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Achieving Purpose with Irony, Metaphor, and Symbol in “Shooting an Elephant”

“Shooting an Elephant,” deemed one of George Orwell’s most influential essays, focuses on an experience during his time as a police officer in colonial Burma. Orwell’s overall purpose in this essay is to provide an imaginative metaphor for British Imperialism, one that dispenses his critical perspective on Britain’s expansionist policy. He achieves this purpose through the deft use of irony, metaphor, and by establishing the elephant as a powerful dual symbol of the narrator’s conscience and British Imperialism in Burma.

Irony

Irony, first, is an important strategy in achieving purpose in Orwell’s essay. The narrator begins by introducing himself as one who “was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in [his] life [he was] important enough for this to happen” (Orwell n.p.). One would think that rising to importance would bring with it likability, but just the opposite occurs for Orwell as an officer in colonial Burma. He is despised by those in his jurisdiction, with the Burmese taking delight in making a mockery of everything he stands for as an Englishman by tripping him on the football field and insulting him. It is a further irony that the narrator passionately despises the imperialistic society that he represents, and which stands between him and the Burmese natives. He reflects:

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. 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. (Orwell n.p.)

Orwell successfully shows, through this ironic relationship, how imperialism mounts an impassable barrier between the officer and the Burmese people. Although the officer hates the system that he represents, he is incapable of doing anything other than just that—representing it. He describes himself as uneducated, young, and naïve where the affairs of the world are concerned. The Burmese are equally as oppressed, albeit in a different way. It would never occur to them that one of the despised British might actually be sympathetic to their plight, and that they might find humanity and even friendship in such a relationship.

A further irony Orwell identifies is during the narrator’s shooting of the elephant. The realization comes upon him suddenly that for all the British dominion in the East, they are nothing more than puppets whose strings are pulled by the very ones they supposedly rule over. “…in reality I was . . . pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind. I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys…” (Orwell n.p.).

Metaphor

Metaphor is another critical means through which Orwell achieves his purpose in “Shooting an Elephant.” In revisiting the scene in which the officer shoots the elephant, there are several key metaphors present, which, taken together, present one overarching metaphor. He is “seemingly the leading actor,” “an absurd puppet” wearing a “mask,” and a stereotyped figure (Orwell n.p.). He is a “conjurer” preparing to perform a trick, and a “posing dummy” (Orwell n.p.). Taken individually, it is obvious that the narrator thinks of himself as an actor playing a part, and not an individual with a separate and distinct will. Together, they create the overarching metaphor of a theater performance. The officer gives the impression that he is on the outside, looking in, and not wholly responsible for his actions. He is bound by the dictates of an imperialist regime, as well as those two thousand people nipping at his heels, marching him inexorably toward the elephant that they intend for him to shoot. He is nothing more than a conventional sahib, and must act accordingly as such. With this metaphor, Orwell achieves his purpose of showing the negatives of imperialism.

Symbolism

The next strategy Orwell uses to achieve his purpose is symbol. The elephant, alternately rampaging and quietly, contentedly eating in a field removed, is a potent symbol of both the narrator’s conscience and British Imperialism. The narrator knows, first, as soon as he finds the elephant eating placidly in the field and for all intents and purposes over his “must” that he should not shoot him. The fact that he does so anyway gives insight into not just his own conscience, but also “the real nature of imperialism . . . [and] the real motives for which despotic governments act” (Orwell n.p.). He shoots the elephant not because he has to, or even because he desires to, but because the natives expect it of him, and he is bound to their will. To do otherwise, with two thousand faces staring eagerly and intently at his every move, would result in him looking like a fool (Orwell n.p.). Therein, he realizes, lies the crux of why governments act the way they do. It is expected of them. To do otherwise would make them appear weak, and foolish.

With this understanding in mind, the officer shoots the elephant, a dizzying number of times in a futile effort to put the beast out of its misery and help it die. The elephant will not die; like British Imperialism, it is “powerless to move and yet powerless to die” (Orwell n.p.). In this scene, conscience and imperialism are knotted firmly together. The narrator cannot stand to witness the elephant’s suffering, especially knowing that he is responsible for it, and leaves before the creature breathes its last. His guilt hangs heavy on him, and yet he knows that he had no real choice in the decision. As an officer representing the British government, he had to be conscious of the weight of that representation he carried continually around with him. To allow the elephant to live would be to allow the Burmese natives to mock the British government. For one in his position, this was an untenable option.

The reader witnesses another twinge of the officer’s conscience when he comes upon the body of the man killed by the elephant. He describes the man as having been “crucified,” with the elephant having come suddenly upon him, caught hold of him with its trunk, placed its foot on his back, and ground him into the soil. His expression is one of “unendurable agony” (Orwell n.p.). While the vocabulary used to describe the man clearly evokes the officer’s state of mind, the comparison between the elephant and British Imperialism and the man and Burma are undeniable, as well. Just as Britain has firmly planted a foot on Burma, the elephant did the same with the Burmese man.

Ironically, the officer seems able to be slightly more removed from the plight of the man killed by the elephant than he is later, by the plight of the elephant killed by the man. This is likely because it is not until later, when he faces the elephant with the gun and the Burmese natives at his back, with their will breathing life into his own will, that he becomes conscious of his own burden and motives. With these symbolic comparisons, Orwell achieves his purpose of expressing his distaste for the imperialist form of government.

Conclusion

It is clear through his recounting of “Shooting an Elephant” that Orwell had little fondness for the imperialist form of government, even if he did serve as a police officer in Colonial Burma. According to Orwell’s essay, he saw imperialism as a policy that ultimately enslaved its own proponents, in the sense that they held themselves hostage to the expectations of those they colonized. Orwell succeeded in communicating this idea through the clever use of irony, metaphor and symbol, both of the narrator’s conscience and of British Imperialism in Burma.