *Esquire* magazine in September, 1973. [1] Released in 1975 by United Artists, it stars James Caan as Jonathan E., John Houseman as Mr. Bartholomew, Maud Adams as Ella, John Beck as Moonpie, Moses Gunn as Cletus and Sir Ralph Richardson as the Librarian.

An Episode Under the Terror (Un épisode sous la Terreuris) is a short story (novella) by Honoré de Balzac, originally published in 1830. It was originally titled *Une messe en 1793* (A Mass in 1793). The story is published in Balzac's collection, *Scènes de la vie politique* (Scenes from Political Life). It was adapted as an episode of *The CBS Radio Mystery Theater* by writer G. Fredrick Lewis, entitled "Episode of the Terror", and stars Marian Seldes as Sister Margarite, Earl Hammond as Father Laurant, Sam Gray as Pante, and Arnold Moss as The Stranger. The episode was broadcast originally on CBS Radio affiliate stations on September 7, 1981. [2] [3]

These two stories, light years apart in timeframes and indeed subject matter, both intensely illustrate the humanity of men caught in the violent societies of their times. The personal struggles they face in wrestling with their consciences, and the consequences of their actions, which many times they are forced to take by powers outside of their control. But even more so, the irony of the fact that they, those with their hands in, or have been exposed to the most bloodshed, seem at times to have the most heart and compassion. Although this analysis is

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dealing primarily with fiction, this basic characteristic can be observed in contemporary societies in survivors of war, natural disasters, the Holocaust, and veterans of intense combat in military, police, and security forces.

And this quality is not lost on the writer, director or actor. This exploration hopes to illustrate this fact in aiding the development of complex characters and their struggles in modern storytelling. Something that commonly accessed Artificial Intelligence has been unable so far to quite replicate.

II. THE STORY OF ROLLERBALL

In the future, the world economy is controlled by a corporatocracy. As explained by the character of Mr. Bartholomew, (John Houseman) nations are now bankrupt and gone. Wars, even wars between corporations which few even talk about anymore are a thing of the past. Transport, food, communication, housing, luxury and energy are now controlled by corporations for the "common good". No more poverty or sickness or even real needs. Only luxuries, at differing levels according to position and social class.

However, there is Rollerball. A sport composed of elements from roller derby, hockey, football, motocross racing, and judo.[4] A violent sport where a stainless-steel ball is launched on a circular track, where players on roller skates from each team scramble to catch it with a baseball-type catcher's mitt before falling into the gutter, out of play. Each team tries to place the ball in their respective goal. Two to three players from each team are on motorcycles with a flexible loop attached to the rear of the bike. This enables the skaters to be towed by the bike and launched at greater velocities on the track, as well as the motorcycle becoming a destructive element in itself at times, although resulting in a penalty.

It is a rough sport where players are routinely injured or even killed, but much like the bread and circuses of Ancient Rome, it serves to give the public an outlet for Man's desire for competition and violence, without the need for war. In addition, it serves the corporation's interests in illustrating the futility of individual effort, helping to lull the populace with the additional elements of privilege, luxury and recreational drugs.

Jonathan E. (James Caan) is captain of the Energy Corporation's Rollerball team in Houston. Mr. Bartholomew, chairman of the Energy Corporation sees that he is well compensated for his efforts (his own ranch, luxuries that only the executive class can afford, including company supplied female companions) as Jonathan is perhaps the greatest man to ever play the game. A ten-year veteran of Rollerball, his name is becoming synonymous with the sport.

And that is indeed the problem. While the game's purpose is to illustrate the uselessness of distinctiveness, Jonathan's career seems to define individualism. Thousands chant his name at each game, including fans of opposing teams. As a result, the threat is felt by the Executive Directorate. After a victory against the Madrid team (food), Mr. Bartholomew informs Jonathan that they wish for his retirement announcement during an upcoming television special chronicling the highlights of his career.

Jonathan hesitates, as he cannot understand why they are asking this of him. He stalls Mr. Bartholomew and sets out to quietly find out why. He begins with asking his former coach, Cletus (Moses Gunn), now an executive himself, to find out more information if possible. In addition, Jonathan orders several books about the history of how the corporations got started, the Corporate Wars, which no one talks about anymore, and how management decisions are made. This results in a blind alley in that he is informed that all books have now been edited and transcribed, and in a sense, censored and sanitized.

The corporation begins to act in forcing Jonathan to retire. In addition to replacing his live-in female companion Mackie (Pamela Hemsley) with Daphne (Barbara Trentham), a spy for the corporation sent to observe him and relay information, they announce rule changes in the upcoming game between Houston and Tokyo (luxury): Limited substitutions of players in action and no penalties for rough behavior. During the formal executive party on the evening of the television special, Cletus informs Jonathan that he was unable to discover much

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information as to the why of Jonathan's retirement, but senses that the Executive Directorate indeed fears Jonathan. The evening ends with a second showdown between Jonathan and Mr. Bartholomew, Jonathan beginning to request concessions for his compliance, including seeing his former wife Ella (Maud Adams) again. He states if the new rule changes stay in place, he will indeed stay with the team to play against Tokyo.

At their peril, the Houston team dismisses the Tokyo team's playing style, heavily influenced by the martial arts, focusing rather on bravado, team spirit and brute strength. The Tokyo game is indeed brutal, the anger between teams becoming more apparent. Even the fans become violent, a foolish Tokyo fan entering the track and attacking a Houston player. A victory for Houston but also pyrrhic for Jonathan. The loss of two key players, Blue (Tony Brubaker), one of the bikers, and leaving his close friend Moonpie (John Beck) now in a permanent coma. Jonathan refuses to have the Tokyo medical teams take Moonpie off life support, making arrangements to have him sent back to Houston. In a final attempt to learn the true reason for his forced retirement, Jonathan travels to Geneva, one of the largest information centers in the world.

However, this effort is also futile. Jonathan learns that all the books have been transcribed and edited at this central location as well. The Librarian (Sir Ralph Richardson) attempts to extract answers for Jonathan from a supercomputer called Zero, which has already unfortunately been corrupted, programmed not to divulge sensitive information about corporate decisions and who makes them. The Librarian also mentions the fact that they had currently misplaced all information regarding the 13th century. This may have indeed been a move by the Executive Directorate as well, as the general knowledge of events such as the Magna Carta of 1215, and the Mongol's conquer of Baghdad in 1258 could have effectively been the seed of another conceivable threat to their corporate structure.

The Executive Directorate meet again via teleconference to discuss the Jonathan E. situation. Two more actions are taken: They send Jonathan's former wife Ella (Maud Adams) to visit him at his ranch as he had requested, yet to try and convince him to retire. And the final solution: the last game of the season where Houston will play against New York (transport) will not only feature no substitutions, and no penalties, but now, with no time limit.

So, for all intent and purpose, this game, which has now degenerated to pure combat, will be played to the death. [4]

Yet Jonathan will not submit, either to Ella's urgings for him to retire, or the force imposed on him by the rule changes. He returns to play against New York in the finals. Tensions are high, as even the audience, usually jubilant and excited, is now quiet and sedate. All are waiting to see what will happen. When the game begins however, the New York team and its fans are now chanting in response, "Jonathan's Dead!" Illustrating that this contest is now nothing more than a war against a single man and what he is coming to represent.

As expected, it is indeed a massacre for both teams, each side sustaining major casualties early in the game. Jonathan, after a narrow escape from a New York biker, is rescued and taken to the center of the track for medical attention. He returns promptly to the game just as the last Houston player is removed from play. There are then three players left, Jonathan for Houston and a skater and biker for the New York team.

The skater charges Jonathan in attempting to score and Jonathan kills him after an intense struggle directly in front of Mr. Bartholomew's box. Taking the ball from his opponent's glove, Jonathan then disables the biker on a charge yet relenting from killing him with the ball at the last moment. Jonathan struggles over to the goal, placing the stainless-steel ball in the goal and scoring for his team, for which he is now the sole member, in the only score of what now only pretends to be a game.

There is dead silence in the stadium, but softly, then loudly the crowd starts chanting his name as Jonathan takes a victory lap around the track, even the members and coaches of the New York team.

Mr. Bartholomew, visibly angry that the corporation and Executive Directorate have failed in their attempts, leaves the stadium. Whereas Jonathan's comrade Cletus smiles and laughs in joy at his friend's victory.

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Jonathan has not only played and won the game, but he has also even overcome it. Becoming greater than the game itself, which is exactly what the Executive Directorate was afraid of in the first place.

And as to the outcome, this is where the story ends. It is uncertain to what extent Jonathan's victory has affected his society, but with Mr. Bartholomew's reaction and that of the crowd, it clearly has made an impact. [5]

III. JONATHAN E.'s CHARACTER

This society, as it is portrayed, is very comfortable, extremely efficient and well organized, and totally geared to producing results. However, it also reveals itself as being quite antiseptic and even soulless. The irony is that Jonathan E., the greatest player ever in the violent sport of Rollerball, holding the world record for putting more players out of play in a single game, seems to be one of the very few, if not the only one who has any sensitivity or real feeling in this somewhat dystopian future In the scenes of the formal executive party to celebrate Jonathan's special program on "Multivision", the audience is introduced to more of an exposure of the executive class and their immediate lessers of this future, and indeed the callousness that makes itself apparent.

The dismissal of another executive named Evans is casually discussed between guests, even with slight humor. There are several examples of extremely casual sexual encounters, which seem the norm for this world. Jonathan's current companion, Daphne, whom Jonathan already suspects is spying on him for the corporation seems miffed at the attention he gets when they enter the party, even though he is the guest of honor. As a result, Daphne spends the rest of the evening dancing and visiting with other men, while keeping Jonathan in sight. Mackie, Jonathan's former company-provided mistress, is also present at the party. She attempts to hurt Jonathan, presumably because she blames him for not insisting to the corporation that she be allowed to remain with him. Mackie shares that she is now with an executive and has revealed intimate details of their previous relationship to him. To which, Jonathan simply gets up and calmly walks away, while her eyes show a trace of remorse at her failed effort to wound him.

One glimmer of sensitivity at the party *is* shown by one female guest as the partygoers all watch the television special about Jonathan's career. With tears in her eyes, she excuses herself to the terrace, as it is apparent that the violence of the game is too difficult for her to watch.

But perhaps the best illustration of callousness or indifference in this society is exemplified as the sun comes up. While Mr. Bartholomew is in the study having another showdown with Jonathan, the remaining guests are having an afterparty with the tree line outside.

One of the guests brings a type of incendiary pistol to the party, and the guests cheer as the ladies (including Mackie, although she appears to have regret at the end) each take turns firing at and in turn burning down six extremely tall trees. Obviously countless years old, due to their size and height are reduced to ashes in moments, with no remorse for their loss or the animals that may live in them as it is apparent that environmentalism, ecology and conservation are no longer concerns for society.

Against this backdrop of an unfeeling, uncaring culture, it is Jonathan's character which strongly contrasts with the people and society around him. He lives primarily on his ranch, away from the more sterile atmosphere of the cities, as well as having horses, suggesting a deep connection to nature, and even Man's past relationship with it. Jonathan is far from arrogant, as might well be expected of someone with his background, success, and achievement, as he seems to treat most with courtesy and respect, at least until they do not do the same with him (such as Daphne tipping her hand as a spy, and threatening Jonathan, and his giving her a scratch across the face with his spiked glove as a warning to get out of his life). Jonathan shows through his actions that he is far from indifferent to others. A veteran of an extremely violent sport, indeed a form of release for society, he illustrates compassion to those people and things around him.

Loyalty to the Team

For example, his dedication to his teammates. As the rules change, Jonathan voices that he does not want to retire and leave them to play the game without him for their own safety. As the Executive Directorate makes the game even more brutal, it

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makes Jonathan even that much more determined to stay in the game. Indeed, the exact opposite of what they had intended.

During the Tokyo game, which is the first game without penalties for unnecessary roughness, his friend and teammate Moonpie (John Beck) is cornered by three opposing players. He is stripped of his helmet and punched severely at the base of his skull by a Tokyo player with a spiked glove, resulting in his becoming brain-dead. He is taken out of the game and Jonathan goes in as his replacement. Seeking revenge for his friend, with the help of Blue, a biker, Jonathan singles out the player who had injured Moonpie. He repays the Tokyo player with the proverbial "eye for an eye", stripping off his helmet and doing the exact same to him.

James Caan in a 1977 interview said he felt there was little he could do as an actor with the character of Jonathan E. [6] Yet his portrayal, the look on his face, as well as that of Tony Brubaker portraying Blue, illustrates true remorse. As the revenge was indeed hollow and held no real satisfaction. A sport which Jonathan loved was degrading itself to get him to leave it, and nothing, not even payback could change what had happened to Moonpie. Directly after this incident in the Tokyo game, Blue himself is killed by fire when his motorcycle is set ablaze as a ball is fired into it, Jonathan himself being visibly shaken by the sight.

Yet possibly the most poignant example of his feelings for his teammates is his refusal to take Moonpie off life support after he is injured, wanting to give his friend every chance at a life. He asks the Tokyo Doctor (Burt Kwouk) if Moonpie can still dream. The Doctor says no, his teammate is now brain dead with no sort of consciousness, no brain waves: a vegetable.

But Jonathan reasons that even a plant can sense life. It turns toward the sun, it senses light. And if Moonpie had life, of any kind, Jonathan would not deny him that. He returns to see his friend in the sanitarium right before the final game against New York, sharing his fears with Moonpie who is probably not even aware of his presence, yet the camaraderie is still felt by Jonathan.

"It's like you're a god now…maybe you know what I don't…I've been stupid for so long…I've been so stubborn…and I don't even know why. It scares me…I know I'm probably gonna…probably gonna die…And you're gonna be in there pumpin' away long after I'm gone…Yeah uh, you got it made old buddy… (noticing the flowers in the room) [Texas] bluebonnets and everything"

Feelings for Ella

Of course, the place where Jonathan is the most sensitive and even vulnerable is regarding his former wife, Ella. Now remarried to a city engineer in Rome, the corporation summons her to revisit Jonathan in a last-ditch effort to convince him to retire. His desire to see her again along with his watching a cherished video of them together on a regular basis attest that his love for her has remained constant throughout the years.

Yet during her visit, certain facts regarding their former relationship as well as the current situation come to light. Jonathan had understood that Ella had to leave him because the corporation took her away because an executive wanted her. That may have been partially true, but Ella reveals that she also felt neglected to a certain extent in their relationship. The game of Rollerball always came first with Jonathan. This admission on her part, coupled with the true reason for her visit, sheds a painful light on his memory of her. The realization that she might not have been in his corner as strongly as he had always believed.

Personal Relationships	**Artificiality:** Jonathan's relationships with the women provided to him (like Mackey) are dictated by the corporation, rendering them *soulless* and transactional. His one genuine, compassionate relationship with his former wife, Ella, was ruthlessly terminated by a powerful executive, highlighting the system's power over personal love.

Fig.1. Google's Gemini AI analysis of the artificiality of Jonathan E.'s relationships.

In querying this comparison and analysis with Google's Gemini Artificial intelligence, these factors along with his relationship with Moonpie are

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overlooked and not touched upon. Rather, machine learning focuses on the overall societal implications in Jonathan E.s relationships with women, (Figure 1) also leaving out Ella revealing the additional reason for her leaving him.

Although never clarified, it is strongly implied that the Energy Corporation and Executive Directorate would have used their power to enable Ella to remain with Jonathan if he agreed to retire. As he puts it to her, "Are you my big reward?". But this realization that she is allowing the corporation to use her, in order to use him, and especially the hard, painful fact that his relationship with Ella was not what he had imagined, but sort of a self-delusion, makes him that much more determined. As a result, he erases the video in front of her, deleting an illusion, something that he chose to see but never truly existed.

And in the final scene, in the game against New York, Jonathan displays his concluding act of mercy. As the biker charges, and Jonathan defeats him, he begins to kill him with the Rollerball. Yet he reneges at the last moment. As he pulls his helmet off, Jonathan's expression reveals his feelings: There has been enough bloodshed already.

Google Gemini was also able to relate this point in its analysis, (Figure 2) yet it draws the inference that the crowd is chanting for Jonathan's act of mercy to his final opponent. It should be noted that the crowd begins *after* Jonathan places the ball in the goal, winning the game.

The Final Game	**The Glimmer of Mercy:** The only true act of compassion occurs during the climactic, deliberately lethal final game. Jonathan E. is given the chance to kill his last opponent, but instead of finishing him, he scores the winning goal. The crowd, which had been silent in shock at the escalating violence, erupts in cheers for his **mercy** and victory over the system's mandate for death, suggesting that human compassion is not entirely extinguished.

Fig.2. Google's Gemini AI analysis of the mercy shown by Jonathan E.

IV. THE STORY OF AN EPISODE UNDER THE TERROR

On January 21, 1793, King Louis XVI of France was executed, put to death by guillotine by the Committee for Public Safety under Robespierre during the period of the French Revolution known as The Reign of Terror. A period of strict surveillance by the state, all French citizens who were deemed enemies of the people were put to death. Royalty, and those who were loyal to them, nobility, and aristocratic classes were prime targets for execution. As a result, many went into hiding in France, forced at times to conceal their identities, as well as often their whereabouts.

As was the clergy, as this was a period of dechristianization. The Catholic Church was stripped of its power in France, its lands confiscated by the state and its ministry initially ordered to leave the country, or later, were simply executed. Replaced by the Cult of Reason, an atheistic state-sponsored religion, and later, for a short time, the Cult of the Supreme Being. An atmosphere so unreal that even the Gregorian calendar was replaced by the state with the French Republican Calendar, [7] the months of the year and days of the week being given new names.

On the snowy night of January 22, 1793, after Louis XVI was put under the guillotine, a woman hurries through the streets of Paris. She is sure there is someone following her as she can hear his footsteps. When she arrives at a bakery, she dares to turn her head, seeing that there is indeed someone in the shadows, watching her. She had suspected someone following and watching her the previous day, and that morning as well.

The baker and his wife are expecting her as she is there to pick up a very special order. She accepts her purchase and pays the price of a gold Louis, the price previously agreed upon. She tells them that she feels she is being followed, and the baker offers his help. As he is in the Garde Nationale or French National Guard, he puts on his uniform and goes outside to have word with whomever is lurking in the shadows.

Yet when he returns, he is as white as the snow falling outside in the Paris night. Filled with fear, and no longer offering his help, he tries to retrieve the

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purchase from her pocket for fear of what repercussions could come to them both if it were discovered. He tells her furiously to leave and never return to his shop again. Rather to brave the streets with only God's protection than lose the package in her pocket, she leaves the bakery and heads toward home.

She still can sense as well as later hear whoever is pursuing her. She arrives home and quickly disappears inside. It is then that it is revealed that she is a Carmelite nun in hiding, living with another sister as well as a priest. And the box she obtained from the bakery contains communion wafers. She relates to both of them that she was followed and that they are being watched.

They hear that someone is coming up the stairs. The priest quickly hides himself and there is a knock at the door.

When the two holy women answer it, The Stranger is not quite what they expected. There seems to be nothing sinister about him, tall and burly, but very respectful and polite. He reveals that he knows who they are, and that they are giving shelter to a priest in hiding who miraculously escaped from the massacres at the Carmelite Abbaye. But he assures them not to fear, that he bears them no harm, and hopefully can be of service to them. He says now that King Louis XVI is gone, he may be one of the few who is now above the law.

The priest reveals himself from hiding, as by listening to their conversation he is convinced that this man is not one of their persecutors. The Stranger then pleads with the priest to perform a mass, now illegal, for the repose of the King's soul. The priest agrees and asks the Stranger to return at midnight.

As promised, the mass is performed. And The Stranger weeps. At its conclusion, the priest asks him if he is in some way guilty of the death of the King, and if so to confide in him as there is no sin the Savior will not forgive. The Stranger assures that he is not guilty of bloodshed, whereas the priest reminds him that it is not enough to have taken no part in a great crime when there was something that could be done to defend against it. Yet the stranger asks if there is punishment for indirect participation, being forced by duty or obligation. The priest mulls over this as he is not sure of the correct answer.

The Stranger then presents the priest with a box containing a holy relic, saying in time they will understand more of its significance.

He also tells them that he knows the owner of their house, Mucius Scaevola. A former huntsman who served the Prince de Conti. He is thought of as a new patriot but in reality, his heart is with the Bourbons, and he has assured that as long as they remain in that house, they will be safe. The Stranger tells them that they will also be provided with money and provisions and urges them to remain in safety for better times.

The Stranger also promises to return the next year, on the 21st of January, if they are still in the same place, to celebrate another mass for the repose of the King's soul, and for the forgiveness of his sins, and then takes his leave.

And when the box is opened, it is revealed that it contains a fine linen handkerchief, knotted and crumpled, with crimson stains upon it. Indeed blood. Upon the linen, is embroidered the royal crown.

Just as foretold, the three begin to receive aid in the form of firewood and supplies, clothing, and even inside information and documentation to protect their safety through Mucius Scaevola. Yet they suspect that he is more the instrument by which these things come, The Stranger being their true source.

And so, a year passes. Queen Marie Antoinette is executed the following October, and true to his word, The Stranger returns for the mass at the appointed hour of midnight. He takes part in the mass, but speaks little, preferring to remain to them perennially, The Stranger, and promptly exits.

After the events of 9 Thermidor in July, when Maximilien Robespierre was ousted from power from the Committee for Public Safety, the priest and sisters are finally free to go outside in safety. The first time the priest goes out, he pays a visit to some friends who own a perfumery. A large crowd gathers outside as he realizes that he cannot leave the shop. A tumbril passes by, transporting the accomplices of Robespierre who will now take their turn under the guillotine.

The priest looks up and recognizes The Stranger as one being taken to execution. He asks his friends who the man is, and they tell him he is the head man,

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as his hand actuates the guillotine. Indeed, "executeur des hautes oeuvres" his previous official title under the Monarchy.

The priest faints, and his friends try to bring him back to consciousness. He tells them that The Stranger gave him the handkerchief the King used to wipe his brow on the way to the end.

He murmurs "... Poor man!... There was a heart in the steel blade, when none was found in all France..."

V. THE CONSCIENCE OF THE KING'S EXECUTIONER

Many of Balzac's works have been staged in film, television and radio dramas such as *Cousin Bette*, *Lost Illusions*, and the character of Vautrin. Yet there is only one dramatization of this story found, the episode of *The CBS Radio Mystery Theater* broadcast in September of 1981, entitled "Episode of the Terror". This series also developed other episodes derived from his works, including *The Countess* and *The Colonel Chabert* in the 1977 season. [2]

As this is a short novella, this production adds additional side plots to the story, indeed reflecting the intense atmosphere under which people lived during this violent time. In this version, there is only one nun in hiding, named Sister Margarite. The baker (named Simone) in the story befriends and is kinder to the sister and priest in hiding. An additional character, Pante, formerly the baker's assistant who sells lemonade and cakes and rolls to the crowds at the guillotine, much to Simone's chagrin. "Like a *ghoul* I told 'em! Selling refreshments, as the knife-falls!" Yet Pante comes to repentance after meeting the brother of the single sister in the story in the street near the guillotine. A poor young man driven out of his mind at the sight of a boyhood friend being taken into custody and summarily executed, as he is later as well. Also, unlike the original version, the priest and sister are actively saying mass for select individuals whom they trust on Sundays. Yet this production remains very true and authentic to the original work, especially to the theme and mood of the story. [3] [8]

A man in an already difficult and even morbid occupation is now forced to carry out his profession against the very royal family who appointed him, and he served under. When the government changed, he had virtually no choice but to serve under it. But that fact does very little in soothing his conscience. Again, as with Jonathan E., the irony of the story is that the one who sends so many to their deaths, at a time of extreme bloodshed and societal upheaval, is the only one of conscience, and compassion.

Even though forced to now ply his trade against the innocent, he does what he can in the way of recompense. He seeks out to find those in hiding, a small insignificant corner of the Catholic Church to say a mass for the dead, and to help them in any way possible. Especially in securing their lives which are in grave danger if they are discovered. He uses his high position and influence as an executioner in obtaining supplies, information and even documentation to intercept any type of surveillance by the Committee.

et unlike Jonathan E., The Stranger is looking for redemption from his actions for his soul. In so doing, he is being helped by the clergy in a spiritual sense as he is helping them in a material one, along with providing protection.

Although this story is fictional, it is believed that the character of The Stranger is strongly based on Charles-Henri Sanson, who was the High Executioner, and conducted the execution of Louis XVI, the first executioner to use the guillotine. Despite his profession, apparently Sanson was very spiritually minded and deeply religious as shown in his memoirs, *The Memories of Sanson*, partially written by Balzac and also originally published in 1830. [9] Balzac had met with his son, Henri-Nicolas-Charles Sanson for collaboration on publication, also an executioner who in turn executed Queen Marie Antoinette.

Google's Gemini AI performed better in its analysis of this work. Due to the story's brevity, the main points were briefly touched upon, yet the machine concluded that The Stranger in the story *is* indeed the historical executioner of Charles-Henri Sanson, rather than just inspired by him. Gemini was able to identify the basic irony of The Stranger, who turns out to be the executioner, being the only one with heart and compassion during this violent time. (Figure 3)

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Sanson's Protection	**Sustained Benevolence:** After the secret mass, Sanson continues to act as the group's "mysterious **benefactor**," providing them with essential supplies like firewood, food, and forged "civic cards" for their safety. This prolonged, anonymous kindness, especially from the man who embodied the Terror's violence, is the story's ultimate statement on the resilience of compassion.

Fig.3. Google's Gemini AI analysis of compassion by The Stranger

VI. CONCLUSION AND COMPLETE AI ANALYSIS

Throughout these points which illustrate the intense struggles of these two men from completely different timeframes, it can be established that although societal systems and cultures transform, whether in fact, or fiction which dramatizes it, the human condition remains basically unchanged. Whether during a period of extreme cultural upheaval such as the French Revolution, or an extremely stable yet sterile environment of a dystopian future, certain individuals who have known violence, by their hand or not, seem to often have the greatest capacity and appreciation for compassion and kindness. Just as those who have truly known hunger appreciate plenty, and those having experienced extreme poverty value wealth. Whether it be by exposure to contrast to what they have known as in the case of Jonathan E. in his relationship with Ella, or through the search for redemption in the case of The Stranger.

And the human element, in the future or the past, or for that matter the present, is indeed the studio of the storyteller. Indeed, the more exposure to both of these works, the more is seen in them.

As illustrated, the same evaluation of this comparison was also queried to Google's Gemini Artificial Intelligence, and although some of the more surface elements of this analysis are indeed touched upon, the depth of investigations are left unexplored in comparing the two works. Presently, Artificial Intelligence is indeed of aid in gaining information for comparison, although not at the same intensity.

Yet it shood be noted that in publishing this document over the Internet, Artificial Intelligence will gain this knowledge as it is constantly becoming more astute at comparison and informed through machine learning. The complete analysis comparison of these two very distinct works by Google Gemini as of October 2025 are listed below:

Comparing Honoré de Balzac's 1830 short story "An Episode Under the Terror" (original French: Un épisode sous la Terreur) to the 1975 dystopian film Rollerball requires drawing parallels between two works separated by nearly 150 years and vastly different settings (1793 Paris vs. the corporatized future).

However, a comparison is possible by focusing on their shared themes of individual morality, systematic violence, and the overwhelming force of a tyrannical regime.

Compassion in Balzac's "An Episode Under the Terror"

Balzac's story is set during the height of the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, a period of political brutality. The core of the narrative is an extraordinary act of selfless compassion and humanity.

Aspect	Manifestation of Compassion/Fear
The Protagonist	**Selfless Risk:** The central act of compassion is performed by the mysterious man (later revealed to be the executioner, **Charles-Henri Sanson**). Riddled with guilt over his role in the King's death, he risks his life to arrange and protect a secret mass for the soul of the executed monarch. This act is driven by **deep-seated guilt and spiritual compassion** for the dead King and the living loyalists (the priest and the nuns).
The Shopkeepers	**Pity vs. Self-Interest:** The pastry-cook and his wife initially feel a "sudden movement of **compassion**" and "pity" for the aristocratic old woman (Sister Marthe) who buys wafers with her last gold coin. However, this feeling is quickly "chilled" by **fear** and "self-interest" when they suspect she is being followed by a spy, showcasing how

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Aspect	Manifestation of Compassion/Fear
	fear can corrupt and override basic kindness.
Sanson's Protection	**Sustained Benevolence:** After the secret mass, Sanson continues to act as the group's "mysterious **benefactor**," providing them with essential supplies like firewood, food, and forged "civic cards" for their safety. This prolonged, anonymous kindness, especially from the man who embodied the Terror's violence, is the story's ultimate statement on the resilience of compassion.

Compassion in *Rollerball* (1975)

The dystopian world of *Rollerball* is designed to suppress **individuality** and, by extension, genuine **human connection** and **compassion**. The corporate state offers comfort and luxury but strips away the freedom and moral awareness that allow compassion to thrive.

Aspect	Manifestation of Compassion/Dehumanization
Corporate System	**Suppression:** The ruling corporations (led by Mr. Bartholomew) are fundamentally *dispassionate*, seeing individuals like Jonathan E. as disposable tools whose success threatens the corporate message of **collective futility**. The pursuit of absolute control abolishes compassion.
Personal Relationships	**Artificiality:** Jonathan's relationships with the women provided to him (like Mackey) are dictated by the corporation, rendering them *soulless* and transactional. His one genuine, compassionate relationship with his former wife, Ella, was ruthlessly terminated by a powerful executive, highlighting the system's power over personal love.
The Final Game	**The Glimmer of Mercy:** The only true act of compassion occurs during the climactic, deliberately lethal final game. Jonathan E. is given the chance to kill his last opponent, but instead of finishing him, he scores the winning goal. The crowd, which had been silent in shock at the escalating violence, erupts in cheers for his **mercy** and victory over the system's mandate for death, suggesting that human compassion is not entirely extinguished.

🔍 Comparative Analysis

Theme	Rollerball (1975)	"An Episode Under the Terror" (Balzac)
Source of Dehumanization	A futuristic, totalitarian corporate/collectivist system that values *comfort* and *control* over all else.	A historical, violent political regime (The Reign of Terror) that thrives on *fear* and *ideological extremism*.
Location of Compassion	Struggle of the Individual: Compassion is a rebellious act of individualism, primarily seen in Jonathan's choice to spare a life and his fight for genuine emotional connection (Ella).	Spiritual Redemption: Compassion is a secretive, redemptive act for both the living and the dead, embodied by the executioner's

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Theme	Rollerball (1975)	"An Episode Under the Terror" (Balzac)
		quiet, life-risking benevolence.
The Role of Emotion	Emotions (love, curiosity) are threats to the system, which tries to eliminate or replace them with synthetic pleasure and controlled spectacle.	Emotions (guilt, pity, fear) are human realities. Fear limits compassion (the shopkeepers), while guilt and piety drive an exceptional act of compassion (Sanson).

Google Gemini, queried October 19, 2025.

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