Analysis of “Shooting an Elephant”

Type of Work

"Shooting an Elephant" is a short story that is also sometimes classified as an essay. It first appeared in 1936 in the autumn issue of New Writing, published twice a year in London from 1936 to 1946.

Setting

The setting is Burma (present-day Myanmar) in the 1920s, when the country was a province of India. The action takes place in the town of Moulmein in the southern part of the province, called Lower Burma, a rice-growing region on the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea.

Historical Background

Burma became a province of India in 1886 when India was part of the British Empire. European interest in India began when the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama arrived there in 1498. In 1600, England chartered the East India Company to exploit Asian resources and within decades established trading posts in key Indian cities. Over the next two-and-a-half centuries, Britain expanded its economic interest in India. In 1858, Britain transferred control of India from the East India Company to the British government. The British overlords directly imposed their will and their ways on three-fifths of the populace in what became known as "British India" and indirectly on two-fifths of the populace in autonomous native states. Meanwhile, after fighting three wars with the Burmese—the first from 1824 to 1826, the second in 1852, and the third in 1885—the British gained control of Burma and incorporated it into India. Britons dominated the economic, political, and social life of their conquered lands. The British got the best jobs, held the top government posts, and exploited the natural resources. They also erected social barriers between themselves and the natives. All the while, native resentment of the English was building. In the twentieth century, this resentment continued to increase. George Orwell called attention to the evils of British imperialism.

Characters
The Narrator: Young Englishman serving as a police officer in Burma in the 1920s, when Burma was part of British-controlled India. He strongly opposes the oppressive British rule of Burma and the rest of India. At the same time, he resents the ridicule he receives from the natives, who are unaware that he is on their side politically. The narrator's views represent those of the author, George Orwell (the pen name of Eric Blair).

Sub-Inspector: Burmese officer who calls the narrator for help after an elephant gets loose in town.

Black Dravidian Coolie: Indian laborer from the town of Coringa, India, who is killed by the elephant. A Dravidian is a lower-caste Indian who speaks his own language, Dravidian.

Friend of the Narrator: Man who provides the narrator an elephant gun.

Police Orderly: Person who fetches an elephant gun for the narrator.

Mahout: Owner of the elephant. He becomes very angry after learning that the narrator has killed his elephant. A mahout is a skilled elephant trainer and handler.

Indian Constables
Crowd of Townspeople
British Who React to the Shooting

Conflicts

The narrator experiences three conflicts: one with the British Empire because of its unjust occupation of Burma, one with the Burmese because of their mockery of him as a representative of the British Empire, and one with himself in his struggle with his conscience and self-image. In literary terms, the first two are external conflicts (because they are outside him) and the third is an internal conflict (because it is inside him). All three conflicts complicate his ability to make objective, clear-headed decisions.

Narrator's Point of View and His Shortcomings

The narrator tells the story in first-person point of view. He blames British tyranny and Burmese reaction to it for his troubles, as the following paragraph indicates:

I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. 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.

The narrator also asserts that “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.” But is he simply making excuses for his own shortcomings? After all, he could refuse to shoot the elephant and walk away. True, he would lose face. But he would retain his honor; his conscience would remain clear. However, under pressure to kill the beast, he cannot muster the courage to oppose the will of crowd. So he decides to shoot the elephant (even though he admits that he is a “poor shot with a rifle”). But that decision is not his only mistake. He also errs when he fails to seek advice—from someone in the crowd, from the sub-inspector, or from the owner of the elephant gun—on where to direct his shot. After firing the first shot at its skull in front of an ear, he wounds but does not kill the elephant. He then fires two more cartridges at the same spot. But the elephant, though down, refuses to die. The narrator then makes a bloody mess of things. First, he fires the last two elephant-gun cartridges into the body of the elephant in hopes of hitting the heart. When that strategy fails, he fires several rounds from his Winchester into the elephant's mouth and body. The elephant remains alive, and the narrator can do nothing but walk away. The elephant lies in agony for another half-hour before dying.

One may conclude that, yes, the British government is condemnable for its subjugation of the people of Burma. One may also conclude that individual British overseers are reprehensible for allowing government policy to run roughshod over their consciences.

Themes

The Evil of Imperialism

Imperialism is evil. First, it humiliates the occupied people, reducing them to inferior status in their own country. Second, it goads the occupiers into making immoral or unethical decisions to maintain their superiority over the people. In “Shooting an Elephant,” the narrator acts against his own conscience to save face for himself and his fellow imperialists.

Loss of Freedom in a Colonized Land

When imperialists colonize a country, they restrict the freedom of the natives. In so doing, the imperialists also unwittingly limit their own
freedom in that they tend to avoid courses of action that could provoke the occupied people. In “Shooting an Elephant,” the narrator realizes that he should allow the elephant to live, but he shoots the animal anyway to satisfy the crowd of natives who want him to kill it. He then says,

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.

Prejudice

Although the narrator seems to respect the natives as fellow human beings, other Europeans regard the Burmese and Indians with contempt—an attitude made clear near the end of the story: "[T]he younger [Europeans] said it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie." Historically, the British placed their own men in positions of authority in the colonial government in India, which then incorporated Burma, and natives in inferior positions. Moreover, the British generally did not socialize with the natives.

Resentment

The natives resent the presence of the British, as would any people subjected to foreign rule. They ridicule the British from a distance and laugh at them whenever an opportunity presents itself. In turn, many of the British despise the natives. And so, there is constant tension between the occupier and the occupied.

Vocabulary

coolie: unskilled laborer.

Coringhee: From or having to do with the town of Coringa, India. It is in the state of Andhra Pradesh in the southeastern part of the country.
Dravidian: lower-caste Indian who speaks his own language, Dravidian.

Imperialism: policy of controlling weak or underdeveloped countries for economic, political, and military purposes.

In saecula saeculorum: in this age and for all ages; now and forever; forever and ever; for eternity; until the end of the world.

Mahout: skilled elephant trainer and handler.

Raj, British: British government rule in India, of which Burma was a part; the period when the British government ruled India.

Sahib: master, sir. Indians and Burmese used the word when addressing an Englishman.

**Climax**

The climax occurs when the narrator decides under pressure that he must shoot the elephant.

**Symbols**

Mad elephant: Symbol of the British Empire. Like the elephant, the empire is powerful. When the elephant raids the bazaar (marketplace), he symbolizes the British Empire raiding the economy of Burma. When he kills the coolie, he represents the British oppressing the natives.

Dead coolie: Symbol of the downtrodden Burmese. Note that Orwell says his arms are outstretched like those of the crucified Christ.

Football: Symbol of British imposition of their culture on their colonies. Modern soccer was developed in England in the 19th Century.

Mud: Symbol of the squalor in which the Burmese must live under British rule. It is also a symbol of the political mire that the British created for themselves when they colonized India and Burma.