

SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT



Introduction

"**Shooting an Elephant**" is an essay by George Orwell, first published in the literary magazine *New Writing* in late 1936 and broadcast by the BBC Home Service on 12 October 1948.

The essay describes the experience of the English narrator, possibly Orwell himself, called upon to shoot an aggressive elephant while working as a police officer in Burma. Because the locals expect him to do the job, he does so against his better judgment, his anguish increased by the elephant's slow and painful death. The story is regarded as a metaphor for British imperialism, and for Orwell's view that "when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys."

Lines 1 and 2

Moulmein, in lower Burma, I was startled by large numbers of people — the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter.

- Moulmein: “Moulmein used to be full of elephants [employed to] haul logs in the timber firms. “Ordinary tamed elephants have been part of Burmese life for centuries,...the rare and revered white elephant believed in Buddhist legend to be a symbol of purity and power.” This was also seen in Moulmein.
- Sub divisional police officer: Orwell moved to Moulmein in 1926. He held the post of assistant superintendent in the British Indian Imperial Police in Burma from 1922 to 1927.
- Anti-European feeling: Burma was under the British rule from 1823 to 1948. it was part of the Indian Empire till 1937. anti-colonial feeling was strong in the country.

Colonial angst of the Burmese

no one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the jeering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

- Anti-European feeling had not reached a significantly high proportion. It limited itself to small, minor everyday incidents such as spitting betel juice over the dress, tripping an Englishman in the football field or jeering at them from a safe distance.

The Buddhist priests of Burma



Orwell's ambivalent attitude towards colonialism

...this was perplexing and unsettling. For at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better. Theoretically — and secretly, of course — I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British. As for the job I was doing, I hated it more bitterly than I can perhaps make clear.

- My attitude to imperialism was clear: it was an evil system. Here we find that Kipling's Imperialistic glory — the White Man's Burden — has worn thin.
- For me the British were the oppressors conquering by force and an independent race.
- I was full of sympathy for the Burmese cause.

British Police Officer



The job of the policeman

In a job like that you see the dirty work of Empire at close quarters. The wretched prisoners huddling in the stinking cages of the lock-ups, the grey, cowed faces of the long-term convicts, the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos — all these oppressed me with an intolerable sense of guilt.

- Since police is the arm that applies all the colonial policies by force, therefore the police knows the heartlessness of the system.

Orwell's Imperialistic Position

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- The English officers serving the crown were asked only forward the imperialistic interest. The perspective lay in the application of the Western humanism which existed only in the papers in the governance of the colonies.
- Utter silence: the British officers were encouraged to question their role in the colonies but were asked only to hold up as a shining example of exemplary duty done by the British for the upliftment of the masses
- The British officers had the feeling that they had been looting India. But they had to follow servile rules and serve the interest of their 'employer'.

Orwell vis-à-vis Imperialism [continued]

did not even know that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are going to supplant it. All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-tempered little beasts who had to make my job impossible.

- British empire is dying: Global events were making the maintenance of empire unprofitable.
- Younger empires: the reference is towards totalitarianism of the communist regimes.
- His attitude towards the job he did and ideology he had is antithetical. He did not like imperialism. He also did not like the sufferers of imperialism. Perhaps he is a racist as well.
- It is also evident that though he does not like what he does, he takes a lot of professional pride in doing what he does to the best of his ability.

Orwell vis-à-vis Imperialism [continued]

With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in *saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty.

- The Latin phrase in **saecula saeculorum** expresses the idea of eternity and is literally translated as "unto the ages of ages." The phrase is the Vulgate **translation** of the New Testament.
- Once again he talks about ambivalence.
- He says that imperialism produces this kind of contradictory feelings between the human being and the professional.

The story advances

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism — the real motives for which despotic governments act.

- Orwell admits that his action may have been a thumb-nail view of the entire situation he has been trapped in.

The sighting of the elephant

Early one morning the sub-
inspector at a police station the
other end of the town rang me up
on the phone and said that an
elephant was ravaging the bazaar.
Would I please come and do
something about it? I did not know
what I could do, but I wanted to
see what was happening and I got
on to a pony and started out. I
took my rifle, an old .44
Winchester and much too small to
kill an elephant, but I thought the
noise might be useful *in terrorem*.

- **Winchester rifle:** The Winchester rifle – the Winchester Model 1866 – was originally chambered for the rim fire Henry. Nicknamed the "Yellow Boy" because of its receiver of bronze/brass alloy called gunmetal.
- **In terrorem:** Latin for "into/abominable fear", is a legal threat, usually given in hope of compelling someone to act without resort to a lawsuit or criminal prosecution.

The story progresses

various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant's doings. It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone 'must'. It had been chained up, as tame elephants always are when their attack of 'must' is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours' journey away, and in the morning the elephant had suddenly reappeared in the town.



The ravages done by the elephant

The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It had already destroyed somebody's bamboo hut, killed a cow and trampled some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock; also it had trampled the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had overturned the van over and inflicted violence upon it.



The elephant is sighted

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palm leaf, winding all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains.



The elephant isn't immediately seen by Orwell

We began questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information. That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction, some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away.

- Once again Orwell takes a stand against the Indians.
- He complains that the Indians are never precise in their reporting.
- They are also not very aware of what is going on about them.
- Finally they lack common sense.
- All these factors combine to keep them longer in the yoke.

Elephant ... a killer.... Rogue elephant

ere was a loud, scandalized cry of 'Go away, child! Go away this instant!' and an old woman with a witch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, promptly shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I rounded the hut and saw a man's dead body sprawling in the mud. He was an Indian, a black Dravidian coolie, almost naked, and he could not have been dead any minutes. The people said that the elephant had come suddenly upon him round the corner of the hut, caught him with its trunk, put its foot on his back and ground him into the earth. This was the rainy season and the ground was soft, and his face had scored a trench a foot deep and a couple of yards long. He was lying on his belly with arms crucified and head sharply twisted to one side. His face was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of indurable agony.



Elephant Rifle

The friction of the great elephant's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit. As soon as I saw the dead man I sent an orderly to a friend's house nearby to borrow an elephant rifle. I had already sent back the pony, not wanting it to go mad with fright and throw me if it met the elephant.

- Elephant rifle: An **elephant gun** is a large caliber gun, rifled or smoothbore, originally developed for use by hunters hunting elephants and other animals. These guns were black powder muzzle loaders at first, but later used smokeless powder cartridges.

The will of the people

The orderly came back in a few minutes with a rifle and five cartridges, and meanwhile some Burmese had arrived and told us that the elephant was in the paddy fields below, only a few hundred yards away. As I started forward practically the whole population of the quarter packed out of the houses and followed me. They had seen the rifle and were all shouting excitedly that I was going to shoot the elephant.

- The officer is therefore in the vicinity of the elephant and is the focus point of a huge public spectacle.
- The big gun has raised their expectations and they were all expecting that the elephant would now be shot.

The crowd following the officer

They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot. It was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd; besides they wanted the meat. It made me vaguely uneasy. I had no intention of shooting the elephant — I had merely picked up the rifle to defend myself if necessary — and it is always unnerving to have a crowd following you.

- The ordinary Burmese did not see any spectacle in the elephant ravaging their homes. It was an everyday incident.
- But the shooting would add a variety never seen but only heard of.
- It would be an entertainment which man is so fond of.
- On top of this the local population were eaters of elephant meat. The killing would make available a huge quantity of meat.

Looking and feeling like a fool

marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels. At the bottom, when you got away from the pits, there was a metalled road and beyond that a miry waste of paddy fields a thousand yards across, not yet ploughed but soggy from the first rains and dotted with coarse grass. The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards me. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth.

- **looking and feeling a fool**: he does not like being the focal point of a public spectacle.
- He does not like to have his actions scrutinized under a public magnifying glass.
- He feels that he is no longer the master of his own independent will.
- The crowd following him makes the entire action a charade.
- He is a public servant and therefore doing his duty and is not engaging in any entertainment or heroic action.

The Attack of must

had halted on the road. As soon I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant — it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery — and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, peacefully waiting, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow.

- The economic value of the elephant.
- The elephant as an expensive cog in an imperialistic machine.
- The attack of must has passed away.
- The elephant has become tame again.

The elephant

thought then and I think now
at his attack of 'must' was
already passing off; in which case
e would merely wander
armlessly about until the
about came back and caught
m. Moreover, I did not in the
ast want to shoot him. I
ecided that I would watch him
r a little while to make sure
at he did not turn savage
gain, and then go home.



The will of the people

But at that moment I glanced
around at the crowd that had
followed me. It was an immense
crowd, two thousand at the least
and growing every minute. It
blocked the road for a long
distance on either side. I looked
at the sea of yellow faces above
the garish clothes-faces all happy
and excited over this bit of fun,
I was certain that the elephant was
going to be shot.

- A little while earlier Orwell decided not to shoot the elephant.
- But at this moment he thought of the 2000 strong following him.
- He thought what the people wanted – the expectation and the excitement.

The futile white man

They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have shot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. And it was at this moment, that I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the shallowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East.

- I was a hated man but at that moment for them I had become a magician with a magical rifle that would fulfil their wishes.
- This expectation of people determined for me my future actions and I lost my independence.
- I also realized that the white man was a master but only on paper. He was actually a slave of the people. It is the people who want him to do what they do. He just complies.

The hollow white man

ere was I, the white man with his
n, standing in front of the unarmed
tive crowd — seemingly the leading
tor of the piece; but in reality I was
ly an absurd puppet pushed to and
o by the will of those yellow faces
hind. I perceived in this moment
at when the white man turns tyrant
s his own freedom that he
stroys.

- It appears that I had the power – the power to please as well as to deprive.
- The crowd was seemingly at my mercy. Yet, it was the master. It decided for me my immediate actions.
- A tyrant does whatever he wants. All that the Englishman ever carries out are that of common masses.
- He destroys the freedom of acting independently. He only becomes a glass where the desires of the people get reflected.

The image of the sahib

He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his life that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the 'natives', and so every crisis he has got to do what the 'natives' expect of him. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant.

- Orwell feels that the white man, despite what he feels is only a mannequin. He is only an image – image of the all-powerful sahib, created by India and he has to play the role to perfection.
- In fact this is his primary duty in India – to be the sahib the Indians expect of him.
- This image or mask, as he calls it, becomes his identity. This is a group identity as well and no one dare violate it for the collective safety of the members of the group.

Orwell strengthening the pillars of imperialism

had committed myself to doing it when I sent for the rifle. A sahib has got to act like a sahib; he has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing — no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

- I played into the hands of the crowd by giving vent to my apprehensions about the elephant and sending for the big gun. Now the same gun has become a trap for me.
- I cannot just send for the gun and use it. That would make me appear dithering and hence a laughing stock.
- But I cannot make myself, for the sake of my race, a laughing stock.
- In case I did that the edifice stands on trust and fear of the master would crack.