

Through the Eyes of an Elephant

by Taylor Finn

The elephant is in the room, an appropriate idiom for explaining that an obvious and difficult issue is at hand, but yet avoids being discussed. The avoidance acts as an unspoken rule, one that is there to keep away controversy, and to maintain a small level of comfort in an uncomfortable situation. George Orwell's short story "Shooting an Elephant" uses this example as a central theme while attempting to explain the sacrifices that take place when personal integrity is tested. The elephant of Orwell's story acts as a focal point symbolizing multiple points of interest that include the narrator's internal struggle, British imperialism in relationship to the Burmese natives, and to some account, human impact on the natural world. Which of these hold the most tangible impact on readers today? Each point is neither more exclusive nor more meaningful than the other, but should be considered for its symbolism and interdependence created from the decisions people make.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator clearly feels out of place with his position as a British police officer amongst the natives in Moulmein, Burma. Unable to find where he belongs he starts to create a contradictory and abstract state of mind. Orwell explains how he thought imperialism to be "evil" while still sticking to the job he hated; but secretly, he sides with the oppressed Burmese yet he desires to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest (620). This early on in the story it is safe to say that the narrator is filled with chaos inside. The internal struggle he suffers foreshadows that he will be faced with a tough decision. When he realizes he did not

want to shoot the previously unstable elephant, the situation comes into the light. Orwell claims he went against his own will “solely to avoid looking a fool” (625). Being stuck in the middle of two undesirable places can make a person sacrifice his or her own integrity in order to avoid humiliation. The narrator knew he was about to kick his job and get out of the situation. He didn’t want to make matters any worse for himself by standing up for what was right at the cost of creating unnecessary discomfort for himself. The elephant’s rampage acts as a symbol for the inner madness the narrator was suffering from. Along with the elephant’s slow and painful death, the narrator’s sense of morals seems to die as well.

Following the point of view that the elephant reflects the narrator’s state of mind, the animal also shows a double-edged relationship between the British and the Burmese. After catching up with the creature, Orwell says “It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant-it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery” (622). This implication shows how the elephant represents the Burmese people. Under British rule, the Burmese were the working elephant. The natives had to be maintained and kept in good working order in order to produce for the British, however they wouldn’t be worth anything if they couldn’t work. On the other hand, it can also be noted how the elephant is also a representation of the British to the Burmese. At the moment of the coolie’s death, “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” (Orwell 621). In this context the elephant is the British Empire while the Indian who died represents the native people. The Burmese were suffering under the British tyranny that invited itself to their native land. The elephant’s drawn-out death

that became very anticipated by the Burmese, exemplifies a symbol to the end of the oppressing imperialists. History parallels the event as the Indian revolution soon came and the native people freed themselves from British colonialism.

Whether Orwell intended for the symbolism in his story to carry meaningful messages further into the future cannot be determined. If it was his intention or not, it is clear that the words written in "Shooting an Elephant" still live on today. After analyzing the elephant's purpose in the story, couldn't it be said that the elephant represents itself as a living organism to the natural world? As Orwell pondered whether the elephant was still a threat, he claimed it would be homicidal to kill the creature while it ate, content in its "grandmotherly" aura (623). Here a creature regarded highly on the chain of life becomes a helpless victim to man's protective ego. A consequence like this is an example being acknowledged more presently as people become aware of the destructive powers shared as an individual and as a society. Not only were the Burmese unable to defend themselves against the elephant, but the elephant's "must" was a normal-expected occurrence, and yet the natives were ready to reap the animal before it had even died (Orwell 625). Without the conflicting quest for control and power by British imperialism, the elephant's rampage may have been seen as a natural phenomenon so the elephant may have never been put down. Instead, a counterproductive scenario is created where the people who won't kill an animal, sign up to eat meat. Orwell's story creates an undesirable cycle of events. In the end, these events are still symbolic, and can be understood in new ways as they are caused by disregarding the sense of right and wrong in order to fit in.

In conclusion, the symbols the elephant stands for include many different ways of interpreting events that take place in the story as well in present day. It is a work of art when writing can be comprehended, remaining to some degree “alive,” years after it is written. Orwell accomplished this by choosing a subject such as an elephant to represent multiple forms of conflict that often appear to be cyclic. These conflicts continue to take on new faces and are often avoided by people in order to keep a level of comfort in an uncomfortable situation. Issues of this resemblance often rely on each other and when a person doesn’t value his or her integrity, nothing changes. The elephant can be seen as the ego within a mind, the destructive power of a certain civilization, or an icon in nature that stands at the end of a rifle barrel simply for being there. By pointing out how complicated it is for a person to do the right thing against a mass, Orwell exposes a fundamental principle for future readers to understand.

Work Cited

Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant" The Bedford Reader. Ed. X.J. Kennedy et al. Boston:
Bedford/St. Martin's, 2014. 619-625. Print.

April 18, 2016