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Rhetorical Analysis of an Essay

“Shooting an Elephant”

By George Orwell

In “Shooting an Elephant”, writer George Orwell illustrates a life-changing incident that reflects more than just “shooting an elephant.” Orwell describes the scene of the killing of an elephant in Burma and articulates the sensations that he goes through during the short, but dramatic event. Rhetorically, Orwell uses various literary techniques to convey the emotion and situational irony of the whole scene, which ultimately leads to a satirical presentation of imperialism. Through the vivid descriptions of the spectating crowd and a direct appeal with the narrator’s pathos, Orwell succeeds in convincing the audience that imperialism not only has a negative impact on those being governed under the imperialists’ oppressive power, but also rots and degrades those exercising that power.

First and foremost, the most rhetorically influential element of this essay is the writer’s background. While George Orwell is a well-known English author and journalist, he is most famous for being a political satirist. Many will remember Orwell for being the genius behind works such as *1984* and *Animal Farm*. In those works, audiences can witness Orwell’s personal opinions on social and political orientations. As an avid opponent of social injustice, Orwell expresses his disapproval for societal oppressions and political corruption. Likewise, in “Shooting an Elephant,” readers detect Orwell’s subjective opinions on imperialism through the narrator’s display of pathos. Continuously throughout the essay, the narrator expresses feelings of fear, hatred, anxiety, doubt, and distress at the fact that he is in a position of mocked authority. The narrator’s agitation could not be any more certain as he states that “As for the job [he] was

doing, [he] hated it more bitterly than [he] can perhaps make clear” (Orwell, 1950). The audience becomes more aware of the narrator’s mental state and is drawn towards his pathos appeal as the essay continues. In addition, because this essay is a personal account, Orwell’s use of ethos is very prevalent to a further degree. Orwell’s description of an experience as a British policeman in a Moulmein, Burma reflects his emotions and opinions on imperialism.

Orwell also uses the technique of imagery to the strongest extent to further his argument. In the moment that the narrator looks back on the crowd of natives behind him, he depicts the people as a “sea of yellow faces”, hungry for action and excitement. The image of a rumbling sea, tossing and turning with excitement, creates a sense of power behind the façade of the once helpless natives. Indeed, during the course of the next few scenes, Orwell feels this power as an unyielding force pressuring him to shoot the elephant. As Orwell mulls over the critical decision, he comes upon the realization that the “white man” must display strength and authority when the people demand it. Ironically, Orwell juxtaposes the role of the ever-powerful “white man” against an “absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of [the] yellow faces...” Although, he the man with the “magical gun” is technically the one with the power, Orwell feels degraded and oppressed by the natives and their will. As a puppet, Orwell equates himself to the helpless figurine that moves at the whim of the puppeteer, or in this case, the natives. Orwell utilizes this comical paradox to express the disgusting irony of the “white man’s burden.”

At this point, George Orwell leads to the irony and hollow reality of imperialism. Orwell compares himself to the “conventionalized figure of a sahib” and shows how the greed of a nation does not impose oppression on only the imperialized people, but also on the oppressors themselves. The comparison to the sahib, a term used to name aristocratic Indian rulers or lords, describes how Orwell feels that he is merely the image of a hollow ruler, standing for the symbol

of false authority and nothing more. In the end, Orwell caves in to the unrelenting pressure of the natives and the imposing responsibility of upholding the white man's honor, and he decides to shoot the elephant. What proceeds is a gut-wrenching description of the pitiful creature writhing in pain.

“He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down...His mouth was wide open — I could see far down into caverns of pale pink throat. I waited a long time for him to die, but his breathing did not weaken. Finally I fired my two remaining shots into the spot where I thought his heart must be. The thick blood welled out of him like red velvet, but still he did not die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him, the tortured breathing continued without a pause. He was dying, very slowly and in great agony, but in some world remote from me where not even a bullet could damage him further. I felt that I had got to put an end to that dreadful noise. It seemed dreadful to see the great beast Lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him. I sent back for my small rifle and poured shot after shot into his heart and down his throat. They seemed to make no impression. The tortured gasps continued as steadily as the ticking of a clock. (Orwell)”

The description of the dying elephant is no accident. In imprinting his argument into the minds of audience, Orwell imprints the violent image of the dying elephant. Emphasizing the pitiful, sad, and perhaps even disgusting reality of the situation, Orwell chooses to describe the elephant with words like “thick blood,” “tortured breathing,” and “great agony.” The audience is then forced to associate such gruesome images to the tragedies of imperialism. The vivid description may also allude to the process of one country killing another. The audience receives this image of a British policeman shooting down a poor beast. Such an image could be comparable to Britain's imperialistic destruction of its colonies. The descriptions of the elephant's tortured gasps seem to reflect the tortured groans of the imperialized countries who are struggling to break free of Britain's painful grasp. Through such use of imagery, Orwell is able to plant a powerful political message in the minds of the audience.

As he ends his narration, Orwell says his whole life, and every white man's life in the East, was "one long struggle not to be laughed at" (Orwell). His humiliation and sense of defeat are conveyed through his compelling words. He shows the audience that through this incident, he receives a "better glimpse than [he] had had before of the real nature of imperialism — the real motives for which despotic governments act" (Orwell). The whole essay, with its appeals of ethos and pathos, uses of imagery, and satirical techniques, boils down to the irony between the outward and inward appearances of a British authority figure in Burma, or any other state within the British sphere of influence. This irony shows how imperialism ruins everyone involved—starting from the inner core.

Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant." Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays. London: Secker and Warburg, 1950.