

George Orwell:  
modernism and  
imperialism in  
"shooting an  
elephant"



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“ Shooting an Elephant,” a short story by George Orwell, is about a man who goes against his morals and succumbs to social pressures at the expense of an innocent elephant. The story, published in 1936, was influenced by the formal innovations and social thought of the Modernist Period. During this time, widespread British Imperialism had a great effect on society; Orwell’s life experiences and the current events of the time also greatly influenced his work. Orwell presents the Modernist themes of Imperialism, racial feuds and isolation using direct, matter-of-fact sentences and a truthful, conversational tone. Throughout, Orwell’s use of an honest first person stream of consciousness based on his experiences in India displays the racial tensions caused by Imperialism during the Modernist Period.

Born in 1903, Orwell lived towards the end of British Imperialism, a time of great conflict. The atrocities the British inflicted on their subjects, especially in India, greatly affected him. Great Britain colonized India and held control of it for over two centuries. The British exploited the country for its abundance of goods such as spices and gold, and used it to expand their trading routes and sphere of influence. Imperialism benefited the British, but not the Indians. When Britain gained control of India, the Indians faced persecution in their own country and forced assimilation into European culture. After spending time working as a police officer in a rundown village in Burma, India, Orwell became aware of these injustices. He was, “ Keenly aware of the inequalities of Imperialism” (Hopkinson 2) and openly expressed his disdain for the practice. He details the horrors experienced by the Indian subjects in his stories. In his writing, Orwell reflects his first-hand

experience of the evils of Imperialism and his great hatred of the British government.

The setting in Burma greatly impacted the story. Similar to the protagonist in the story, Orwell acted as the assistant district superintendent of the Imperial Police in Burma. During this time the author witnessed much discrimination and injustice towards the Indians. Only a select group of European men ruled millions of Indians through force, creating an imbalance of power. Orwell channeled his animosity into his writing by, "Immersing himself in difficult situations and then writing about them with extraordinary insight" (Hopkinson 1). By doing so, he helps the reader better understand the injustices of Imperialism. Orwell's criticism of Imperialism and deep understanding of the plight of the Indians add thoughtful insight to the story.

The plot of "Shooting an Elephant" and the protagonist's thoughts portray how racial tensions and societal expectations can alter a man's values. The plot of the story demonstrates the racial tensions between the British Imperialists and the villagers of Burma. The European men control the villagers, which makes the unnamed protagonist feel like he must act powerful. He feels that, "He has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him" (Orwell 6) and be the powerful and brave leader they want him to be. For this reason, he takes action when a group of frenzied villagers tell him that a wild elephant is causing havoc in their village. At first, the protagonist has no intention of killing the elephant. He demonstrates this by only taking a small handgun for protection. This quickly changes. As he approaches the village, he sees a trampled corpse of a man and thousands of villagers. As the protagonist pursues the elephant, the large crowd follows, watching his <https://assignbuster.com/george-orwell-modernism-and-imperialism-in-shooting-an-elephant/>

every move. Although he did not originally plan on killing the elephant, he feels pressure from the villagers and shoots. The elephant does not die immediately, it takes many bullets and over half an hour for the elephant to slowly perish. The villagers watch in as awe as if the killing was their entertainment, and after the elephant dies, they scavenge for its meat.

Within the narration, there is much debate on whether or not the killing of the elephant is ethical. The protagonist internally struggles with having killed the elephant and is overwhelmed by guilt. In the end, the protagonist is relieved that the elephant killed a man, because it gave him the legal right to kill the elephant. But the protagonist did not kill the elephant to protect the village or because it was the right thing to do. He states that " Legally I had done the right thing," (Orwell 9) but morally he did not. He killed the elephant to sustain his image as a strong leader and protect his ego.

By using first-person narration, Orwell displays the protagonist's internal struggle regarding shooting the elephant. The protagonist narrates the story using a stream of consciousness to provide blunt, truthful accounts. He uses a didactic manner to educate the reader and describe the horrors of British Imperialism. He portrays Orwell's hatred of British Imperialism and sympathy for the Burmese with an " Honest use of language" (Kinsella 1). By using first person narration, Orwell provides the reader with a glimpse into the protagonist's inner thoughts and reveals " Extraordinary insight" (Kinsella 1). It also depicts the character development of the protagonist from a morally upstanding police officer to a weak-willed elephant murderer. The story includes the narrator's inner thoughts to show his moral development and criticisms of the cruel Imperialistic system.

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The three Modernist themes illustrated in "Shooting an Elephant" are Imperialism, racial feuds, and isolation. Portrayed negatively, Imperialism greatly influences the story. Orwell negatively describes Imperialism and reveals its immorality. The story displays the loss of freedom and injustices the villagers endure. The second theme, racial feuds, is shown through the tensions between the protagonist and the villagers. Because of the British Imperialism of Burma, India, a small group of Europeans are given power over the millions of Indians of the country. This great imbalance of power causes the villagers to resent the protagonist and the other Europeans in their country. The villagers had a bitter, "Anti-European feeling" (Orwell 1) toward the protagonist which affected their relationship. The third theme presented in the story is isolation. Because he is the only European in the village and one of the few white men in all of India, the narrator is ostracized. The British have rule over the Indians and domain over their country, so the narrator separates himself as the man in power. This causes him to feel like he must rise to meet the India's great expectations of the white Europeans in power. British Imperialism of India causes racial feuds and isolation of the protagonist, which are three of the prominent themes of the story.

"Shooting an Elephant" illustrates the social tensions created by British Imperialism. Orwell draws off of his experiences as a police officer in Burma to develop the protagonist, which created a more insightful and realistic character. Using first person narration, Orwell clearly describes the narrator's thoughts and emotions. Therefore, he is able to display the protagonist's character development through the story. He transforms from an upstanding police officer to a weak-willed man that disregards his morals and better

judgement to conform to the expectations of others. In addition, Orwell critiques British Imperialism in India and expresses his disdain for the treatment of the Burmese. He exposes their exploitation and the racist actions taken against them. Overall, George Orwell uses first person narration to portray the thoughts and emotions of the protagonist and draws on his own experiences with British Imperialism to create a short story highlighting the racial tensions in Burma, India. A man is no match for an elephant, unless he has a gun. The British troops would be no match for the millions of Indians, except they have guns. The slow death of the elephant reminds the reader of the long, cruel period of British Imperialism in India, which killed the free will of the Indians. Orwell uses the seemingly simple situation of a man shooting an elephant to bring to light the pain and consequences of Imperialism.