

Critical analysis of "shooting an elephant" by george orwell essay sample



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In George Orwell’s essay “ Shooting an Elephant,” the author’s character develops from the pressure to make a decision and the horrifying results which follow. A potential existed for Orwell to display confidence and high morals, but this potential was destroyed when he pulled the trigger. The death of the elephant signifies the weakness of Orwell’s character.

Orwell is ashamed to had submitted to the pressure of the Burmans, but he does so at his own will. In the essay, his largest fear is that of public humiliation or “ looking like a fool” (Orwell 206). Orwell’s dilemma involves poor morals colliding with common sense. The statement “ The crowd would laugh at me” (Orwell 204), is shortly followed with the point “ It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him” (Orwell 204). These statements contradict eachother and add to the climatic decision to pull the trigger.

Respect among the people is highly valued to Orwell. He claims that “ every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at” (Orwell 204). This weakness plagues the author throughout the story and displays the softness of his character. This softness foreshadows the collapse of his morals, and ultimately the slow, sad death of the elephant. The authors mistake in his desision cost him the goodness of his character, and forced upon him the horrifying experience of watching the elephant die slowly in pain. This sight was so disturbing to Orwell that he leaves. “ In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away” (Orwell 206). This quote

also hints at the shamefulness that the author feels and the dishonor which prevails over him in the end.

Orwell does not learn from his mistake. He tries to provide a sufficient reason for shooting the elephant at the end. “ afterwards I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking like a fool” (Orwell 206). Orwell claims to of looked like a fool if he hadn't of shot the elephant. Yet, the author declines to say that he also would have upheld a higher standard of ethics and honor for himself if he hadn't of pulled the trigger. The path not taken would have displayed a sense of self-standing, self confidence, and strong internal morals, which all perished with the death of the elephant.

As deep as the elephant's death disturbs the reader, the author does not openly convey to the reader that he feels he had made a mistake. In fact, the essay ends almost too abruptly for the reader to conclude the author's deeper feelings. However, the in depth description of the elephant's painful death is sure to render some amount of sympathy toward the creature, and create feelings of disgust toward the author. “ The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock” (Orwell 206). The memories of the slobbering open mouth, red velvet blood, and shrunken figure are the punishment Orwell must live with for submitting to the will of the Burmans. Orwell deserves the integrity he lost and the guilt he must endure from the suffering of the elephant.

The decision that the author chose in "Shooting an Elephant" caused great pain and suffering to the creature, and symbolized the decline in Orwell's character. The judgement lowers the author's morals and self confidence, consequently leading the reader to perceive the author in a negative light.