

Rhetoric and contradiction of human nature



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Though at times confusing, using a contradiction strongly establishes and emphasizes a point and often inspires an emotional response. In George Orwell's essay, "Shooting an Elephant," Orwell effectively delivers these contradictions, or paradoxes, in a manner that defines human nature in political situations and illustrates the issues with such responses. These rhetorical devices add depth to Orwell's argument that better persuade the reader to consider his position on human nature in political situations.

To claim that "...when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys," Orwell implies that, in the context of the time period of British Imperialism, any leader that runs rampant in their country is destined to sacrifice their own freedom in addition to pulverizing the freedom of the others' they are desperate to control. In the essay, Orwell describes himself as being "...stuck between [his] hatred of the empire [he] served and [his] rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make [his] job impossible." His job as an Indian Imperial police officer makes him loyal to Imperialist Britain, yet, he wants to help the oppressed Indians, regardless of how poorly they treat him. This is an example of how the white man destroys his own freedom when attempting to viciously control or expand into other countries, as Great Britain was doing in this era.

Orwell later argues with himself about shooting the elephant before realizing that he must with the crowd watching him. This is his loss of freedom based on his loyalty to the British Empire that had run tyrant. It is human nature, in political situations, to either consciously or subconsciously sacrifice something personal for the sake of the whole. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. also proves this instinct in his description of the few white American, saying in "A

Letter from Birmingham Jail,” “ I suppose I should have realized that few members of the oppressor race can understand the deep groans and passionate yearnings of the oppressed race, and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action.” This hesitation and resistance that King faced was a result of the oppressive government that, when loyal to that government, the freedom of that person is obliterated for the sake of suppressing another’s because their choices had to follow the strict guidelines they’d been given. Because of this, the paradox Orwell uses to emphasize how people react in the face of hardened, harsh government officials shoving rules and restrictions down their throats is effective, in that it shows how it’s human nature to follow orders and avoid being singled out for daring to speak out.

Orwell presses the issue of human instinct in times of racial and social segregation by saying that the white man “...wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it,” addressing the reality that, when oppressive governments or leaders, in general, press for something with enough force, the citizens under their rule will adhere to their wishes and at least pretend to stick to the status quo. The citizens adopt a persona, a “ mask” that does not reflect their true feelings and thoughts for the sake of conformity. Ultimately, however, fantasy vanishes and what’s left is only reality. The citizens’ faces “ grow to fit the mask,” and they, in turn, become their personas. The racist and controversial ideas people adapt, most commonly do to fear of their leaders, eventually solidify from facade to actuality which they then pass on to younger generations, of whom know nothing different as a result. This is true in Orwell’s account of shooting an elephant where he, again, describes

himself as “...stuck between [his] hatred of the empire [he] served and [his] rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make [his] job impossible,” illustrating that, because he was forced to “wear a mask” in order to appease his leaders and aid in the suppression of the British-controlled India at the time, he came to despise the Indians as well, adhering to the stereotype. This is human nature: to go with the flow and keep quiet when having a differing opinion is the option many choose when faced with difficult political situations. Because the dictators and fascist governments of a given time created freakishly effective propaganda, many citizens feared reprimanding for posing an opposing argument to their leaders and adopted racial, social, sexuality, and religious discriminating perspectives to avoid being on the other side of the barrel of the gun. These “masks” they wore came to be truth, eventually, and they passed those ideas down to their children. This paradox Orwell makes is sound and true, proved in the accounts of World War II, because it adequately emphasizes how humans react to oppressive, power-greedy governments and leaders with how quickly they answer to fear and “...grow to fit [the mask].”

Orwell takes such simple phrases that initially seem merely contradictory and confusing, and he uses them to his advantage to inspire questions and emotions. These questions and emotions fall back to his concept of human nature in the face of political situations, and he effectively presents them in such a short and sweet way with the paradoxes that without them, the essay loses its effect to call attention to the issues with things such as imperialism. Because Orwell successfully creates these paradoxes that are not difficult to comprehend and can be supported with evidence in other essays such as “

Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” written by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and events in history, they add an element to the essay that strongly supports the argument. Though at times confusing, the complexity of paradoxes often changes an entire piece in a way that’s unattainable through anything else.