

Analysis of a narrative text: "shooting an elephant"



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"Shooting an Elephant" is an autobiographically influenced short story written by George Orwell and published in 1936. It deals with the inner conflict of an imperial police officer in Burma who feels pressured by the Burmese and forced to kill an outraged elephant in order to prove himself and his status as an imperial police officer. The short story can be divided into two parts. In the first two paragraphs the narrator introduces himself and talks about his life and experience in working as a "sub-divisional police officer" in the town of Moulmein in Lower Burma.

He also talks about his ambiguous attitude towards the Burmese people who ridicule and mock him because of anti-European feelings and towards the British Empire whose "dirty work" he now has to witness in his job. In the second part of the short story the narrator tells the readers about a specific incident, already indicated in the title of the story, which gave him a better understanding of imperialism and the way it works. One day in his service as an imperial police officer he is asked to stop an outraged elephant from ravaging the town and attacking the people.

He takes along a rifle just in case he needs protection from the wild animal and starts on his way to find the elephant and see for himself what is happening. When a man is killed by the outraged elephant and the Burmese people follow the police officer on his way to the elephant he realises that the Burmese expect him to shoot the elephant. He knows it would not be right to kill the animal because of its worth and because it has started to calm down and would be the tame, harmless animal it is used to be.

But under the pressure of the crowd the police man does not see leaving the elephant alive as an option because it would make him look weak and he might get laughed at if he gets attacked by the animal. This is when he realises that imperialism does not only mean to oppress a nation but to give up his own freedom and act as the “ natives” expect him to in order to impress them. After this realisations he feels forced to kill the elephant and he shots the animal twice and leaves it to die.

In the last paragraph of the short story he reflects on this incident and talks about discussions whether it was right of him to shoot the elephant or not. The story is set in the early 20th century in a town in Lower Burma and the only character introduced to the reader is the European imperial police officer, whose name is unknown. The main thesis of the story is not presented at the beginning of the text but rather develops through the course of the actions. With his opposing attitude towards the British Empire the police officer is in a conflict with himself right from the beginning of the story which makes him a complex character.

He works for an Empire which ideals and actions he does not support but he can not identify with the Burmese people either because, as an European, he is not accepted in their country. Being mocked by the Burmese and seeing the “ dirty work” of the Empire he feels hatred for both the oppressed and the oppressor. His realisation about what imperialism really is makes him even more reluctant towards the British Empire but at the same time he does not see a way out of the situation and feels pressured by the ideal of imperialism into doing something he does not feel right about.

Orwell based his short story on his own experience as a police officer in Burma and chooses to use an autodiegetic first-person narrator to tell his story. He wants to talk about his own experiences or his own inner conflict and describing the police officer's or his own feelings and attitudes is more suitable and more personal with a limited first-person narrator. The narrator of the story is an overt narrator because he introduces himself in the first paragraph and gives comments to guide the reader's understanding throughout the text.

His comments are on his opinion about imperialism, the British Empire and the Burmese or just further explanations about the Burmese and their culture. Even though the author might believe that an autodiegetic narrator is more trustworthy because he can give first-hand information it must be stated that the narrator in this text is not reliable. It only presents one perspective on the incident of the elephant shooting and the narrator can not be reliable because he has ambiguous feelings towards both the British Empire and the Burmese.

One can not tell what the Burmese are thinking while experiencing the shooting of the elephant and the narrator only assumes what they think and what they want him to do. The perspective from which the story is perceived is limited to one single character which is the police officer. The reader gets a deep insight of the character's feelings and thoughts and the focalisation is restricted to one perspective (the police officer's perspective) throughout the text which indicates an internal, fixed focalisation.

The character's words and thoughts are mediated through free direct discourse and interior monologues. Through this mimetic discourse the reader can feel even closer to the story and empathise with the narrator better. After the short summary of the police officer's time in Burma the author alternates between descriptive paragraphs , which guide the reader through the shooting of the elephant, and the police officer's inner monologues which reveal his thoughts on the situation and his attitude towards imperialism, the Burmese people and the British Empire.

While the descriptive paragraphs are mostly summarised and do not have the same time of their occurrence, the inner monologues are written in a time pause and the narrator reflects on what is happening at the moment. However when it comes to the point of the shooting itself the time is stretched in order to emphasise the narrator's inner conflict and to build suspense. Through the use of this particular voice and focalisation the author achieved to compose a convincing, insightful and reflective way of presenting his own inner conflict, the situation in Burma during the early 20th century and the faith of the British Empire.