

Shooting an elephant essay



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In the essay “ Shooting an Elephant”, Orwell tries to put across the dilemma of a white man in a position of power in the imperialistic Britain, who does not quite identify with the evils of imperialism.

This often leads him in to uncomfortable situations requiring him to take actions against his will. Although it might seem that this means carrying out British orders even when he does not agree with them, “ Shooting an Elephant” shows that it could also mean living up to the expectations placed on a white man by the locals, even though it may be against his conscious.

In the essay, Orwell realizes that he must shoot the elephant because as a representative of the British imperialism in the small town, not doing so would have shown the British Empire to be a foreign oppressor that could not be trusted to protect the locals when needed.

Orwell makes its very clear at the outset that even though he represented the British imperialism, he had already decided that “ imperialism was an evil thing” (para 2) and secretly sided with the Burmese in their fight against the British oppression.

So even though the Burmese saw him as an enemy and tried to harm him in inconspicuous ways, Orwell actually empathized with their cause. As such, his duties as police officer often meant that he had to carry out orders that at a personal level he found distasteful. It also meant that the locals, who had no way of knowing how he really felt, judged him based on the actions that he carried out as an instrument of the British rule.

According to Bertonneau, “ The “ British Empire” is never present in and of itself, because it is an abstraction, a system; it only appears through its agents” (para 3), the agent in this case being Orwell. As a result, Orwell realizes that he must always act in way that is expected of a white man, even though he may not personally agree with those actions.

This need to always behave in a way expected of him is not because of any pressure from the empire or his superiors but because as a representative of the British ruler, he must do everything he can to “ impress the ‘ natives’ and so in every crisis he has got to do what the ‘ natives’ expect of him” (para 7).

Killing the elephant was not only morally wrong since it was a source of income to its owner but even legally it bordered on the gray. Orwell was well aware of this even before he laid his eyes on the elephant. He never really intended to kill the elephant and when he borrowed the elephant rifle, it was more as an act of self defense than with any intention to shoot at the elephant.

Yet, once he had got the gun, the natives expected him to kill the elephant and protect them from the “ crazy” animal. As more and more natives gathered, the pressure to do what was expected of him and impress the natives grew, until Orwell was left with no other option but to shoot the elephant, against his better judgment.

Orwell’s actions show that even though as a person he may not want to kill the elephant, as a white man, “ he wears a mask” of the colonizer and hence must live up to the expectations placed on a white colonizer, that is, make

sure that “ his face grows to fit” the said mask. As a white man in the colony, he is by definition supposed to be superior to those he colonizes.

He cannot afford to show any kind of weakness which would in any way compromise his superiority over the colonized. As a result, even though he believes that imperialism is evil, he “ ultimately fails to see beyond the ‘ yellow faces’ of the Burmans” (Tyner 266).

His “ white mask” of the colonizer is juxtaposed against the “ yellow mask” of the colonized and the white man must always come across as the superior. If he had not killed the elephant, he would have come across as a weak person and become a laughing stock among the locals.

As Orwell mentions, their “ hideous laughter” and “ sneering yellow faces” (para 1) were getting on his nerves and he could not allow them to get another opportunity to laugh at him. By killing the elephant, he made sure that the superior white mask of the colonizer that he wore in his interactions with natives remained firmly in place.

Thus, Orwell contends that even though he was supposedly the free white man ruling the native Burmans, in reality he was not really free as he could not do what he really wanted to do but must always do what was expected of him as a representative of the British government.

The British Empire is just an abstract system but it is the actual people, whether the colonized or the colonizer, who must give up their freedom in order to live within this system. In killing the elephant, Orwell stopped being

a “ person” and become just an agent of the British Empire, thus losing his freedom as an individual.

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