

Critical Analysis of “Shooting an Elephant”

From the outset, Orwell establishes that the power dynamics in colonial Burma are far from black-and-white. While he holds symbolic authority and military supremacy, Orwell is still powerless to stop the jibes and abuse he receives from oppressed Burmese.

The elephant is the central symbol of the story. Orwell uses it to represent the effect of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized. The elephant, like a colonized populace, has its liberty restricted, and it becomes violently rebellious only as a response to being shackled. Orwell, a colonizer, feels a similar ambivalence towards the elephant as he does towards the Burmese locals. While he recognizes that both are harmless and peaceful and have suffered wrongs at the hands of others, he still perpetuates barbarous treatment of both, simply in order to uphold an irrational standard of imperial behavior. He kills the elephant simply because he fears that he would be humiliated if he failed to do so. In much the same way, colonial savagery perpetuates itself simply because colonists fear that they would look weak or ridiculous if they acted less inhumanely. Orwell further humanizes the elephant by referring to it throughout the story with the pronoun “he,” rather than “it.”

Orwell is able to better understand imperialism through his run-in with the elephant as the elephant serves as a symbol of colonialism. For example, much like the Burmese who have been colonized and who abuse Orwell, the elephant has been provoked to destructive behavior by being oppressed. While its destructive behavior, and the Burmese’ more subtle rebelliousness may not be unequivocally good things, they are made understandable given the oppressive conditions both the elephant and the Burmese have had to endure.

Just as he empathizes with the oppressed Burmese, Orwell recognizes that the elephant is a peaceful creature that has been driven to rebellion by its mistreatment. Because it is both a harmless animal and a valuable piece of property, it is clear that there is no ethical or practical reason to hurt the elephant. Note that for the British all of Burma was essentially a valuable piece of property—another metaphorical link between the elephant and colonialism.

There is nothing humane about Orwell’s killing of the elephant. He does not even know enough about marksmanship—or elephants—to kill the elephant painlessly. In the same way, the British empire is inhumane not out of necessity, but rather out of reactionary ignorance regarding both the land it has colonized and the pernicious way that colonization acts on both the colonized and the colonizer. Meanwhile, the Burmese’ readiness to eat the elephant underscores the desperation of their situation, and the way in which colonial oppression has made them focus on survival rather than moral outrage at the elephant’s brutal death.

The aftermath of Orwell's killing of the elephant illustrates the way the colonial cycle perpetuates itself. Those harmed by the violence are either silenced—like the elephant—or lack recourse—like its owner. Others, from more detached perspectives, are able to rationalize barbaric actions with legal justifications founded in the racism that underpins colonization. The crucial point of Orwell's final observation is that, while logic can be read into colonialism from a distance, the real motivation of its savagery is simply the triumph of irrational insecurity and role-playing over ethics or human compassion.

Again colonialism leads to contradictory thinking and pits different sets of Orwell's principles against one another. His morality staunchly opposes the abuses that result from empire and his own role in that empire, but he is unable to overcome his visceral urge to avenge the indignities he suffers at the hands of the Burmese. His knee-jerk resentment at being humiliated—coupled with an implied sense that those humiliating him should see him as powerful and their better—seems to be as powerful as his higher-order ethics.

"Shooting an Elephant" is filled with examples of warped power dynamics. Colonialism nearly always entails a small minority of outsiders wielding a disproportionate amount of influence over a larger group of local peoples. This imbalance of power in colonialism seems counterintuitive, and Orwell literalizes the imbalance by showing his ability to kill the elephant singlehandedly. But even this distribution of power is not clear-cut: Orwell and the British colonists do not in fact have absolute power over their colonial subjects. As the story continues, it becomes clear that the British's status as colonists has rendered them powerless: Orwell is irked by subtle insubordination from the Burmese, and, moreover, feels obligated to "spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives'" out of his own pride and because it is necessary to maintain the power (or façade of power) of the colonizing British. Thus, Orwell depicts his colonial experience as a series of paradoxical relationships, all revolving around power.

When Orwell stands before the crowd, he likens himself to a performer, rather than a peacekeeper or powerful official. He repeatedly uses metaphorical language to develop this connection. The thousands of gathered Burmese regard him as they would regard "a conjurer about to perform a trick;" he describes how, as he loaded the rifle, "the crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats." Orwell is constrained by the spectacle of his colonialist stature. His language demonstrates that colonialism is not fueled by genuine needs, duties, or obligations—but rather by the British need to perform the role of colonizer in order to maintain their colonialist power. Like colonialism, shooting the elephant is an act of senseless destruction; it is utterly unnecessary and goes against everyone's real interests. Still, the colonial system grinds on, simply because each participant feels obliged to fulfill his assigned role within the larger performance. The colonist, Orwell asserts, "wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it." In other words, the colonizer is a performer who subsequently adopts, or is overcome by, his dramatic role, which becomes his real identity whether he likes it or not.