**Glossary of Terms & Background** – ‘Shooting an Elephant’ by George Orwell

**About Orwell – 1903 - 1950**

Orwell described himself as a Democratic Socialist. He had far reaching left wing views, but despised Communism. He also contested the place of Imperialism in the modern world. He was very concerned with the plight of the working man and those in the lower tiers of society. These personal viewpoints are apparent in much of Orwell’s work.

After three wars between the British and the Burmese (1824-1826, 1852-1853, 1885-1886), Burma became a British colony.

‘Shooting an Elephant’ was written in 1936. Burma, the Republic of Myanmar as it is now known, finally gained its independence in 1948. So the essay was written in the final period of the British rule in Burma.

**Understanding Imperialism**

Imperialism is a complicated concept but a good definition of imperialism is “A policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonisation, use of military force, or other means.” So a country might seek to increase its power by colonising other areas — there could be a huge number of reasons for this — but usually the reason is tied to a resource the country has (e.g. gold, oil etc…) or its location in the world (from a military standpoint this can be important, or in terms of free passage of people and/or goods from one area to another.)

In the case of the British Empire it was a huge Imperial power in the world and they annexed Burma as a colony. Britain already had India, or British India, as a colony and so they made Burma a province of India. The British controlled Burma through direct rule — taking government level decisions — and made changes like abolishing the monarchy and sending the King into exile; and separating church and state in order to diminish the influence of Buddhist monks; to deal with troublesome important village leaders (who may have been resistant to British policies/ideals, there was resistance to British rule until 1890) they burned villages, uprooted families and replaced troublesome citizens with people they approved of.

To help your understanding, it’s worth remembering that parts of North America were British colonies and Britain’s influence can still be recognised today in place names ‘New York’, ‘New Hampshire’ and so on, plus the main language spoken in America is English. The influence of British Imperialism is one reason English is so widely spoken across the world.

**Key Facts**

- Imperialism involves controlling/influencing another country to some extent
- The colonising nation was almost invariably white and European
- Usually the nation being colonised was not ‘white’ and were viewed, by some, as lesser people or more primitive people
- Arguably, the colonising nation was looking after their own interests and ‘exploiting’ the resources and people of the colony
- Britain was a hugely influential power with many colonies around the world
- Usually white Europeans would be installed in the colonies in positions of authority to rule and control the native people or people who were able to be influenced and controlled by the ruling nation would be supported into power
- By taking advantage of the natural resources of the country it usually led the country to be poorer that its wealth of resources would suggest it had the potential to be — the wealth of the country was also not wholly reinvested in the country itself and this often led to poverty and poor infrastructure
- White Europeans by being elevated to positions of authority were often viewed as better — they are privileged so they deserve to be privileged — this also led colonised nations to have very hierarchical societal structures
Glossary

**Coolie** - A coolie, during the 19th and early 20th century, was a term for an unskilled labourer, mainly from the Indian subcontinent or Southern China. Today, it is also a racial slur for certain people from Asia, particularly in South Africa.

**Betel** - An Asian piperaceous climbing plant, *Piper betle*, the leaves of which are chewed, with the betel nut, by the peoples of SE Asia.

**Bogged** – Flogged or beaten.

**British Raj** – Raj means rule in Hindi

**Burman** – Largest native ethnic group in Burma

**Sahib** – Arabic word meaning “Holder, master or holder” AND a term of address for a European man in colonial India

**Shooting an Elephant by George Orwell**

In Moulmein, in Lower Burma, I was hated by large numbers of people—the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me. I was sub-divisional police officer of the town, and in an aimless, petty kind of way anti-European feeling was very bitter. No one had the guts to raise a riot, but if a European woman went through the bazaars alone somebody would probably spit betel juice over her dress. As a police officer I was an obvious target and was baited whenever it seemed safe to do so. When a nimble Burman tripped me up on the football field and the referee (another Burman) looked the other way, the crowd yelled with hideous laughter. This happened more than once. In the end the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere, the insults hooted after me when I was at a safe distance, got badly on my nerves. The young Buddhist priests were the worst of all. There were several thousands of them in the town and none of them seemed to have anything to do except stand on street corners and jeer at Europeans.

All this was perplexing and upsetting. 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. 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. But I could get nothing into perspective. I was young and ill-educated and I had had to think out my problems in the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East. I did not even know

*Comment [a1]:* His situation exemplifies the British in colonies—outnumbered, hated but the white British are in charge.

*Comment [a2]:* Made important simply by being white and therefore placed in an authoritative role.

*Comment [a3]:* The people are being effectively oppressed. Unhappy but their respect/fear of the white people in charge keeps them in check.

*Comment [a4]:* Petty small rebellion, symbolising the patches of resistance which is not concerted or focused enough to unseat the British.

*Comment [a5]:* Word choice here emphasises that he is very sure of his opinion and is not going to change it.

*Comment [a6]:* Indicates clearly that he is about to discuss the visible effects of Imperialism.

*Comment [a7]:* Those who are against the empire, treated harshly. Probably as an example.

*Comment [a8]:* Extremely harsh punishment. Could the scarring represent the damage being done to Burma?
that the British Empire is dying, still less did I know that it is a great deal better than the younger empires that are
going to supplant it. 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. With one part of my mind I thought of
the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, in saecula saeculorum upon the will of
prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into
a Buddhist priest’s guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism ask any Anglo-Indian
official, if you can catch him off duty.

One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening. It was a tiny incident in itself, but it
gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism — the real motives for which
despotic governments act. Early one morning the sub-inspector at a police station the other end of the town rang
me up on the phone and said that an elephant was ravaging the bazaar. Would I please come and do something
about it? I did not know what I could do, but I wanted to see what was happening and I got on to a pony and
started out. I took my rifle, an old .44 Winchester and much too small to kill an elephant, but I thought the noise
might be useful in terrorising Various Burmans stopped me on the way and told me about the elephant’s doings.
It was not, of course, a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone must. It had been chained up, as tame
elephants always are when their attack of ‘must’ is due, but on the previous night it had broken its chain and
escaped. Its mahout, the only person who could manage it when it was in that state, had set out in pursuit, but
had taken the wrong direction and was now twelve hours’ journey away, and in the morning the elephant had
suddenly reappeared in the town. The Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against it. It
had already destroyed somebody’s bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls and devoured the stock;
also it had met the municipal rubbish van and, when the driver jumped out and took to his heels, had turned the
van over and inflicted violence upon it.

The Burmese sub-inspector and some Indian constables were waiting for me in the quarter where the elephant
had been seen. It was a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding
all over a steep hillside. I remember that it was a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains. We began
questioning the people as to where the elephant had gone and, as usual, failed to get any definite information.
That is invariably the case in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to
the scene of events the vaguer it becomes. Some of the people said that the elephant had gone in one direction,
some said that he had gone in another, some professed not even to have heard of any elephant. I had almost
made up my mind that the whole story was a pack of lies, when we heard yells a little distance away. There was a
loud, scandalized cry of ‘Go away, child! Go away this instant!’ and an old woman with a switch in her hand came round the corner of a hut, violently shooing away a crowd of naked children. Some more women followed, clicking their tongues and exclaiming; evidently there was something that the children ought not to have seen. I had halted on the road. As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him. It is a serious matter to shoot a working elephant — it is comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery — and obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance, obviously one ought not to do it if it can possibly be avoided. And at that distance,
peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow. I thought then and I think now that his attack of 'must' was already passing off, in which case he would merely wander harmlessly about until the mahout came back and caught him. Moreover, I did not in the least want to shoot him. I decided that I would watch him for a little while to make sure that he did not turn savage again, and then go home.

But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd, two thousand at the least and growing every minute. It blocked the road for a long distance on either side. I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes-faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me and I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly. 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:

perceived in this moment that when 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' expect 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. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.

But I did not want to shoot the elephant. I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. At that age I was not squeamish about killing animals, but I had never shot an elephant and never wanted to. (Somehow it always seems worse to kill a large animal.) Besides, there was the beast's owner to be considered.

Give, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly. But I had got to act quickly. I turned to some experienced-looking Burmans who had been
there when we arrived, and asked them how the elephant had been behaving. They all said the same thing: he
looked no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.

It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within twenty-five yards of the
elephant and test his behavior. If he charged, I could shoot; if he took no notice of me, it would be safe to leave
him until the mahout came back. But also I knew that I was going to do no such thing. I was a poor shot with a
rifle and the ground was soft mud into which one would sink at every step. If the elephant charged and I missed
him, I should have about as much chance as a toad under a steam-roller. But even then I was not thinking
particularly of my own skin, only of the watchful yellow faces behind. For at that moment, with the crowd
watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man
mustn’t be frightened in front of ‘natives’; and so, in general, he isn’t frightened. The sole thought in my mind
was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on and
reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of
them would laugh. That would never do.

There was only one alternative. I shoved the cartridges into the magazine and lay down on the road to get a
better aim. The crowd grew very still, and a deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre
curtain go up at last, breathed from innumerable throats. They were going to have their bit of fun after all. The rifle was a
beautiful German thing with cross-hair sights. I did not then know that in shooting an elephant one would shoot
to cut an imaginary bar running from ear-hole to ear-hole. I ought, therefore, as the elephant was sideways on,
to have aimed straight at his ear-hole, actually I aimed several inches in front of this, thinking the brain would be
further forward.

When I pulled the trigger I did not hear the bang or feel the kick — one never does when a shot goes home —
but I heard the devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd. In that instant, in too short a time, one would
have thought, even for the bullet to get there, a mysterious, terrible change had come over the elephant. He
neither stirred nor fell, but every line of his body had altered. He looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely
old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. At last, after what
seemed a long time — it might have been five seconds, I dare say — he sagged flabbily to his knees. His mouth
slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. One could have imagined him thousands of
years old. I fired again into the same spot. At the second shot he did not collapse but climbed with desperate
slowness to his feet and stood weakly upright, with legs sagging and head drooping. I fired a third time. That was
the shot that did for him. You could see the agony of it jolt his whole body and knock the last remnant of strength from his legs. But in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upward like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skyward like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. And then down he came, his belly towards me, with a crash that seemed to shake the ground even where I lay.

I got up. The Burmans were already racing past me across the mud. It was obvious that the elephant would never rise again, but he was not dead. He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling. 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.

In the end I could not stand it any longer and went away. I heard later that it took him half an hour to die.

Burmans were bringing dash and baskets even before I left, and I was told they had stripped his body almost to the bones by the afternoon.

Afterwards, of course, there were endless discussions about the shooting of the elephant. The owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing. Besides, legally I had done the right thing, for a mad elephant has to be killed, like a mad dog, if its owner fails to control it. Among the Europeans opinion was divided. The older men said I was right, 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 coolie. And afterwards 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. I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.

1936

THE END