



ORWELL'S "SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT" AND THE DEMANDS OF EMPIRE

Literature

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KEYWORDS

In "Shooting an Elephant" George Orwell writes of his experience in British-ruled India in the early Twentieth Century. At the time, he was a young, inexperienced soldier stationed there to help protect the Queen's interests. While he was there, he had to do something that had made some ethical conflicts within him.. Orwell had to kill an elephant that had run rampant in lust throughout a village. In its wake it destroyed a truck, a hut, and a villager. The villagers were obviously upset about the ordeal and he was called upon to restore the order before anything, or anyone, was hurt. Throughout the course of the adventure, he decided that it was best to kill the animal. His reasons for doing so, however, were not as clear-cut. He said his ultimate decision was to not look bad in front of the villagers; and that gave him a degree of shame. Orwell was obviously in conflict within himself about his rationale, otherwise there would be none. What is to be seen is how he was justified in shooting the elephant, regardless of what ethical or moral agonies he had suffered. Orwell needed to show solidarity among the people as a man of authority. If he had not, the presence of the troops there would deteriorate to the point of total anarchy. The creature had also trampled a hut, killed a man, a cow, destroyed a fruit stand and ate the contents, and destroyed a government garbage van. These are very valid reasons to kill it, and ensure that it will never occur again with the animal in question, as well as maintain order within the village.

The first and best way to justify it is to look at the man killed in the elephant's sexual lust. In most countries when a man kills another, he or she is condemned to death or life imprisonment. Why should an animal face any different punishment? That man's family will never see him again, and the contributions he made to his family and community will be difficult to replace. The man killed had dreams and a life to live; it was taken away from him most tragically. His manner of death was not wholesome either. When the elephant crushed him underfoot, it had torn the skin off of his back and buried him into the soft mud, "The friction of the beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit." The villager probably just accidentally crossed the animal's path, but a male creature in lust is not a calm one. Try running into a male cat or dog in heat; it isn't pretty. Orwell really didn't have much of a choice after this. The elephant would more than likely kill again, since it now knows that it can kill a human easily. What if it had been a child? No, Orwell obviously made the correct choice here, even if the other ones were not as justified. Those poor villagers have absolutely no defense against this, and depend upon the British government to help them when it occurs, "The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it." What else could be done? Allow the elephant to destroy the entire sector?

Orwell had another reason to destroy the animal, and it was for the destruction of property. "It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow, and raided the fruit stalls and devoured the stock..." "It takes time and materials to rebuild things, and the damage caused in the elephant's wake most certainly will take time to recover from. The time and materials spent to do so could have gone to other things in the community. When it destroyed and devoured the fruit stands' contents, it deprived a livelihood from those vendors who were trying to earn a living there. When it destroyed the hut, a family is now left out in the cold to seek other shelter until it can be rebuilt. Aside from the civilian damage done, it wrecked a government trash vehicle, and decided to play with it, "...also, it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the van over and inflicted violence upon it." A smart move on the driver's part, but the damage was still done. Orwell argued over the intrinsic value of the elephant, as well as the value of the villager (hundreds of pounds in difference), but the van cost a bit more than both the villager and

animal combined. He was justified in killing the animal in sheer property damage alone.

The final justification for Orwell's decision is to keep a measure of order and respect within the community. The British presence there has to be kept where respect and discipline are always maintained. If not, the anarchy that would eventually ensue would make laws and codes harder to enforce. "The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly." With such vast odds against the troops there, if he showed the slightest weakness, the villagers would pounce upon him; everything would descend into chaos. At that precise moment, he realized that the British (Anglo-Saxon) rule there was utterly void and useless, "And it was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the east." What choice did he have then? No more than when the damage done by the elephant was done. In order to preserve the common good, he had to do something he did not want to. Orwell was justified legally and morally by the standards of the British government to do what he did. Killing the elephant not only helped restore and maintain the order there, it provided much needed meat to a starving population. There can be no wrong in that at all. He may have felt like he did the wrong thing in his own moral and ethical code, but he did what he must. What Orwell had to do, no matter how he felt personally. Even if he felt that he had to look good in front of people he considered inferior to himself. Preserve the peace, and make sure that order is prevailed. Not only is it his job as an officer, it is his duty as a human being. One could not ask for anything more.

George Orwell was "disgusted by the inhumanity of colonial rule that he witnessed while stationed in Burma". Using his writing to confess the inner conflict of an imperial police officer, he wrote an autobiographical essay titled Shooting an Elephant. He notes that the Burmese civilians were not allowed to own guns during his stay – a testament of British control over Burmese resources. Feeling "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" he knew that "the sooner he chucked up the job and got out of it the better". Orwell repressed his emotions because acting out as the only white man would have been foolish. If he betrayed his country, he risked treason. If he sided with the Burmese, he would never fit into their culture. Every white man's life long struggle in the East was to not be laughed at, so the safest choice for a man like George was to live without action. However, when a sexually aggressive elephant gets loose Orwell is called to take action.

Orwell responds to the call, taking his rifle, "an old 44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant" in hopes of frightening it with the noise. This elephant was not wild, but normally tame and broke loose due to sexual desire. This first action is just an exercise of authority in maintaining order; however, in seeing a dead native victim he requests an elephant rifle and five cartridges. This is when the Burmese become quite excited and an "immense crowd of two thousand" (2846 Longman Anthology) follow him. They believe that the imperial police officer is going to shoot the elephant when, in actuality, he just wanted to defend himself from becoming another devilish corpse.

This is where Orwell's insecurities get the best of him. He is "pushed to and fro by the will of these yellow faces behind". He knows, along with the Burmese, that his duty is to act as a British official in killing the elephant. He develops a strategy: he would "walk within twenty-five yards to test his behavior". If they elephant came at him, he would shoot. If not, he would reveal that the tame elephant no longer posed a

threat. Yet, his insecurities with a gun get the best of him and he discards a strategy that would have allowed him to remain neutral.

He shoots the elephant five times with the elephant gun, but it does not die. He calls for a normal rifle to finish the job, but it does not die. He leaves to avoid the dying, gasping elephant and later learns that it took another half hour for it to die. The Burmese get the meat that they wanted and Orwell learns that he is legally right for shooting the elephant. He is thankful for this because he often wondered "whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking like a fool" (2848 Longman Anthology). This is how the colonizer became colonized.

I believe that George Orwell's essay reflects what many of us go through today: the struggle to do what is morally right when an entire world sways us to conform. Orwell's dilemma is no different than one that we might face with a job that goes against the very grain of our moral virtue. We face these challenges all of the time. Some of us are born into situations that are not easy and we're forced to navigate through the chaos and disorder. In result, we may make bad decisions. In fact, the life of an imperial policeman would have been quite difficult. Orwell had the guts and candidness to confess his inner dilemmas and questions about the situation he lived out. It reminds us that we all face these conflicts everyday. The great Ralph Waldo Emerson knew this to be true when he declared: "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment."

George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" can be considered to be a text which still have give to the critics and readers. This essay is a brilliant example of rethinking a text from green perspective. It still keeps its post-colonial value, but the employment of a double-coded approach is all we need in today's ever-changing world of academia..

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