

A Close Reading of Shooting an Elephant¹

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Abstract:

“Shooting an Elephant”, one of George Orwell's documentary autobiographical prose, describes his experience of shooting an elephant in Burma. This experience became a turning point in Orwell's life. Since then, having seen the nature of the colonial system, he resigned as a police officer, returned to Europe, and devoted himself to writing, and later became a "cold conscience" writer who spoke for the people at the bottom. Through the close reading of the text, this paper probes into the "theme", "symbol" and Orwell's contradictory psychology in the prose.

Key words: Orwellian colonialism symbol

1. Introduction

“Shooting an Elephant” “Hanging” and “Marrakech” are George Orwell’s documentary semi-biographical prose, revealing the evil of imperialism and colonialism, partly for which he is labelled as a writer with “the wintry conscience of the generation” by Jeffery Meyers. With detailed description and restrained emotional revelation, Orwell expresses his hatred of colonialism and sympathy for the colonized natives the present paper delves into “Shooting an Elephant”, with the focus on its theme, symbols, through a close reading, aiming at observing the dilemma of George Orwell.

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2. Three Theme

Through three Anglo-Burmese wars, Britain completed the annexation of Myanmar, incorporated it into the territory of British factor, and carried out Indian colonial rule in Burma.

Orwell begins by using the words "hate" and "strong" to express emotion, which not only skillfully attracts the attention of readers, but also reveals the two main themes of Burmese anti-imperialism and white alienation in the east. "...and in an aimless, pretty kind of way the anti-European feeling was very bitter" (Orwell, *Shooting an Elephant*, 18-19) the narrator said he himself, "as a police officer was an obvious target and was baited when it was safe to do so." (SAE, 19) then he gave three examples to illustrate his point: the Burmese spit betel nut juice on the clothes of European women, the Burmese tripped Orwell on the football field, and the young monks jeer at Europeans. The red betel nut juice, similar to the color of blood, symbolizes the suffering of the oppressed people in the colonies. The football episode suggests that the era of peace between the Burmese and the British, which was in stark contrast to the current situation. The mocking monks shows that the monks are also involved in the movement against imperialist oppression. These economic social and religious examples demonstrate that anti-European sentiments have spread to all sectors of Burmese society.

On the other hand, the anti-imperialism of the native inevitably leads to the isolation and alienation of Europeans. Isolation and alienation are the second theme of the article, which is of great significance in structure and morality. At the structural level, it connects the main characters and provides a fundamental mode for what Orwell is trying to convey. At the moral level, alienation can lead to death—partly physical, partly emotional. As to the human being, because of racial, religious, linguistic estrangement and mutual hostility, the white man was alienated from his Burmese subordinates, and the colonial people were alienated from their oppressors because of oppression.

The three Anglo-Burmese wars and their final annexation caused a large influx of Indians into Burma. During the British period, the contradiction between Indians and Burmese in Myanmar was first manifested in all areas of the economy, and then spread from the economic to the political and social fields. As a result, black Indians Delaware coolies was alienated from other Burmese, and the Burmese superiority over him also put him in an isolated position; When monks are involved in political disputes, they are alienated from the true nature of religion. In addition, in terms of the human-animal relationship, such a large animal as an elephant in the jungle, their habitat is taken by humans while they are required to whatever in an environment entirely different from their nature.

As a policeman Orwell, Orwell had deep sympathy for the oppressed Burmese people: "the wretched prisoner 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." (gave the face of the prisoner who had been locked up in a smelly cage for a long time." Scarred buttocks after being whipped with bamboo sticks—all this made me feel guilty and oppressed so much that I couldn't stand it. " (SAE, 19) As an oppressor, he felt humiliated and ashamed of his country, harboring an intention to help the Burmese, which, nevertheless, was bitterly confronted with the merciless reality of the hostility of the Burmese. Thus Orwell struggled in this contradiction between ideal and reality.

The third theme of this paper is the juxtaposition of superiority and inferiority. The following passage expresses Orwell's cynicism as an European:

“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. Here was I, the white man with his gun, standing in front of the unarmed native crowd--- seemingly the leading actor of the piece; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys. He becomes a sort of hollow, posing dummy, the conventionalized figure of a sahib. For it is the condition of his rule that he shall spend his life in trying to impress the “natives” and so in every crisis he has got to do what the “natives” expects of him. He wears a mask and his face grows to fit it. I had got to shoot the elephant. I 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.”(22)

This means that the oppressors think they are superior to the oppressed, but this is a paradox. These Europeans were forced to be sahib expected by the natives, thus losing their freedom of action-they could not do what they wanted, they had to act as the “natives” expected. “A white man mustn’t be frightened in front ‘native’.”(23) Here Orwell expresses his inner inferiority beneath his appearing strong political and military power as one of oppressors.

This paradox dominates the actions of all men who serve the colonial system, whose power is based on the oppression of the colonized people, who must be absolutely loyal to the colonial system as a whole. To flinch in the face of the "natives" means to lose the face of the British Empire, and to lose face is tantamount to a loss of power. No wonder an older official affirmed Orwell's behavior: because whites who had lived in the East for a long time realized that “My whole life, every white man’s life in the East, was one long struggle not be laughed at.”(22) Thus Orwell acted in accordance with convention and was legally the right choice, so Orwell had reason to appease his conscience-"I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.”(25)

The juxtaposition between superiority and inferiority is manifested by the opposition between whites and Asians, human beings and animals. The rivalry between Europeans and Burmese is both the main structure and an important point of view of this article. Europeans are “jeered at” by “natives”, the policeman "becomes an obvious target and baited.” In the face of the hostility of the “natives,” Orwell revealed his true sentiment: “I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts.”(19) in the case of the death of Dravidian coolies trampled to death by elephants is another paradox: man should be the master of domestication and control of elephants, but is trampled to death by elephants. Therefore, no matter whether it is the opposition of the White and the enslaved Burmese or that of the human beings and the animal, there is no need for the former to feel superior to the latter. This sense of superiority is false as it forces the oppressors to act according to the of the oppressed. In a word, in the final analysis, this is the evil of colonialism, which leads to the metamorphosis of society and the distortion of human nature.

3. Symbolic significance.

Orwell was always sympathetic and compassionate toward the elephant throughout the article. He saw himself in the elephant and realized that it looked like a symbol of his own alienation, however, he had to shoot it. In the process of shooting the elephant, he also symbolically destroyed himself. This group of "natives" awakens Orwell to the realization of his alienation. When he felt that "their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly." (22), he was forced to admit his timidity and inferiority and that of his fellow Europeans; But the vicious circle of oppressors also includes the natives: they become "tyrants" as, likewise, their eagerness to watch the elephant to die, and they lose the ability to think and make choices. As a result, in the carnival process of encouraging the police to shoot images, they symbolically ruined part of their livelihood.

"The Indian, a black Dravidian coolie" also adds to the paradox: his death was the reason why Orwell killed the elephant: "I was very glad that the coolie had been killed; it put me legally in the right and it gave me a sufficient pretext for shooting the elephant."(25) Humiliating the natives as worthless creatures is typical of the white's attitude towards Burmese. For instance, the younger men said "it was a damn shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coodie."(24-5) Indeed, the Indian can functionally divide the views of Europeans: on the one hand, the older generation is glad that the elephant has been shot, because it preserves the honor of whites; On the other hand, young people do not think it is necessary to shoot images for coolies. It is clear that the impact of the evil colonial system on human beings is enormous-an individual, as part of the autocratic system, the longer he stays in the colonial environment, the less power he has to make his own choices.

The elephant is also loaded with many symbolic meanings. First of all, it symbolized not only the oppressor, but also the oppressed. As an oppressor, it destroyed a bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock, turned over the rubbish van over and inflicted violence upon it. He also trampled to death the Dravidian coolies, leaving him "lying on his belly with arms crucified and to the ground with his hands open and his head twisted to one side". he became a tyrant, and it lost its freedom and life, which, as Orwell analyzed himself, in a sense, the death of the elephant symbolized the death of the imperial regime. As the Burmese scrambled to peel off the elephant's corpses, Orwell seemed to suggest that the vicious circle continued when the oppressed became oppressors: the threatening attitude of the natives described in the first paragraph has now become a practical action. In fact, the elephant acted as Orwell's agent, and its finality awakened Orwell to his destiny. The elephant is also a symbol of death: its terrible death symbolizes not only the decline of the empire, but also the end of the lives of many oppressed under autocratic regimes, as well as the loss of individual choice in a rigid system. The symbols of this series embody Orwell's superb creative ability of "merging political and artistic purposes into a whole".

In this article, the elephant also gives full play to its structural function: almost all violence is related to the elephant: the Dravidian coolies are trampled to death by the elephant, Orwell shoots the elephant, and the crowd shared the elephant meat. In the context of this article, violence is the product of imperialist system. In addition, rifles and betel juice are symbols of violence, rifles are symbols of

power as well, and ironically, it was "a beautiful German thing" (23) that eventually led to the painful death of the elephant. At first, Orwell faced a thorny problem: he had a rifle in his hand and the power to deal with both elephants and natives. He had power in his hands, however, he could not exercise the power conferred on him by the rifle at his own will. Instead, in accordance with the usual practice of whites, they were forced to shoot elephants dead as the natives had expected. The elephant's blood and red betel nut juice are both symbols of violence and of the suffering of the oppressed Burmese people.

4. Orwell's ambivalence

Orwell is the protagonist of the play. In the article, he summarizes his two characteristics-his ambivalence and inferiority complex. He is always in a dilemma between a sense of responsibility and a sense of personal identity. These ambivalence is revealed through his communication with the native and elephants. Orwell was born in Motihari in the northern Indian state of Bihar and was brought up to believe that British rule in India was justified. Before the age of twenty, he himself became a colonial civil servant. However, the tradition of inheritance also contains the seeds of self-destruction. He saw the Burmese people ravaged by the imperialists and expressed deep sympathy for their plight. He openly admitted that he was on the side of the Burmese: "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."(19) On the other hand, his "sympathy" for the Burmese is understandably not paid off, so his hatred for Burmese was aroused "All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible... Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism."(19)

In "*The Road to Wigan Wharf*," George Orwell also expressed the similar ambivalence at this time:

I was in the Indian Police five years, and by the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving with a bitterness which I probably cannot make clear. In the free air of England that kind of thing is not fully intelligible. In order to hate imperialism you have got to be part of it... The truth is that not modern man, in his heart of hearts, believes that it is right to invade a foreign country and hold the population down by force. Foreign oppression is a much more obvious, understandable evil than economic oppression.(*The Road to Wigan Pier*,134-135)

The episode of shooting the elephant plunged him into a dilemma. He realized that as a white man serving an imperial empire, he had lost his ability to make a decision, and that things had gone beyond his expectations. The story goes like this. When he received a request to deal with an frenzied elephant, he did not intend to kill the elephant, but to defend himself with a gun if necessary. Then Orwell depicted an absurd picture: "I 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 that moment, he almost realized that he had been sent to Burma serving the empire. The discovery of his conscience made him feel a dull pain in his heart. As soon as he saw the elephant he was certain that he should not shoot him "as it was a serious matter to shoot a working elephant---it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of

machinery.” (21) What’s more, the elephant was eating peacefully, like a kind old grandmother, looking no more dangerous than a cow. Orwell decided that he would watch him for a while and then go home. However, when he glanced around, the immense crowd of natives changed his mind. He knew he had to kill the elephant, as is expected by the audience. Upon the second thought, if he did not kill the elephant, he, as a man with the rifle, a man serving the empire, a white master, he would not be laughed at. If he should not shoot the elephant, he would lose honour, self-esteem, and the sense of responsibility that is necessary for a white master. As a member of the empire, serving the country was his unshakable responsibility and means of making a living. He should stand on the side of the British and fulfill his duty. To maintain the image of the empire and the image of white men. “A white man mustn’t be frightened in front of ‘natives’.”(23) “The people expected it of me and I had got to do it, I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly.”(22) thus, in order to preserve the so-called "self-esteem," face, "and" responsibility, "Orwell made the decision to shoot an elephant, just like any individual who allowed himself to become part of an autocratic system. Orwell lost his freedom of choice and became a “tyrant who destroyed his own freedom.”

Orwell depicted a grand scene for the death of the elephant with restrained emotion. The death not only satisfied the curiosity of the "natives" to watch the excitement, but also made Orwell recognize the bloodthirsty nature of imperialism: “the real motives for which despotic governments act” (19). The elephant gasp at the time of death like a bell ticking in his ears. It seemed to ring the death knell for the British Empire, indicating that guilt would linger with him for the rest of his life.

Conclusion

“Shooting an Elephant” is one of Orwell's most successful examples of "merging political and artistic purposes into a whole". Orwell, as a loyal policeman of the British Empire, whose duty is to confine the Burmese people firmly at the feet of white lords who came from Britain to steal Burma's wealth and enslave her people. Elephant made Orwell understand that he had to leave Burma, or he would become disillusioned and commit suicide in pain and disappointment, like Flory in the Burmese Years. He understood how a whip destroys the spirit of a man who holds it, so he must throw it away at once and expose lies with writing. His experience in Burma was crucial to his writing of 1984: he had to be part of the dark heart of the British Empire to show us the despair of Winston and O'Brien; Only when he became a Burmese policeman, Eric Blair, could he become the later writer George Orwell.

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