

██████████
A-ENGL 2300.01: Essay 3

February 27, 2011

Orwell's 1984 and the "Elephant" In the Room

Before Eric Blair (using the pseudonym "George Orwell") wrote the novel 1984, he served in Burma as an officer in the Indian Imperial Police, the law enforcement arm of the English government (Orwell, "Elephant" 209). Orwell's experiences during his service considerably influenced his writing; his 1934 novel Burmese Days is obviously derived from these experiences. It is less obvious how Orwell's experiences in Burma influenced 1984, but a careful study of three of the major conflicts in the short work "Shooting an Elephant" shows some of the roots of 1984. The conflicts of man versus himself, man versus government, and man versus other man present in "Shooting an Elephant" can be seen as early attempts by Orwell to address themes and ideas that have parallels in 1984.

The first major conflict in "Shooting an Elephant" is man versus himself, or man versus his own base nature. The protagonist of the story wants to do the "right" thing. He wants to treat the natives with kindness, as if they were neighbors in his hometown in England, and secretly sympathizes with them (Orwell, "Elephant" 209). However, the more time the protagonist spends around the natives, the more he has to struggle to treat them with fairness, and the less he comes to like and care for them. The natives openly insult the protagonist, and take every possible opportunity they can to abuse him (Orwell, "Elephant" 209). And the protagonist responds to this treatment; at various points, the protagonist refers to his "rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job miserable" (Orwell, "Elephant" 210) and states

“...I thought the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts” (Orwell “Elephant” 209). Orwell himself is known to have struggled with the contradiction between his desire to treat the natives fairly and his hatred of them; Christopher Hitchens suggests that Orwell ultimately resigned his position because of these feelings (Hitchens 16).

How is the man versus himself conflict paralleled in 1984? One example is the protagonist Winston Smith’s childhood recollection of selfishly eating all of his family’s chocolate ration (Orwell, 1984 162-163). A second is Smith and his lover Julia’s dialog with the supposed traitor O’Brien, in which both profess their willingness to kill, commit treason, and even “throw sulphuric acid in a child’s face” in order to bring down Big Brother (Orwell, 1984 167-179). Both are willing to commit horrifying, vile acts; not in the service of a higher cause, but simply so they can be together as lovers. Perhaps the most obvious example is the scene in Room 101, when Winston Smith is about to be tortured with the thing he fears most in the world, rats. This is the point where Smith breaks, and his base nature, his desire for self-preservation, triumphs over honor, love and everything else. This is the point where Smith says “Do it to Julia! Not me! Julia!” (Orwell, 1984 282-287).

There are also parallels between Smith’s relationship with the “proles” in 1984 and the protagonist’s relationship with the “natives” in “Shooting an Elephant”. Smith views the “proles” as a symbol of hope (Orwell, 1984 69) at first, and even goes “slumming” with them in an effort to find out the “truth” instead of the history he learned in school (Orwell, 1984 81-93). At the same time, Smith views the “proles” as dirty, uneducated, and beastly; “it was when you looked at the human beings passing you on the pavement that [hope] became an act of faith” (Orwell, 1984 86).

Similarly, the protagonist of “Shooting an Elephant” is “all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors” (Orwell, “Elephant” 210). At the same time, he is enraged by the actual people he has to deal with, the “wretched prisoners” (Orwell, “Elephant” 209), the young men who seem to have nothing to do except “jeer at Europeans” (Orwell, “Elephant” 209), and the “yellow faces” that impose their will upon him and force him into the position of having to kill the elephant (Orwell, “Elephant” 212). Much like Smith views the “proles”, the protagonist of “Shooting an Elephant” views the natives as a “largely undifferentiated, depersonalized, mass” (Marks).

Another man versus himself conflict present in both “Shooting an Elephant” and 1984 is incompetence. The protagonist in “Shooting an Elephant” has been give the job of executing an elephant that has gone rogue, damaged property, and killed a man. Elephants are quite difficult to kill; they have a relatively small brain, surrounded by a thick skull (Capstick 78) while the heart and the arteries around it tend to seal themselves after all but a large caliber bullet strike (Capstick 140). The protagonist of “Shooting an Elephant” sets out with a gun he knows is not powerful enough to kill an elephant (Orwell, “Elephant” 210), has to borrow a rifle with only five rounds of ammunition when he does find the elephant (Orwell, “Elephant” 211), and ends up botching the job. D.H. Stewart points out that an unspoken but implied part of the protagonist’s discomfort “is the wave of guilt that comes with bad shooting, the sense of inflicting pain through incompetence” (Stewart).

Similarly, Winston Smith’s discomfort with the Party in 1984 has roots in incompetence. Smith views his co-worker Parsons as a “man of paralyzing stupidity” (Orwell, 1984 24), common consumer goods like saucepans as “wretched, flimsy things” (Orwell, 1984 70), and reality in general as “decaying, dingy cities, where underfed people shuffled to and fro in leaky

shoes, in patched-up nineteenth-century houses that smelt always of cabbage and bad lavatories” (Orwell, 1984 74). Smith’s frustration with the incompetence he sees around him, Orwell seems to say, is a major contributing factor to his eventual disillusionment with the Party; likewise, the incompetence of the protagonist in “Shooting an Elephant” is a major contributing factor to his disillusionment with the empire.

The second major conflict is man versus government. This conflict is well known as the major theme of 1984; the plot of the book involves Smith’s disenchantment with and attempted rebellion against what he perceives as an oppressive government, followed by his capture, “re-education” by that government, and finally acceptance of his position. The conflict against an oppressive state is also a major theme of “Shooting an Elephant”. The protagonist himself states that the incident “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, “Elephant” 210). The protagonist realizes that his shooting of an elephant is not really necessary. While the elephant may have destroyed property, and even killed someone, by the time the protagonist finds the elephant it has calmed down and could perhaps have been brought under control. The person who was killed is just “a damn Coringhee coolie” who is not worth as much as the elephant (Orwell, “Elephant” 214). Further, killing the elephant deprives the owner of both a valuable piece of property and his way of making a living (Orwell, “Elephant” 212). But the protagonist has to kill the elephant because he is expected to by the people; because that is his role as a representative of imperialism, and because if he doesn’t people will laugh at him (Orwell, “Elephant” 212).

It is through having to shoot the elephant that Orwell’s protagonist comes to his realization about the nature of imperialism. As he puts it, “it is the condition of his rule that shall spend his

life in trying to ‘impress’ the ‘natives’, and so in every crisis he has got to do what the ‘natives’ expect of him” (Orwell, “Elephant” 212). Orwell’s protagonist feels that this expectation removes the autonomy of the ruler, since he is always expected to do the expected thing, and that this expectation is itself a form of tyranny imposed upon the ruler. To quote Orwell again, “when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” (Orwell, “Elephant” 212).

In “Shooting an Elephant”, there are multiple conflicts of man versus other man. The very first sentence of “Shooting an Elephant”, where the protagonist refers to being hated “by large numbers of people” establishes man versus man conflict immediately (Orwell, “Elephant” 209). As mentioned earlier, the natives abused the protagonist and other representatives of the English government whenever they could get away with doing so. Additionally, the very nature of the protagonist’s position leads to man versus man conflict. As a police officer, he is responsible for enforcing the laws and arresting those who break them; in other words, a classic cop versus criminal conflict. This conflict is given even more significance by the fact that many of the laws the protagonist had to enforce were written more to protect British interests than for the good of the “natives”, at least in Orwell’s opinion (Hitchens 17).

The literal elephant in the story is obviously a natural object. But in the context of “Shooting an Elephant”, the conflict between the protagonist and the elephant can also be viewed as a symbolic man versus man conflict. The elephant is assigned human qualities; the protagonist states at one point “it seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him” (Orwell, “Elephant” 212), and refers to the elephant as “old” and “senile” after the first shot is fired (Orwell, “Elephant” 213). The destruction caused by the elephant is treated as a criminal act, requiring the “execution” of the elephant as if it were a human being, instead of as an accident. Thomas Bertonneau further points out that the elephant is historically seen as smarter than the average

animal; also, as a “working animal”, the elephant is assigned more value than a domestic pet (Bertonneau). All of these factors lead to the elephant in “Shooting an Elephant” becoming somewhat anthropomorphized (Bertonneau), setting up the man versus man (or “man”) conflict.

In 1984 there are also multiple man versus man conflicts. The story itself is set against the backdrop of various ongoing wars resulting in such atrocities as the bombing of refugees (Orwell, 1984 8). Smith’s clearly hates his neighbor Parsons, and his neighbor’s children; that hatred is extended to all children, who Smith believes are “horrible”, and “turned into ungovernable little savages” (Orwell, 1984 21-24). The most explicit man versus man conflict takes place in the third section of 1984, after Smith and Julia are arrested. Smith and O’Brien (who turns out not to be a traitor, but part of the “Thought Police”) engage in a battle of wills ending in Smith’s being systematically broken apart and then re-integrated into society (Orwell, 1984 239-287).

The conflicts of man versus himself, man versus man, man versus nature, and man versus government are classic conflicts that occur throughout almost all literature. The handling of these conflicts reveals a great deal about the writer. Orwell’s handling of these conflicts, first in “Shooting an Elephant” and then in 1984, demonstrate his development as a writer. These conflicts also show how the early events of his life, shown in “Shooting an Elephant”, influenced the development of similar themes and ideas in both “Shooting an Elephant” and 1984.

Works Cited

- Bertonneau, Thomas. "An overview of "Shooting an Elephant"." Short Stories for Students.
 Detroit: Gale, 2002. Literature Resource Center. Web. 27 Feb. 2011.
- Capstick, Peter Hathaway. The Last Ivory Hunter. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988. Print.
- Hitchens, Christopher. Why Orwell Matters. New York: Basic Books, 2002. Print.
- Marks, Peter. "The Ideological Eye-witness: An Examination of the Eye-witness in Two Works."
Subjectivity and Literature from the Romantics to the Present Day. Ed. Philip Shaw and
 Peter Stockwell. Pinter Publishers, 1991. 85-92. Rpt. in Short Stories for Students. Ed.
 Kathleen Wilson and Marie Lazzari. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. Literature Resource
 Center. Web. 27 Feb. 2011.
- Orwell, George. 1984. New York: Signet Classics, 1950. Print.
- . "Shooting an Elephant." Introduction to Literary Studies. Ed. Tim Green. New York:
 McGraw-Hill, 2010. 209-14. Print.
- Stewart, D. H. "Shooting Elephants Right." The Southern Review 22 (Winter 1986): 86-92. Rpt.
 in Short Stories for Students. Ed. Kathleen Wilson and Marie Lazzari. Vol. 4. Detroit:
 Gale, 1998. Literature Resource Center. Web. 27 Feb. 2011.