

What perspectives
regarding colonialism
is Orwell expressing
in shooting an
eleph...

[Literature](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Shooting an Elephant: George Orwell's Shooting an Elephant is one of the best short stories to have appeared during the last days of British colonialism. Partly autobiographical in its content, the short story narrates the difficulties encountered by a colonial officer in Burma, as is sent on a mission to shoot down a rampaging Elephant which has already killed an Indian coolie. The story is portraiture on the effects of imperialism on those who perpetrate the system. This essay will argue how the story shows this role reversal, that the oppressor becomes the oppressed in the functioning of imperialism.

As Orwell notes very poignantly in the story, when the imperialists use force and authority to suppress the locals, it is the imperialists who suffer more. This is so due to two reasons. First, the imperial officer is forced to carry out acts which were to merely prove his bravado and power. Second, the unrelenting hatred directed against him by the locals takes away mental peace and equity.

In the story, there is an insightful passage toward the end, where the author describes the climactic scene in the open fields. Having come near shooting range of the wild beast, the officer suddenly finds himself followed by a few thousand Burmese natives. They all wait in eager anticipation of the impending finality - indeed the only possible outcome in the circumstance. It is at this moment that he officer realizes how powerless he is. The all powerful, rifle wielding member of the ruling clan is faced with the compulsion of expectation from the Burmese locals following his pursuit. In an observation that is applicable universally to the entire institution of colonialism, the author can see not only the irony of power but also its

reversal. As the author admits after having killed the Elephant, he merely completed the act to not appear a fool to the imposing audience. There were no other weighty considerations behind this. Indeed, neither the death of the innocent Indian coolie, nor the slow, painful murder of the majestic Elephant had struck the officer as unfortunate or unfair. Sadly, for a colonialist, the foremost thought is his display of power, even when it often manifests at the cost of justice, prudence or poise in judgment. The biggest of ironies in the story is how the institution of imperialism, based on express display of military might for the purpose of economic and geo-political gain, crushes the agents along with the subjects.

One of the trademark features of Orwell's works (either biographical or fictional) is his admission and respect for hard facts. In *Shooting an Elephant*, the central fact is that of the inherent evilness and immorality of the imperialist project. The narrator of the story could not have been less discreet when he says that his job as a police officer allowed him to witness "the dirty work of Empire at close quarters". There is another insight offered by the story, namely, that the servants of the empire, who are on deputation to various colonies, are themselves victims. They are subject to long journeys across the seas and spend a lot of time in alien lands, away from their home and family. In this sense, the condition of colonial officers is far more pitiable than those of their subjects.

Reference:

Orwell, George (1968) [1958]. *Selected Writings*. Heinemann Educational Books. ISBN 0-435-13675-5.