

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



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In George Orwell’s short story, “ Shooting an Elephant,” the narrator, a young European sub-divisional police officer states, “ that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys.” This realization of British imperialism comes to him one day when he is pressured into shooting and killing a “ peacefully eating,” elephant. Orwell’s tone in this story is rather blunt and candid. The narrator is often speaking on how he doesn’t like the society he’s in. It seems like he’s angry yet uncertain about how he really feels in his community. The conflict here is that the white man that is supposed to be in charge realizes that he lives his life to impress the natives, which pretty much puts them in charge. As the reader analyzes this story, they will soon understand why the narrator says he doesn’t like imperialism. However, not because he is for the Burmese, but because he understands what imperialism really is.

For the reader to figure out how Orwell uses the tone of his narration to appeal to the reader, its important to examine how early on in the essay Orwell establishes a candid and blunt tone towards the Burmans, Natives, and the British based on imperialism. This is important to the reader because later on in the story he/she will begin to notice the contradiction of the statements being made. The narrator states how he doesn’t like imperialism and that he’s “ all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors.” Yet, when he first describes them, his description of them is rather negative. The narrator describes the way the Burmans “ got badly on my (his) nerves.”

From the jump he seems to be portraying the Burmans as “ little beasts who tried to make my (his) job impossible.”

The clearest illustration of the narrators attitude towards them is when he writes, “ I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive an bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts.” The narrators attitude towards the Burmans is important because he is trying to show readers that he only really dislikes imperialism because he lives his live to impress them. In “ Shooting an Elephant,” Orwell appears to be using the way he describes the mob of Burmans to show the reader that the Burmans have a huge impact on society simply because the white man is always trying to impress them.

Once the reader begins to understand how Orwell is using a blunt and candid tone towards the Burmans and imperialism, then one can begin to understand how he uses a conflicted portrayal of imperialism to highlight his ethical conflicts. To make his point about the issues with tyranny and oppression, he routinely calls attention to his dislike of the empire he served. If there is one passage that epitomizes his issue with tyranny is when he explains, “ when the white man turns tyrant it his his own freedom that he destroys.” Indicating that when the British became “ in control,” they really became “ under control.” He also states that the only reason they were in charge is because they had weapons that the Natives and Burmans didn’t have. The gun was “ the futility of the white man’s dominion in the East.” While, “ The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it.” Orwell’s conflicted attitude toward the narrators attitude towards the society he lives in this passage appears to be another example of Orwell

trying to show readers that he only does what he does because it's what " the natives expect of him."

One can get a sense of Orwell's conflicted attitude toward imperialism when he goes on to tell the reader that he doesn't want to look like a fool. The most telling line is when Orwell writes, " And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at." Orwell seems to be calling the readers attention to the fact that he simply only killed the elephant to " avoid looking like a fool." One begins to see a clear pattern to how Orwell s using commentary to call the readers attention to his ironic and uncertain view. While Orwell may be using uncertainty throughout the essay to show the reader the moral complexity of his situation, another significant illustration of Orwell's appeal to the reader is the frank tone he uses to portray the dead coolie. Orwell is explaining how the elephant was destroying homes and killed a native, one might notice how Orwell makes special note of disturbing imagery.

Although it may be subtle, one can see a definite sense of Orwell's attitude here when he writes, " He was lying on his belly with his arms crucified and head open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony." When describing the dead coolie he also says that he looks " devilish." The narrators attitude toward the coolie in this passage appears to be an example of Orwell trying to show the readers how we wouldn't feel bad. Since Orwell uses words like " devilish" and " unendurable agony" the reader would get more of a sense of disgust. Instead of the reader feeling bad for the dead coolie, the reader just thinks its disgusting. The reader

doesn't think " aww poor innocent man." That's exactly what Orwell wanted when he wrote.

Similarly, one can also get a sense of Orwell's sympathetic attitude towards the elephant when he goes to tell the reader that the elephant was " peacefully eating." Orwell writes, " But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with the preoccupied grandmotherly air.." In this case, Orwell is making it seem as if the elephant has done nothing wrong. And he already describes the elephant better than he described the Burmans and Natives. While he has called the innocent Burmans " little beasts," he compares the elephant that has killed a native and destroyed homes as being " grandmotherly." Which is very ironic since the Burmans and Natives are the one that hasn't done any harm. At this point the reader is worried more for the elephant than he/she was the dead coolie and the Burmans.

When the narrator has a crowd of eager natives behind him, all ready for him to kill the elephant, the reader is wondering what is about to happen. Once the narrator does shoot the elephant, Orwell's tone becomes very sympathetic towards the elephant. In this case, the reader can see that Orwell's attitude can be illustrated more when he writes, " You could see the agony of it (the bullet) jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs." He continues by writing, " Finally, I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be." With the portrayal of the elephant here, Orwell seems to be underscoring to the reader that people will feel more sympathetic towards the elephant than the human simple because he used a more sympathetic tone when describing <https://assignbuster.com/rhetorical-analysis-of-shooting-an-elephant-by-george-orwell-essay-sample/>

the elephant. This is exactly what Orwell wants the reader to feel. One can observe how Orwell is consistently challenging the reader to empathize with the moral issues that he is narrating throughout the essay by forcing the reader to confront the fact that the elephant was wrong and we should really be more sympathetic towards the coolie because he's human and was innocent, unlike the elephant.

In George Orwell's story "Shooting an Elephant," he writes, "a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes." In this case he is describing his own story. At first you would think that the narrator feels bad for the Burmese and Natives and he really doesn't like imperialism. But when you look deeper into the story the reader realizes that the only reason that he doesn't like imperialism is because he realizes that he lives to impress others.

Works Cited

Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant." *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*. New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2003. Blackboard. PDF file.