Shooting an Elephant

George Orwell

Summary

"Shooting an Elephant" by George Orwell is a narrative essay about Orwell's time as a police officer for the British Raj in colonial Burma. The essay delves into an inner conflict that Orwell experiences in his role of representing the British Empire and upholding the law. At the opening of the essay Orwell explains that he is opposed to the British colonial project in Burma. In explicit terms he says that he's on the side of the Burmese people,who he feels are oppressed by colonial rule. As a police officer he sees the brutalities of the imperial project up close and first hand. He resents the British presence in the country.

Inevitably then, he faces challenges as a police officer representing British imperial power. The people of Burma hate the empire too, and thus they hate Orwell, for he is the face of the empire. They harass him and mock him and seek opportunities to laugh at him. He explains that at the time of the events, he is too young to grasp the dilemma of his situation, or to know how to deal with it. He thus finds himself resenting the Burmese people as well. The one thing that the Burmese have over the British is the ability to mock and ridicule them. Orwell's entire focus as a police officer thus becomes about avoiding the ridicule of the Burmese.

The narrative centers around the event of a day when all of these conflicted emotions manifest themselves and Orwell faces them and understands them. On this day, Orwell learns that an elephant has broken its chain and it is undergoing a bout of "must" (a passing hormonal disorder that causes elephants to become uncontrollably violent). The elephant is rampaging through a bazaar, wreaking havoc. Feeling compelled to do some decent policing, Orwell sets out with a small rifle to see what's happening. He states that he has no intention of killing the elephant.

When he arrives in the shanty town area he finds the mess the elephant has made. It has trampled grass huts and turned over a garbage disposal van and it has killed a man. Orwell sends for an elephant rifle, though he still has no intention of killing the elephant. He states that he merely wants to defend himself. With the rifle, he's led down to the paddy fields where he sees the giant elephant peacefully grazing.

Upon laying eyes on the elephant he instantly feels that it would be wrong to kill it. He has no inclination to destroy something so complex and beautiful. He describes the beauty and great value of the animal. It would go against everything in him to kill it. He says it would be like murder. But when looks back to see the people watching, he realizes that the crowd is massive—at least two thousand people!

He feels their eyes on him, and their great expectations of his role. They want to see the spectacle. But more importantly, he feels, they expect him to uphold the performance of power that he is meant to represent as an officer of the British Empire. At this stage Orwell has the clear revelation that all white men in the colonized world are beholden to the people whom they colonize. If he falters, he will let down the guise of power, but most of all, he will create an opportunity for the people to laugh. Nothing terrifies him more than the prospect of humiliation by the Burmese crowd. Now, the prospect of being trampled by the elephant no longer scares him because it would risk death. The worst part of that prospect would rather be that the crowd would laugh. In this way, he realizes that the entire enterprise of the empire is kept afloat by the personal fear of humiliation of individual officers.

He thus gets down on the ground, takes aim with the powerful elephant gun with cross-hairs in the viewer, and he fires at the elephant's brain. He hits the elephant and the crowd roars. But the elephant doesn't die. A disturbing change comes over it and merely seems to age. He fires again and this time brings it slowly to its knees. But still it doesn't go down. He fires again and it comes back up, dramatically rising on hind legs and lifting its trunk before thundering to the earth. Still however, it remains alive. Orwell goes to it and finds that it's still breathing. He proceeds to unload bullet after bullet into the elephant's heart, but it won't die. The people have swarmed in to steal the meat. Without describing his shame or guilt, he leaves the elephant alive, suffering terribly. He learns later that it took half an hour for the elephant to die. There's some discussion among the other police officers about whether or not he did the right thing. The older ones think he did. The younger ones feel that it's a shame to shoot an elephant for killing a Burmese collie.

Summary and Analysis of Part One

Summary

Orwell opens the essay by explicitly describing the hatred that the Burmese people feel for him during his time as a police officer for the British Raj, in Moulmein, Lower Burma. This hatred forms part of a general anti-European sentiment in the area at the time. Though the Burmese aren't ready to riot, they are hostile toward their colonizers. The main way that their hostility shows itself is through ridicule and bitter laughter. The Buddhist priests, he says, are the worst. They openly mock Europeans.

Orwell is deeply troubled by this atmosphere of hostility, for he feels that he is on their side. He says: "I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing" (31). He hates his own role. His job as a police officer gives him a close-up view of the brutalities of imperialism. He describes the whipped and tortured bodies of the people in filthy, stinking prison cells. He describes his inner conflict—on the one hand hating the tyrannical empire that he represents; on the other, being driven mad by the Burmese people who jeer at him and make his job miserable. He explains how at the time of the story he doesn't yet know himself. He calls himself young and "ill-educated," suggesting that he doesn't yet have the confidence to stand up for his own opinions.

The narrative picks up on the day he is called to the other side of town to deal with and elephant that had rampaged through the bazaar. He gets on his pony and takes his .44 Winchester, though he knows the rifle is much too small to kill an elephant. As he goes, he learns from passing Burmen that the elephant is tame, but it's experiencing a bout of "must"—a passing hormonal disorder that affects elephants. The elephant broke its chain and its owner is away. It has crushed huts, wrecked fruit stalls, killed a cow, and trampled a municipal garbage disposal van.

Orwell ventures to the side of town where the elephant is rampaging. It's a poor part of town, a shanty, where people live in grass huts. When he arrives he finds people going about their business. He thinks the whole thing has been a lie. Then he comes to a scene where a woman is shooing naked children away. He goes around the corner of her hut and sees a dead man lying belly down in the mud. It looks as the though he's been stamped into the earth. Orwell describes his face turned to the side, mud filling his mouth. His teeth are bared. Orwell sends an orderly to get an elephant rifle from a friend.

Analysis

A distinct attribute of Orwell's style (both generally as a writer, and specifically within this essay) is his explicit or straightforward expository language. He isn't nuanced or ambiguous in his analyses or critiques, either of character, event, idea or experience. Rather he attempts to spell out his meaning in plain terms. He presents the reader with his interpretations in clear, expository prose. This is not to say that he doesn't deploy symbol or allegory or doesn't try to demonstrate or illustrate by way of gestures and images. The story of the shooting of the elephant is itself a strong allegory. Yet when Orwell does

make use of devices, he explains how they are working. His interpretation of events is woven through his narrative descriptions of those events.

"Shooting an Elephant" is explicitly about the inner conflict that defines Orwell's experience as a police officer for the British Raj in Burma. It starts with a straightforward discussion of that conflict—what constitutes it and how it manifests—and it proceeds to illustrate it by way of scene and action. In discussing his own inner dilemma as a policeman who opposes his own role, Orwell openly presents a critique of the British Empire. He sees it as tyrannical. His description of it is as a complete and totalizing oppressive force, tightly clamped down on Burmese society. He holds this feeling in a general, theoretical way; but explains how as policeman he has firsthand experience, seeing the Empire's violence up close, firsthand. His description of the tortured bodies of prisoners in their cells illustrates in physical terms what he refers to when he speaks of the British Empire's dirty work. In simple language he states that he is against the empire, and for the people of Burma.

Orwell's dilemma is, in part, absurd. He hates the regime that he represents as a policeman and whose mandate he furthermore enforces. But as he explains, he's too young at the time of the events of the story to know how to fully recognize the nature of this dilemma, let alone do anything about it. He thus carries on by attempting to play his role as the face of the British Empire, though he is acutely aware of the resentment that the Burmese people feel for him, and specifically he's aware of how ready they are to ridicule him.

This fear of ridicule is the central motivation that drives Orwell through the story. He's not afraid of being attacked or physically hurt. He's afraid of being laughed at. Humiliation is an entirely psychic injury, unlike most other forms of injury. Nothing is lost from humiliation apart from personal pride. While Orwell may theoretically be opposed to his position as a police officer in Burmese society, he is driven to uphold it out of fear of ridicule. When he hears of the elephant rampaging through the bazaar, he feels compelled to show his face, and demonstrate his responsibility.

Upon arriving on the scene and seeing a man dead, he sends for an elephant rifle. But as he explains, this isn't out of some deeper sense of responsibility; it's simply to defend himself. He doesn't yet know that when he finds the elephant it will be peacefully grazing.

Summary and Analysis of Part 2

Summary

The elephant gun arrives and Orwell heads down to see the elephant. As he goes, he realizes that a massive crowd has mobilized. He attributes their interest to the presence of the gun; they want to see the spectacle of the elephant being shot. Orwell remarks that English people would be the same. The Burmese are also interested, he says, in the elephant meat.

Orwell is led down to some paddy fields below, where the elephant is said to be grazing. The excited crowd follows. Orwell feels unsettled by the attention and the idea of the spectacle that's being created. He says again that he has no intention of shooting the elephant—again, he merely wants to defend himself.

When he sees the massive and remarkable elephant he is even more certain that he doesn't have any inclination to kill it. The elephant is down in the paddy field grazing, entirely oblivious to the crowd. Orwell analyzes his instinct not to kill the elephant, explaining that the animal is like an elaborate piece of "machinery" and the idea of taking it down is antithetical to his instincts (33). It seems wrong. He analyzes this rationale and considers his resolve as he observes the elephant grazing and looking entirely harmless. He plans to leave it.

But as he turns back he sees that the crowd has grown exponentially. There are now at least two thousand people watching, eagerly waiting for him to shoot the elephant. He describes the feeling of their collective will bearing down on him. He realizes that he has no choice but to shoot the elephant. He feels an obligation to perform for these people.

In explicit terms he describes a revelation that he has about "the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the east" (33). He stands with the gun as though he's the one with power, yet he is entirely swayed by the will of the crowd. He realizes that everything he's doing and everything "the white man" does in the east, is a performance for them, the colonized people. If he acts as a tyrant, he is, he states, the one who loses his freedom. He becomes a "puppet," performing power and in that way, "trying to impress the 'natives'" (33). He will let them down and they will see through his act if he doesn't follow through with shooting the elephant. Most importantly though, he will give them cause to laugh at him, and as he says, his "whole life, every white man's life in the East, [is] one long struggle not to be laughed at" (33).

Despite this immense pressure, Orwell feels a strong visceral aversion to killing the elephant. As he watches it graze on the grasses, he sees a beautiful and "grandmotherly" quality in the elephant (34). To kill it, he says, would seem like murder. He claims that at that age he isn't squeamish about killing. He realizes that the right thing to do would be to test the animal, to see if it's still mad. He should approach it and if it gets mad, then he should shoot it. But if it doesn't, then he should leave it. But the soil is very soft and he's not a good shot, so he doesn't trust that he wouldn't fall back in the mud. Again, the thing that scares him most about that is the humiliation to which he would be subjected by the crowd. If the elephant tramples him into the mud, he's sure that some of the natives would laugh, "and that would never do," he says (34).

Instead of doing the right thing, then, he puts the cartridges into the rifle, gets himself onto the ground and takes aim. The rifle has cross-hair sights. He aims for the head.

He pulls the trigger and the crowd erupts with glee as he hits his mark. The elephant stays standing, but it seems to age immensely. Orwell describes this chance that comes over it as a kind of "senility" (34). Slowly the elephant begins to sink down to the earth, onto its knees. He fires again and then the animal slowly rises. He describes every movement and shift of the elephant's expression. He fires again and though the elephant seems to weaken, he also rises, up onto his hind legs, his trunk flinging up into the sky, before he goes down, trumpeting noisily, and thundering onto the earth.

Orwell goes toward the elephant and so do the Burmans, who are pleased by the spectacle and ready to get the meat. When Orwell reaches the elephant he realizes that it's still breathing, totally alive. Orwell fires two shots into the area of its heart, but the elephant remains as it is, calmly breathing, though thick blood pours from the wounds. Orwell fires again and again, multiple shots into the heart and down the throat but the elephant doesn't flinch and it continues breathing.

In the end Orwell cant' take it anymore and he walks away. He hears later that it took the elephant half an hour to die. The Burmans, he hears, stripped the bones of all the meat.

Back with the other police officers there's discussion about whether or not it was the right thing to do. The essay closes with the tellingly racist claim of some of the young officers that it's wrong to kill such a beautiful creature, just because it killed a Burman.

Analysis

The essay has a strong narrative element that serves to illustrate Orwell's critique of British Imperialism. While Orwell presents a candid analysis of imperialist behavior, his ideas are also demonstrated through the events of the narrative. Orwell's analysis of his own experience of shooting an elephant is simultaneously an analysis of colonial power. In realizing that he has to perform for the people, Orwell realizes the performative aspect of the encounter between colonizer and colonized. The pressure that he feels to perform emerges and is revealed as an essential engine of imperialism. What's most important is that we see that the pressure the colonizer feels to perform comes down to personal discomfort: specifically, the fear of humiliation. In the climax of the narrative we see that Orwell will go against all of his instincts and better judgments and do something that feels entirely wrong by shooting an animal that he describes as "peaceful" and "grandmotherly," rather than be laughed at or ridiculed in any way by the Burmese crowd. The fear of humiliation, we thus see, is a powerful motivating force in the policing and upholding of the British Empire. Orwell seems to be suggesting that when imperial power is reduced to individual performers (policemen and military rulers, etc.) the fear of ridicule may be the most pervasive and persistent motivators.

In order for the colonizer to maintain their image of power, they must be decisive. Orwell has the rifle in his hands, so now he must use it. If he hesitates or chooses not to shoot, the crowd will see through his performance of dominance, and in that way they will see through the entire charade of British imperial power.

The fear of being laughed at is the most important aspect of Orwell's personal fear and this, he suggests, goes beyond himself. The crowd, the people on the streets, the Buddhist priests, etc. all have the power to laugh and to ridicule him. This is something they all deploy, something they make use of. This is where Orwell's personal pride becomes, despite his own wishes, entangled in imperial power.

Orwell despises the British Empire and hates its presence in Burma; he says that he's on the side of the Burmese. Yet he's compelled to uphold the imperialist image of power. The thing that drives him isn't some idea of the importance of the British empire; it's not for

the glory of the empire; it's the simple fear of looking ridiculous. He is driven out of personal pride, and yet this leads him to further a much larger political project, that of upholding the image of British imperial power. Orwell explicitly attributes this same fear of ridicule to all other white men in the East. He deduces an important motive of imperial power to the single actor's fear of embarrassment.

His aversion to killing the elephant is vital in the story. Though he doesn't elaborate on it or break it down beyond the one passage, he explains in simple clear terms that he doesn't want to do it. Orwell's lack of affect in his language in the part is important. His language is honest: he is going against his will.

Orwell gives substantial attention to his description of the elephant's death. In clear prose he moves through every stage and detail of the elephant's motions from the first shot, when it seems to age "a thousand years," to the moment when it sinks to its knees, to its slow rise on the third shot, that causes it to go up on its hind legs in slow motion. The attention to descriptive detail in this moment speaks to the value that Orwell puts on the elephant's life and indeed, the impact of its killing. This is the most dramatic part of the essay, seeing the elephant go down. In giving it this attention, we come to feel the inner conflict at work in the essay, a conflict at the heart of imperialism.

Character List

George Orwell

In this first person memoir, Orwell holds the central role. He explicitly defines himself in the opening of the piece as being a young police officer who despises the British imperial project in Burma, sides with the Burmese, and yet still feels that he has to prove his authority to the Burmese. As he explains this, he also states that at the time, he was too young to understand this about himself. We thus seem him play out exactly this inner conflict over the course of the story.

The sub-inspector

The sub-inspector is a Burmese policeman who answers to Orwell (and to the British). He's waiting for Orwell at the bazaar where the elephant has been rampaging.

The dead man

The dead man isn't so much a character as a figure—a body trampled into the mud by the rampaging elephant. He nonetheless plays in to the story as Orwell considers his own potential fate if he fails to properly shoot the elephant and merely makes it mad.

Themes

British imperialism

Throughout the essay Orwell explicitly discusses the nature of British imperialism, specifically the way that he, as a police officer, both represents and internalizes the imperial project. He opens by revealing the brutality of British colonialism in Burma, with images of tortured prisoners, and he discusses his distaste for the empire's impact in Burma. He says that he's on the side of the "Burman," yet he also resents Burmese people for the way they perceive him. Orwell's self-consciousness as the face of British imperialism is central to his internal conflict as he tries to uphold the image of the impenetrable empire while going against his personal inclination, and killing an elephant that he doesn't want to kill.

Fear of humiliation

Orwell says that the bystanders would laugh at him if he were trampled to death by the elephant, and "that would never do" (34). In this way he is compelled to kill the (now peaceful) elephant. In the way that the elephant, in the essay, can represent the Burmese society, Orwell's fear of humiliation can represent the motive of the broader British colonial project. The imperial police officer is willing to sacrifice his sense of what is right, and to fulfill the role of oppressor and tyrant, in order to save face. The fear of humiliation is one of the most important motives in Orwell's essay.

Colonial resentment

One of the central themes threaded through the essay is the latent resentment of the colonized people of Burma for the British occupiers who aim to control their society, yet cannot fully do so. We see this resentment in the open disgust which the monks reveal for Orwell personally, a sentiment that he feels is hypocritical given their office; we see it in the cruel laughter of the Burmese for the British players on the football field; and

ultimately Orwell's awareness of his resentment manifests in his explicit rationalizing for his motivation for killing the elephant.

The performance of power

Orwell describes power as being fundamentally performative; it's also illustrated as such through the heavily allegorical aspect of his act of shooting the elephant. Openly, Orwell discusses the ways that he must uphold the performance of power by not appearing to hesitate in shooting the elephant. With the crowd watching, he must appear to be in control of the situation. The performative element of power subsequently plays out as we watch him, in his role as British police officer, demonstrate his confidence in bringing a wild beast, literally, to its knees.

Taming of the colonized subject

Related to the theme of the performance of power is a clear theme of "taming" that plays out in the scenario of a man controlling a wild beast. Orwell's self-imposed task of upholding the impenetrable image of the British empire is part of a larger goal: to control or "tame" Burmese society. If he falters in his performance, he'll make room for the colonized Burmese to see through imperial control and to subsequently cease to respond to that control.

Police power

The experience of the imperial police officer is an experience of representing the empire as a whole. As the face of the British empire, Orwell is personally subject to the Burmese peoples' derisions of the empire. To them, he is the Empire. By seeing Orwell's personal criticisms of that Empire contrasted with his experience asa representative of it, we are able to reflect on the experience of policing, and of representing state power more generally. The personal feelings, beliefs and ideologies of the officer are irrelevant so long as he is in uniform and thus represents a whole other set of beliefs and ideologies.

Natural life

When we see the elephant grazing in the paddy field, we see the naturalness of its existence. The image of the Burmese inhabitation as a labyrinth of thatch huts is similarly an image of natural life. The presence of the "white man" or the British empire contrasts

with this naturalness and literally physically disrupts it. In the way that Orwell's shooting of the elephant reflects a form of vandalism of natural life, so to do the beatings of Burmese bodies and the imperial policing of Burmese society.

Symbols

The policeman

As a police officer, Orwell's presence holds symbolic power within Burmese society. He explains this in clear terms in the essay: the Burmese people at once despise him, ridicule him and expect him to perform on behalf of the empire that he symbolizes. When he goes to shoot the elephant, he does so as a police officer representing British colonial authority. The people expect him to demonstrate this authority. If he fails, the British imperial project will be shown to fail. The policeman, in this way, upholds the image of the authority that it represents.

The tortured body

Early in the essay we see an image of a naked, scarred buttocks of a prisoner. This image has a symbolic function that resonates through the essay. The beaten flesh of the Burmese prisoner represents the power structure at play in the broader essay. The British police hold the whip; the Burmese people submit. Nonetheless, we see how precarious that dynamic is when we see Orwell forced to perform his authority for the massive, unwieldy Burmese crowd.

The elephant

The rampaging elephant is easy to read as a symbol of Burmese society: unwieldy, untethered and ultimately impossible to subdue. Orwell shows the Burmese people as having a particular power over their colonizers that expresses itself in the form of ridicule. In the way that the elephant runs amok, and is impossible to contain without violence, the Burmese defiance of British rule is a constant, making itself known by jeers and humiliation. In the way that "the white man" or British officers in Burma must rely on force, and specifically on torture, to have the upper hand of the Burmese people, so Orwell must fall back on an unnatural use of force to demonstrate his power over the elephant.

When we see him shooting the elephant, we are seeing the same demonstration of force the British imperialists use over the Burmese people.

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" as a Colonial Writing or Criticism of Imperialism

From a first person narrative perspective of a British officer stationed at Moulmein, Burma, "shooting an Elephant" is an essay which conveys the wrongs of New Imperialism, the intense anti-European feelings in the East. In fact, George Orwell, the essayist, and critic, whose brilliant reporting and political conscience fashioned an impassioned picture of his life and times through his essay "Shooting an Elephant" the political and colonial themes counter the totalitarian tendencies that he felt threatened his age. Here our narrator imparts one very significant event in his career as an Imperial police, which was shooting an elephant for the sake of not seeming like a "fool."

After receiving a message about elephant rampaging the village area, the narrator proceeds in a journey to search for the mammoth beast. On the first leg of the search he finds a trampled Coolie, a death which gives him judicial and possibly moral justifications in killing the beastly Elephant. Subsequent to calling for a rifle the narrator encounters the Elephant in a rice paddy, he is not alone, and the eyes of an imperialized culture are intently glaring at his confrontation. The "must" of the elephant is gone but the officer has gone too far in his attempt to tame the beast. Now the voices of thousands shouted in joyful anticipation. Now the eyes of thousands looked with interest. Now two thousand wills irresistibly pressed him to action.

The slaughter of the elephant was unnecessary but the pre-established European presence of a potentate like class of individuals had already trapped him into the only feasible course of action, the execution of the elephant. Soon enough the magnificently ancient beast was put to a painfully agonizing indecent sleep. As the crowd shouted in joy, the officer had fulfilled the stereotypical, expectations in Burma's society towards the oppressive westerners, in that instant the oppressor had indeed become the oppressed, "And it was at this moment as I stood with the, rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East." Intrinsically the quote and by extension, the essay speaks of the distastefully ill nature of imperialism and its

psychologically metaphorical entrapment of the westerners by conforming and growing to fit the" mask" of preconceived stereotypical notions.

"Shooting an Elephant" is a central text in modern British literature and has generated perhaps more criticism than any other comparable short piece. In the politicized atmosphere of contemporary criticism, commentators are especially drawn into debate about whether Orwell apologizes for or condemns imperialism. Left-wing critics see insufficient condemnation; conservative critics point out that it is the narrator, an agent of empire, who explicitly denounces the British presence as pervasively corrupting to both sides. The story is one of the most widely anthologized and studied items of the modern English-language canon.