

Three essays by george orwell the growth of political awareness critical thinking...

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



‘ The Hanging’ (1931)

‘ Shooting an Elephant’ (1936)

‘ Why I Write’ (1946)

Having read these three essays by Orwell and noting the dates they were published, I would have to say that what is important to Orwell does change to a certain extent, but some important things remain constant. The main thing that changes is his political awareness. In ‘ Why I Write’ he states that.

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.

He makes clear that his experiences as a police officer in Burma and his subsequent experiences of poverty, contact with the British working class and his participation in the Spanish Civil War, have changed him politically. Towards the end of his life when ‘ Why I Write’ was written, politics and the exposure of injustice had become the most important element in his life and his writing. There are hints of this in the earlier essays. In ‘ Shooting an Elephant’ he has decided that the British Empire “ was an evil thing”, so his experiences in the Imperial Burmese Police Force did contribute to his later political awakening. In ‘ Why I Write’ he tells us that as a teenager he kept “ a sort of diary existing only in the mind” which became “ more and more a mere description of what I was doing and the things I saw.” He expresses the hope that this “ sort of diary” had a “ meticulous descriptive quality.” This phrase is especially interesting, because ‘ Shooting an Elephant’ and ‘ The

'The Hanging' do contain "meticulous descriptive" impressions of people and places and things, and in 'Why I Write' he states

So long as I remain alive and well, I shall continue to feel strongly about prose style, to love the surface of the earth, and to take pleasure in solid objects and scraps of useless information.

'To take pleasure in solid objects' - and to write about them accurately - is another thing that Orwell considers important and we can see this in the concise, yet accurate, descriptions in 'Shooting an Elephant' and 'The Hanging.' One final thing that is important to Orwell might be said to be injustice. He writes in 'Why I Write' that when writing, his starting point is "always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice." There are clear hints of this in the earlier essays: he thinks the hanging of the man is wrong and unjust, and, deep down, he is disgusted at his own actions of shooting the elephant, but he wrote those essays before the full development of his political awareness and feels duty bound to carry them out.

Orwell believes in the dignity and value of every human being and every living thing. We can say without hesitation that Orwell believes passionately in his version of the truth. By the time he comes to write 'Why I Write' he clearly believes in what he calls "democratic socialism", but his ability in 'Shooting an Elephant' and in 'The Hanging' to write with empathy about the owner of the elephant and the man who is about to be hanged show his ability to see things from the perspective of those without power. In a sense, he wants the point of view of these characters to be heard and people to be

made aware of them. His love of the truth also comes out in 'Shooting an Elephant' where he is scathingly critical of his younger, less politicized self. He admits at the end of the essay that he wonders whether anyone who discusses the fate of the elephant is aware that, "I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool." This honesty about himself is refreshing. The essay even begins with some very self-deprecatory comments about himself: In Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people - the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me.

In 'The Hanging' his bare, accurate descriptions of the condemned man show admiration for his bravery and his preservation of his own dignity, and an implied disagreement with capital punishment.

Orwell is clearly against those who would suppress the truth or who mistreat their fellow human beings. This is why, even in an essay as early as 'The Hanging' he takes part in a punishment that he feels to be wrong, and in 'Shooting an Elephant' he admits to "my hatred of the empire I served." He is against writing that is unclear or too concerned with what he calls "aesthetic enthusiasm". Because he is so much in favour of writing about "some lie I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention", it must follow that he is against writing that does not tell us something new or does not expose "some lie."

There is a lot to admire in Orwell. His most admirable quality is his honesty about his own shortcomings. In 'Shooting an Elephant' he admits "I was

young and ill-educated"; in 'Why I Write' he admits that for all writers their first motive is "Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on the grown-ups who snubbed you in childhood, etc, etc. It is humbug to pretend this is not a motive and a strong one." At the end of 'The Hanging', without explicitly saying so, we are aware that Orwell is ashamed of his own behaviour:

"Pulling at his legs!" exclaimed a Burmese magistrate suddenly, and burst into a loud chuckling. We all began laughing again. At that moment Francis's anecdote seemed extraordinarily funny. We all had a drink together, native and European alike, quite amicably. The dead man was a hundred yards away.

This honesty about his own insensitivity is an admirable quality. Orwell's political commitment might be seen as admirable, depending on one's own convictions – it is clear that he held his opinions sincerely, even if one disagrees with him. His single-mindedness as a writer might also be admired – the desire to expose lies and change people's perceptions.

Orwell does have shortcomings as a man and as a writer. His strong commitment might be seen by some as a shortcoming as a writer – his political views colour everything he writes. As a man in the two stories set in Burma, he does come across as rather cowardly, obeying orders and taking part in procedures he believes are wrong. It could be said, then, that as a young man in Burma he lacked the strength of his convictions, the determination to challenge what he knew to be wrong. In 'Shooting an

Elephant' he describes himself as "an absurd puppet." In addition, although he states quite clearly that he hates the British Empire, he does reveal some stereotypical views about race: he talks about the "sea of yellow faces behind me" as he prepares to shoot the elephant; he complains about the lack of reliable information about the elephant, remarking, "That is invariably the case in the East." I think another shortcoming which he is not aware of is his sense of his own personal dignity: Orwell seems to have a desperate need to be liked - he doesn't like being a policeman in Burma because he is disliked by the Burmese and he shoots the elephant only to please the crowd.

As a writer there is much to admire in Orwell. His qualities as a writer are similar to his qualities as a man - honesty and openness. I also like his eye for absurd details which are presented with a sort of grim irony, especially in 'The Hanging': the intervention of the dog on the way to the gallows, the way the condemned man avoids treading in a puddle - these tiny details demonstrate Orwell's observational skills and also create a mood of irony. Even his honesty about his political opinions is a good quality and it tends to mean in the two essays set in Burma that Orwell feels a natural sympathy and compassion for the underdog, the less privileged outsiders of the world.