

Short story shooting an elephant



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The short story *Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell takes place in British controlled India. Orwell was a police officer for the British, located in Lower Burma, and tensions between the Natives and the British ran high. Without Britain's involvement in India, Orwell would not have felt the societal pressures to shoot the elephant.

The British had established themselves in India by the early 18th century, primarily from the British East India Company, whose primary exports were cotton cloth, opium, silk, and indigo dye. Once the French withdrew from India following the Seven Years War in 1763, the British had the full ability to take control over India. Over the first half of the 19th century, the British colonized independent Indian territories until the last independent territory, the Punjab region, was seized in 1849. In an effort to regain control of their land, the Indian Mutiny occurred in 1857, but only resulted in increased control and the establishment of central administration. The British Raj was instituted in 1858 and lasted until 1947; during this time the British Empire had social, economic, and political control over India.

The story begins with *I was hated by large numbers of people* (Orwell 1). This sets the tone for the entire story, establishing the social tensions in the first sentence.

The British were hated among the Natives, and were openly targeted, according to Orwell. Although the British were the minority, they had the highest social status and disregarded the general caste system in India that was present before British colonization in regard to themselves. The caste system was set up into four separate castes: The highest is the Brahmins (priests and teachers). Second was the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors).

Followed by the Vaishyas (merchants and traders) and finally was the Sudras (workers and peasants) (Kuah 1). The Europeans were on top of any Native no matter their caste. Despite being the majority of the population, the Natives were too fearful to revolt. This created high social tensions between the two groups and were one of the primary reason's Orwell felt he had to shoot the elephant.

George Orwell thought must he prove his authority and status as the only Non-native during the incident by shooting the animal unprovoked. Orwell states, Here was I, the white man with his gunseemingly the leader of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind he shall spend his life trying to impress the natives', and so in every crisis he has got to do what the natives' expect of him(4).

The natives were going to judge Orwell for whatever choice he made; Britain's need to emphasize their power through intimidation was a sign of their fear. This is the same fear George Orwell felt on a smaller scale. Orwell writes, I was not thinking particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behindA white man mustn't be frightened in front of the ' natives'; and so, in general, he isn't frightened (5).