Shooting an Elephant

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GEORGE ORWELL

Eric Blair was born and spent his youth in India. He was educated at Eton in England. From 1922-27 he served in the Indian Imperial Police in Burma. Through his autobiographical work about poverty in London (*Down and Out in Paris and London*, 1933), his experiences in colonial Burma (*Burmese Days*, 1934 and "Shooting an Elephant", 1936) and in the Spanish Civil War (*Homage to Catalonia*, 1938), and the plight of unemployed coal miners in England (*The Road to Wigan Pier*, 1937), Blair (who wrote under the name George Orwell) exposed and critiqued the human tendency to oppress others politically, economically, and physically. He is best known for his satires of totalitarian rule: *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Both books were widely considered to be indictments of Communism under Joseph Stalin, but Orwell insisted that they were critiques of totalitarian ideas in general, and warned that the nightmarish conditions he depicted could take place anywhere. In 1947 a lung infection contracted in Burma worsened, and in 1950 Orwell succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 46.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The British Empire is undeniably the dominant historical backdrop for "Shooting an Elephant." The empire expanded rapidly in the 19th century, and its territories spanned as far as New Zealand and India. Burma—now Myanmar—was where Orwell was stationed, and was acquired by the British in 1886. In 1948, a relatively short time after "Shooting an Elephant" takes place, Burma gained its independence from Britain—an affirmation of Orwell's observation in the story that "the British Empire is dying."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The British Empire has been the subject of literary and academic study since at least the 19th century. Precursors to Orwell's work include the writings of Rudyard Kipling, a Briton who was born in the British colony of Bombay in 1865. Kipling would go on to write short stories depicting the British involvement in India, and much of his work, such as the poem *The White Man's Burden*, were criticized for the attitudes of white supremacy they insinuated. "Shooting an Elephant" marks a step towards repudiating the institution of colonialism and humanizing the people who were and are oppressed by it. Moving forward, other scholars have worked to better understand the motivations and effects of colonialism. Edward Said, a Palestinian-American who grew up under British rule, helped establish the field of post-colonial studies with his seminal work 1978, *Orientalism*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Shooting an Elephant"
- **When Written:** Uncertain; Orwell served as a police officer in the British Raj from 1922 to 1927.
- **Where Written:** Uncertain; Burma or England.
- **When Published:** 1936, in *New Writing*
- **Literary Period:** Interwar
- **Genre:** Autobiographical short story
- **Setting:** Moulmein, Burma (modern-day Myanmar)
- **Climax:** Orwell's execution of the elephant and its prolonged, agonizing death.
- **Antagonist:** Imperialism
- **Point of View:** Limited first-person narrator

EXTRA CREDIT

Timber! In Burma, trained elephants still play a unique and vital role in the logging industry, where they are used to move heavy pieces of wood.

Rebel. Unsurprisingly, Orwell never fully conformed to British notions of imperial propriety. While working as a police officer in Burma, he received knuckle tattoos typically worn by Burmese locals.

PLOT SUMMARY

George Orwell works as the sub-divisional police officer of a town in the British colony of Burma. Because he is a military occupier, he is hated by much of the village. Though the Burmese never stage a full revolt, they express their disgust by taunting Orwell at every opportunity. This situation provokes two conflicting responses in Orwell: on the one hand, his role makes him despise the British Empire's systematic mistreatment of its subjects. On the other hand, however, he resents the locals because of how they torment him. Orwell is caught between considering the British Raj an "unbreakable tyranny" and believing that killing a troublesome villager would be "the greatest joy in the world."

One day, an incident takes place that shows Orwell "the real nature of imperialism." A domesticated **elephant** has escaped from its chains and gone berserk, threatening villagers and property. The only person capable of controlling the

elephant—its "mahout"—went looking for the elephant in the wrong direction, and is now twelve hours away. Orwell goes to the neighborhood where the elephant was last spotted. The neighborhood's inhabitants give such conflicting reports that Orwell nearly concludes that the whole story was a hoax. Suddenly, he hears an uproar nearby and rounds a corner to find a "coolie"—a laborer—lying dead in the mud, crushed and skinned alive by the rogue elephant. Orwell orders a subordinate to bring him a gun strong enough to shoot an elephant.

Orwell's subordinate returns with the gun, and locals reveal that the elephant is in a nearby field. Orwell walks to the field, and a large group from the neighborhood follows him. The townspeople have seen the gun and are excited to see the elephant shot. Orwell feels uncomfortable—he had not planned to shoot the elephant.

The group comes upon the elephant in the field, eating grass unperturbed. Seeing the peaceful creature makes Orwell realize that he should not shoot it—besides, shooting a full-grown elephant is like destroying expensive infrastructure. After coming to this conclusion, Orwell looks at the assembled crowd—now numbering in the thousands—and realizes that they expect him to shoot the elephant, as if part of a theatrical performance. The true cost of white westerners' conquest of the orient, Orwell realizes, is the white men's freedom. The colonizers are "puppets," bound to fulfill their subjects' expectations. Orwell has to shoot the elephant, or else he will be laughed at by the villagers—an outcome he finds intolerable.

The best course of action, Orwell decides, would be to approach the elephant and see how it responds, but to do this would be dangerous and might set Orwell up to be humiliated in front of the villagers. In order to avoid this unacceptable embarrassment, Orwell must kill the beast. He aims the gun where he thinks the elephant's brain is. Orwell fires, and the crowd erupts in excitement. The elephant sinks to its knees and begins to drool. Orwell fires again, and the elephant's appearance worsens, but it does not collapse. After a third shot, the elephant trumpets and falls, rattling the ground where it lands.

The downed elephant continues to breathe. Orwell fires more, but the bullets have no effect. The elephant is obviously in agony. Orwell is distraught to see the elephant "powerless to move and yet powerless to die," and he uses a smaller rifle to fire more bullets into its throat. When this does nothing, Orwell leaves the scene, unable to watch the beast suffer. He later hears that it took the elephant half an hour to die. Villagers strip the meat off of its bones shortly thereafter.

Orwell's choice to kill the elephant was controversial. The elephant's owner was angry, but, as an Indian, had no legal recourse. Older British agreed with Orwell's choice, but younger colonists thought it was inappropriate to kill an elephant just because it killed a coolie, since they think elephants are more valuable than coolies. Orwell notes that he is lucky the elephant killed a man, because it gave his own actions legal justification. Finally, Orwell wonders if any of his comrades understood that he killed the elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool."

CHARACTERS

George Orwell – Because "Shooting an Elephant" is a short autobiographical reflection, Orwell is the only named character in the piece, as well as its narrator. At the time the story takes place, he works as a sub-divisional police officer in Moulmein, a town in the British colony of Burma. He is conflicted about his complicity in the British Empire—on one hand, he recognizes that it is a reprehensible and oppressive institution. On the other hand, however, he detests the resentful locals who abuse him because of his role in the imperial police force. The experience of shooting an **elephant** gives him insight into the way imperialism warps the colonists' freedoms as much as it oppresses the colonized.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM

Orwell uses his experience of shooting an **elephant** as a metaphor for his experience with the institution of colonialism. He writes that the encounter with the elephant gave him insight into "the real motives for which despotic governments act." Killing the elephant as it peacefully eats grass is indisputably an act of barbarism—one that symbolizes the barbarity of colonialism as a whole. The elephant's rebelliousness does not justify Orwell's choice to kill it. Rather, its rampage is a result of a life spent in captivity—Orwell explains that "tame elephants always are [chained up] when their attack of "must" is due." Similarly, the sometimes-violent disrespect that British like Orwell receive from locals is a justified consequence of the restraints the colonial regime imposes on its subjects. Moreover, just as Orwell knows he should not harm the elephant, he knows that the locals do not deserve to be oppressed and subjugated. Nevertheless, he ends up killing the elephant and dreams of harming insolent Burmese, simply because he fears being laughed at by the Burmese if he acts any other way. By showing how the conventions of colonialism force him to behave barbarically for no reason beyond the conventions themselves,

Orwell illustrates that "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys."

POWER

"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.

PRINCIPLES

Orwell's service in the British Empire places his reasoned principles and his basic intuitions in constant conflict. He recognizes that the empire is tyrannical and abusive, yet he is unable to overcome his visceral contempt for the local villagers who mistreat him. The decisions Orwell makes when confronted with the rogue **elephant** encapsulate these tensions between his different principles. Orwell could have followed his more humane, ethical impulses and chosen to spare the elephant. However, in the same way that his resentment of the villagers compromises his principled objection to the British Raj, Orwell ends up compromising his humane impulses and killing the elephant because he fears humiliation. His motivation to do so is nothing more than his visceral (and racist) conviction that it would be improper for him to back down in front of the Burmese.

At the end of the story, Orwell describes the debate surrounding his choice to kill the elephant. The arguments his colleagues offer for and against the act are largely legal, but this legal justification is clearly a secondary concern for Orwell. It is only a fortunate coincidence that his actions were legally justified. Ethical principles did not factor heavily in his decision-making process: his real motivation was simply to "avoid looking a fool."

PERFORMANCE

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.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE ELEPHANT

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."

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harvest Books edition of *A Collection of Essays* published in 1970.

"Shooting an Elephant" Quotes

> With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator, George Orwell, is a British police officer stationed in the British colony of Burma. Though he is employed by the British Empire, he feels disdain regarding the nature of colonialism and the brutality that it imposes upon the colonized people. However, as a policeman imposing the rules of the colonizing empire, he is consistently taunted by the Burmese people who resent the oppressive British rule.

In this quote the narrator reveals his conflicting feelings regarding colonialism: he is morally opposed to the underlying tenants of the British Empire, but holds the colonized people he feels sympathy for in contempt due to the rudeness with which they treat him, as an agent of the Empire. The narrator posits that any such agent working for the British Empire holds these complicated feelings for the colonizer and the colonized. Though British officers in colonized areas must enforce the rules of the Empire, which are oppressive and brutal, they cannot help feeling resentment and humiliation in response to the oppressed people's hatred.

> That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

One day, the narrator (Orwell) is given word that there is a rogue elephant rampaging through the local town. He heads into town, where he is given varying accounts as to what the elephant has done and where it is. The stories are so different that Orwell wonders whether the story is true at all, or whether it is just a rumor that has circulated like wild fire.

In this quote, Orwell stereotypes this scenario based on other instances he experienced during his time in Asia as an officer of the British Empire. He states that a wild story may sound plausible from afar, but when one attempts to come nearer to the truth, none of the details add up and one seems to be even further from the facts. This passing commentary on what he has observed in the East reveals feelings of superiority and distance towards the Burmese people, as this quote implies that the narrator finds this sense of confusion and disorder something inherent to the societies of Asia. Though the narrator claims that his moral virtues lie in favor of the colonized people, his tone and commentary reveals contradicting sentiments favored by supporters of colonization.

> And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd – seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. 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. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

As he walks through the town, wondering whether the story of the rampaging elephant is true or not, the narrator comes across a coolie, or laborer, who has been trampled to death by the elephant. Realizing that the elephant, and its danger,

is very much real, Orwell commands a subordinate to fetch him a rifle that is strong enough to kill the beast should it act violently towards him. However, when the townspeople see the gun, they are very excited at the prospect of seeing the elephant killed, as both a spectacle and as a chance for free meat. A crowd of what Orwell gathers to be about 2,000 people follow him to the rice paddies where the elephant is, eager for the excitement of shooting an elephant.

In this quote, Orwell feels at once powerful and powerless. In his hands lies a tool that can kill a beast that has killed a man with one step of its powerful legs. Though when he asked for the gun he did not plan to pull the trigger unless provoked, the expectation of the Burmese townspeople makes him anxious to the point that he now knows he has no choice but to kill the elephant. Despite being an agent of the colonizer (Great Britain), Orwell finds himself being controlled by the people he is supposedly controlling. It is here that Orwell finds the fallacy in colonialism: in attempting to oppress and restrain people deemed "barbarians," the oppressor himself ends up committing barbaric acts of violence—sometimes even against his will.

> A white man mustn't be frightened in front of "natives"; and so, in general, he isn't frightened. The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

When Orwell and the mob of thousands of Burmese town people following him reach the rice paddy, the elephant is grazing and appears to be peaceful. Orwell does not want to shoot the massive beast, but feels anxious about the expectations of the crowd, which is anticipating a bloody spectacle.

In this quote, Orwell feels torn in his emotions: on the one hand, he technically holds power over the Burmese people, and can act as he pleases. On the other hand, it is hard to dismiss the expectations of two thousand people. By committing a violent act against the elephant, he will be asserting his dominance and show that when provoked, he can become dangerous. Asserting this image of himself will perhaps help to reduce the taunts he endures as an agent of the Empire. However, if he fails to properly kill the elephant and is killed himself in the process, his death will be a public spectacle, perhaps even rejoiced by the oppressed people who hate him because he works for Britain. His pride trumps his morals, and he aims his rifle at the elephant to kill it.

> But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

Finally giving into the pressure he feels from the looming crowd, Orwell crouches and shoots at what he believes to be the elephant's brain (in writing the story, he notes that he likely fired too far forward, a rookie mistake for someone trying to kill an elephant with a gun). The elephant staggers back but does not fall. He shoots again, and the elephant sinks to its knees. In this quote, a third shot finally brings the elephant to the ground. The fact that Orwell tries to kill the elephant when he does not have any idea how to do it painlessly, and ends up doing so in the most excruciating manner for the beast, is a metaphor for the ways in which the British Empire approached colonialism. It colonized regions of the world with different cultures, such as Berma, and ruled them with the brute force the British believed "native" and "barbaric" people deserved in order to be submissive. The result was an unnecessarily excruciating experience for the colonized people, just to fuel the pride of the colonists.

> It seemed dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

After the elephant falls to the ground, it continues to breathe laboriously, but it still does not die. Orwell uses his handgun at close range and fires shot after shot into the elephant, but it does not seem to notice the extra bullets.

In this quote, Orwell takes note of the horror he feels at the sight of the breathing, bloody beast that is mortally wounded but cannot die to end its pain. Orwell realizes then that he has begun something--the death of the elephant--that he cannot seem to finish, but rather must wait for nature, cruelly, to take her course. Orwell feels awfully both for what he has done to the elephant without being specifically provoked, and for looking foolish in front of the expectant crowd for not knowing the correct way to swiftly end the life of the beast. Like with colonialism, the British colonial rule continued to oppress the Burmese people in inhumane ways, without understanding the repercussions of their actions. Instead, they continued to impose violent rule, without ever receiving the submission they hoped for from a people who refused to be silenced by a far-away king. Like Orwell, the British empire began a bloody and violent process that refused to die.

> And afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

Related Characters: George Orwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

By the afternoon of the elephant's death, the Burmese townspeople have stripped its body of meat. Though the owner of the elephant was very angry that it had been killed, Orwell did not face any repercussions for killing the elephant due to his position of superiority as a British officer.

In this quote, he notes that in retrospect, he was actually happy that the coolie was killed, since he could claim that he killed the elephant in self-defense. Tragically, and ironically, it was due to the death of the coolie that Orwell felt forced to summon the elephant-killing rifle in the first place. He states that his colonist colleagues, like the elephant's owner, did not approve of his choice to kill the elephant; however, their reasoning was that the life of the Burmese coolie it killed was worth less than the value of the elephant. This devaluation of a human life, like Orwell's value of pride over the life of the elephant, is representative of the "barbaric" choices that colonists make in order to preserve propriety and equanimity in an attempt to oppress (supposedly barbaric) colonized peoples. In the colonial hierarchy of morals and values, image and prestige for the Empire comes before the basic human rights (and animal rights) of the colonized society.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

"SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT"

George Orwell works as the sub-divisional police officer of Moulmein, a town in the British colony of Burma. Because he is, like the rest of the English, a military occupier, he is hated by much of the village. Though the Burmese never stage a full revolt, they express their disgust by harassing Europeans at every opportunity. Burmese trip Orwell during soccer games and hurl insults at him as he walks down the street. The young Buddhist priests torment him the most.

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 abuse he suffers from Burmese confuses Orwell, because he is "theoretically—and secretly" on their side, and opposed to the oppressive British empire he serves. His work handling wretched prisoners gives him a close-up view of "the dirty work of Europe" and makes him feel guilty for his role in colonialism. He has yet to understand that the British empire is waning, and will soon be replaced with even worse regimes. However, while Orwell considers the empire an unconscionable tyranny, he still hates the insolent Burmese who torment him. This conflicted mindset is typical of officers in the British Raj, he explains.

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.

One day, a minor incident takes places that gives Orwell insight into the true nature of imperialism and the reasons behind it. He receives a call from another policeman, informing him that a rogue **elephant** has been causing damage in the town. Orwell heads toward the affected area. On the way, locals explain that the elephant is not wild, but rather a domesticated one that has had an attack of "must." "Must" occurs when tame elephants, held in chains, break their restraints and go berserk. The Burmese have been unable to restrain the elephant. Its "mahout," or handler, pursued it in the wrong direction and is now twelve hours away. On its rampage, the elephant has destroyed public and private property and killed livestock.

Orwell is able to better understand imperialism through his run-in with the elephant because 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.

Orwell goes to the neighborhood where the **elephant** was last spotted, which is one of the town's poorer districts. He tries to figure out the state of affairs, but, as is common in his experience of Asia, he finds that the story makes less and less sense the more he learns about it. The neighborhood's inhabitants give such conflicting reports that Orwell nearly concludes that the whole story was a hoax. Suddenly, he hears a commotion nearby and rounds a corner to find a "coolie"—a laborer—lying dead in the mud, crushed and skinned alive by the rogue elephant. The mutilated corpse appears to have been in excruciating pain. Orwell orders a subordinate to bring him a gun strong enough to shoot an elephant.

In the same way that Orwell does not understand precisely how he fits into the power dynamics of colonial Burma, he also has trouble finding a clear-cut narrative of the elephant's rampage. Evidently, colonialism and the power dynamics it entails are too convoluted to be contained within a single straightforward point of view.

Orwell's subordinate returns with the gun, and locals reveal that the **elephant** is in a nearby rice paddy. Orwell walks to the field, and a large group from the neighborhood follows him. The townspeople, who were previously uninterested in the destructive elephant, have seen the gun and are excited to see the beast shot. Orwell feels uncomfortable—he had not planned to shoot the elephant, and requested the rifle only for self-defense.

Once again, the Burmese appear to wield power over Orwell, subverting the colonial hierarchy. He is no longer an authority figure, but rather a spectacle, and the force of the Burmese' anticipation is beginning to make Orwell feel like he cannot completely control how he handles this matter.

The crowd reaches the rice paddies, and Orwell spots the **elephant** standing next to the road. The animal is calmly eating grass. Killing an elephant is akin to destroying "a huge and costly piece of machinery," and after seeing the peaceful creature, Orwell understands that he should not shoot it. Orwell suspects that the animal's attack of "must" will soon be over. He makes up his mind to simply watch the elephant to make sure it does not become aggressive again, and does not plan on harming it.

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.

However, after he makes this decision, Orwell glances back at the crowd behind him. It has swelled to over two thousand people, all of whom are excitedly expecting to see the **elephant's** demise. Orwell feels as though he is a magician tasked with entertaining them, and realizes that he is now compelled to shoot the elephant.

Orwell reneges on his ethical and practical conclusions almost as quickly as he makes them. By being placed in front of a crowd, Orwell has been forced to take on a performative persona that makes him act counter to every reasonable impulse he has.

His inability to resist the crowd's bloodlust makes Orwell realize that his authority over the locals is a hollow sort of power. Orwell, the imperialist, cannot do anything other than what the Burmese expect him to do. He is constrained by having to "impress" the empire's subjects by embodying the "conventionalized figure" of Western authority. In this way, Orwell reflects, "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys." Orwell realizes that he committed to killing the **elephant** the moment he ordered that he be brought a rifle. He entertains the possibility of doing nothing and letting the elephant live, but concludes that this would make the crowd laugh at him. His entire mission as a colonialist, he says, is not to be laughed at—thus, sparing the elephant is not an option.

In this crucial moment of the story, Orwell articulates the paradox of colonialism. By limiting the freedom of others, the British have actually forced themselves to adopt a limited, exaggerated role in order to maintain their grip on authority—and thus limited their own freedoms far more sharply. He cannot tolerate mistreatment from the Burmese, even though he understands that he, as a colonist, is in the wrong. It is deeply ironic, and tragic, that Orwell is compelled to entrench himself further in barbarism, simply because he feels that propriety dictates that he do so. That is the paradox of colonialism—that colonial propriety comes to force the colonizer to act barbarously.

Still, Orwell does not want to kill the beast. It appears "grandmotherly" to him; killing it would be a form of murder. Moreover, killing an **elephant** is a waste of an expensive commodity. The locals tell Orwell that the elephant has kept to itself, but may charge if provoked. Orwell decides that the best way to handle the situation would be to approach the elephant to test its temperament and only harm the animal if it behaved aggressively. However, to do this would endanger Orwell, and worse still, he would look like an idiot if the elephant maimed him in front of the natives.

Orwell's compassionate reasoning makes it seem as though his nobler impulses may yet prevail. Unfortunately, his desire not to be laughed at trumps his other motivations—in fact, he is more afraid of humiliation—and perhaps of the way that humiliation might impact the local's sense of him as an authority figure—than he is of physical harm! It is clear that the conventions of imperialism make Orwell feel compelled to perform a particular inhumane and irrational role. In spite of his reasoned introspection, he cannot resist the actions that the role forces him to make in order to display his power.

There is only one thing Orwell can do. He loads the gun, lies on the road, and takes aim at the **elephant**. The crowd sighs in anticipation. Orwell aims at the elephant's head—too far forward to hit the brain, he thinks—and fires. The crowd roars in excitement, and the elephant appears suddenly weakened. After a bit of time, the elephant sinks to its knees and begins to drool. Orwell fires again, and the elephant does not fall—instead, it wobbles back onto its feet. A third shot downs the elephant. As it tumbles to the ground, however, it trumpets and appears to grow even larger, and its fall shakes the earth on which Orwell lies.

The description of the elephant's physical distress is excruciating, and Orwell clearly intends to emphasize the barbarity of his decision and actions. It is particularly notable that the elephant appears to be at its most magnificent just as it falls. This illustrates that at the elephant's moment of bodily defeat, it only becomes a more powerful symbol of the irrational savagery of colonialism.

The **elephant** lies on the ground, breathing laboriously. Orwell waits for it to die, but it continues to breathe. He fires at its heart, but the elephant hardly seems to notice the bullets. Orwell is distressed to see the elephant laboring to die, clearly in agonizing pain, so he fires his smaller-caliber rifle into its body countless times. These bullets do nothing; the elephant continues to breathe torturously. Orwell leaves the scene, unable to bear the elephant's suffering any longer. He is later told that the elephant took a half hour to die. Shortly thereafter, the Burmese stripped the meat off its bones.

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.

Orwell's choice to kill the **elephant** was controversial. The elephant's owner was angry, but, as an Indian, had no legal recourse. Older British agreed with Orwell's choice, but younger colonists thought it was inappropriate to kill an elephant just because it killed a coolie, because they are of the opinion that elephants are more valuable than coolies. Orwell notes that he is lucky the elephant killed a man, because it gave his own actions legal justification. Finally, Orwell wonders if any of his comrades understood that he killed the elephant "solely to avoid looking a fool."

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.

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