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Midterm: History and Power

George Orwell’s “Shooting an Elephant,” an essay set in a Burma under the control of the British Empire, describes the experience of a British police officer, who was “hated by large numbers of people” (1) because of his position of apparent power. The narrator of the essay, possibly Orwell himself, struggles with his position in Burma and with the expectations of his role. He saw the power dynamics in Burma very differently than what might be traditionally expected in a country under the control of a foreign power.

The narrator, despite secretly supporting the Burmese in their animosity towards the British tyrants, harbors hatred towards those who jeer, insult, and bully him because of the nature of his position in Burma. One day, a tame work elephant caught in the uncontrollable rage of “must,” rampages through the village. The narrator, tasked with the removal of the elephant, tracks the elephant through the village. He eventually discovers the dead body of a local who had been viciously trampled to death, then, for protection, gains the use of an elephant rifle. Nearby, he finds the elephant in question calmly grazing on grass in a field and approaches the area with his rifle. By the narrator’s estimate, around two thousand of the locals had followed him in his approach of the elephant, watching him, and the central conflict of the essay is soon made clear.

As soon as he saw the elephant, he “knew with perfect certainty that [he] ought not to shoot him” (4), but he felt his perceived duty as a White police officer in a foreign land come into stark contrast with his own desire. While he knew that he could back away and leave the elephant to come out of the last of its “must,” he suddenly felt the pressure of the judgmental gazes of the crowd. Despite his supposed position of power in the village, he felt he was “only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind” (4). Though the British empire had conquered lands afar, the narrator realized at that moment that “…when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” (4). And so, after a little more consideration about what he should do, fearing most of all that he would be laughed at by the natives if he retreated, the narrator shot the elephant, which died only after a long, excruciating ordeal.

One important concept to consider when reading this essay is power. The narrator—possibly Orwell—questions the notion of his power in Burmese society. While on paper, as the sub-divisional police officer, he might seem above the reach of the natives. From the outside (the position of a Burmese native, perhaps), his position might seem powerful. In their discussion of power, Grossberg et al. wrote that“power has been a compelling reference point in understanding what motivates people, how they stand with one another, what they are in control of and what controls them…” (274).

He was called upon to make the decision of whether to kill the elephant, and he seemed fearless, saying “at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense…” (5). But his reaction to the situation, he felt, was tightly controlled by the presence of the onlookers, so he was not afraid “as [he] would have been if [he] had been alone” (5); in reality, he felt powerless to act any other way, and wrote, “A white man mustn't be frightened in front of ‘natives’; and so, in general, he isn't frightened” (5). Power was not a thing that the narrator felt he had, though the Burmese onlookers may have disagreed; the narrator was in control of the gun, but the onlookers were in control of the narrator.

“Substances,” according to Grossman et al., “*possess* powers, that is, qualities and dispositions to act in certain ways, having specific effects on other things or people” (274). The crowd of Burmese townsfolk, then, possessed the power to influence the narrator’s behavior, restricting his freedom in a way he keenly felt during the situation with the elephant. He behaved in a way that would produce the most agreeable outcome, which was singularly influenced by the crowd. The worst situation was to be laughed at for retreating, and so he acted the way he felt he was required to, as a White man in his position; “He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it” (4).

Another way of reading “Shooting an Elephant” is by considering its relation to history—specifically the aspects of history that are discussed by Grossberg et. al.. Much of the discussion of history was put in the context of communism, for which “historical consciousness proved powerful…in which men and women were deemed to become ever more conscious of themselves and hence of their historical tasks” (Grossberg et al., 158). Orwell admits, at the beginning of the essay, that he was aware of the crimes of the British Empire which he serves, which “oppressed [him] with an intolerable sense of guilt” (2). He was aware, even then, of the impacts that the empire had on the people they oppressed, and though he didn’t know what was to come for the future of the empire, he was (in the words of Grossberg et al.) “conscious of [his] historical tasks” (158). He knew how a White police officer ought to act in his situation, when he was standing in front of the crowd, facing the elephant. Orwell wrote about the position of police officers: “For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the ‘natives’, and so in every crisis he has got to do what the ‘natives’ expect of him” (4). Each officer was expected to behave as if they represent the empire as a whole, despite what their personal feelings might be, exemplifying the fact that, as the narrator says, “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom he destroys” (4).

Could this account of the British police officer be considered a historical text? Anecdotally, the experience of the White police officer in “Shooting an Elephant” would be interesting and useful when compared to other “colonial” texts from the same time period, especially if this was Orwell’s personal account. The narrator felt alienated from the empire he represented and hated the locals for their treatment of Europeans. Referring to his hatred of the Burmese locals, the narrator wrote: “Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty” (1). This implies that what he felt was widespread. Did other officials also feel such resentment toward the British Empire? If so, how did this impact the effectiveness of British control overseas? Did other officials feel as if their actions were influenced not by the empire they served, but by the pressure of the local population, as the narrator claims? Was the supposed power and influence of their position in Burmese society more like a great, dying beast, “Lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die” (Orwell 6), like the elephant?

After my peer-review, I decided to add some mention of the terms I would be discussing into the intro paragraph. Before, the intro only included a little discussion of “Shooting an Elephant,” so I related it a bit to power (mentioning the narrator’s perception of the power dynamic), the terms I discussed toward the end of the essay. Mustafa also pointed out some grammar errors as well as pointing out that I might benefit from more paraphrasing and fewer quotations (I didn’t end up removing any of my quotations, because I don’t think I could have thought of a way to phrase them any differently, but I spent a lot of time considering it, if that counts).

Works Cited

Bennett, Tony, et al. *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant*. 1936.