George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant":

The Elephant as a Symbol of Colonialism's Failure

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1. Introduction

> My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, 'I am going to produce a work of art.' I write because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get hearing. (Orwell's *Why I Write* quoted in Rai 1988, 21)

Which specific aspect and perspective of injustice Orwell aimed to convey in "Shooting an Elephant" which was first published in 1936 (cf. Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 69) is up for discussion. The plot of an English police officer in colonial Burma shooting an elephant provides diverse angles of injustice. For instance, there are both the elephant which is shot for questionable reasons, as well as the Burmese who are being oppressed by the British. It is debatable though whether Orwell intended to also expose the injustice the British central character feels he himself falls victim to.

The story is included in many school and higher education curriculums (cf. Connelly 1987, 2) such as the obligatory topics for the English A-levels in Baden-Wuerttemberg up to and including the year 2014. It rarely appears to be discussed in academic contexts, however. This is most likely due to its brevity in relation to Orwell's other works, especially *Burmese Days* which is also set in Burma and is concerned with issues of conformity with the British rule. Nonetheless, "Shooting an Elephant" includes some aspects which *Burmese Days* does not provide. There is, for instance, the autodiegetic narrative situation which seems to create an even stronger link between the events and the author's biographical background which they were likely inspired by. Additionally, the impact of the protagonist's inner conflict on the reader is increased by this form of narration. This paper will make an attempt at exploring the significance of the elephant's symbolism within the colonialist dilemma of the protagonist in "Shooting an Elephant". The following chapters will demonstrate that the main character is torn between the pressure of keeping up the authority of the British and the pressure of his increasing contempt towards his own involvement in oppressing others which is represented by the question whether to shoot or not to shoot the elephant.

As the story's setting is of great significance for the conflict of the story, *2. The British Empire* will give insights and background information on how the British colonialist mentality and the era of colonialism in India -and more specifically- Burma have influenced the surroundings, the narration and characters as well as the conflict of the story. Whether and to what extent the essay was inspired by Orwell's life, will be discussed.

Introductory to *3. The Significance of Elephants, 3.1 Biology and History* will establish a base for further elaborations on elephant symbolism b providing biological facts about the largest living mammal and some historical information. This will be followed by *3.2 General Connotations* which lists and links the widespread diverse associations mankind has concerning elephants which are usually related to their anatomy or history. The depiction of elephants in language will be explored within chapter *3.3. Idioms.* The chapter will then finish by presenting how the content of subchapters *3.1., 3.2.* and *3.3.* have been processed in epic literature in *3.4 Elephants in Tales and Fables* all of which will later be the point of reference for the analysis and interpretation of the elephant's importance in "Shooting an Elephant".

The following chapter, *4. Analysis of the Story,* will first of all give a short *plot summary in 4.1*. This will be followed by the discourse and character analyses *(4.2 and 4.3)* which lead up to *4.4.*, the analysis of the major conflict of the story constituted by the moral dilemma the protagonist finds himself in. His dilemma is of great importance concerning the symbolism of the elephant in the story as the animal's fate can be seen as resembling the cause of the conflict.

The subsequent *interpretation of the story in 5.*, will dive into the interpretations of the symbolism of the elephant. With close reference to the analysis and included aspects from the previous chapters, the interpretation will be presented in the form of two not necessarily exclusive variations in *5.1 and 5.2.*.

To conclude this paper, the two interpretations from the previous chapter and a short summary of the results achieved will then be combined into one final interpretation in *6. Conclusion: The Elephant as a Symbol of Colonialism's failure altogether.* A subsequent prospect will elaborate on which other perspective of the story could be interesting to read, analyse and interpret.

2. The British Empire

The in the following presented "white man's burden" as an intention for Britain's involvement in other countries, to be followed by the historical

circumstances of British Colonialism in India, shall help establish an image of the colonialist mentality plays a significant role within the story. Built upon this information, the setting of the story will be discussed. Concerning the story's setting, it has also shown to be particularly interesting to analyse obvious and possible parallels to George Orwell's life.

2.1. "The White Man's Burden"

"What forces drove the imperial process that conquered and colonized large parts of the world?" (Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 4) -that is precisely the question this subchapter intents to answer by exploring how the British justified their involvement in other countries and their attitudes towards the natives.

British authors in the 19th century such as Rudyard Kipling were convinced of the so-called "White Supremacy" (Britannica c) which entailed the obligation to civilise the native populations of the countries they colonised (cf. Britannica c). Kipling even wrote a poem titled "The White Man's Burden" which conveys an ambiguous attitude towards colonialism. On the one hand, it seems to reflect hints of an imperialist mentality whereas on the other hand, it implies a retrospective view on the matter and contains several warnings towards the colonisers to whom he addresses the poem to.

The assumption of supremacy implies hierarchical opposites which are very frequently portrayed in the western mind (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 232). Contrasting adjectives and nouns such as "white / black, good / evil, Christian / heathen, human / beast, master / servant, strong / weak, educated / uneducated, power / submission, order / chaos" (ibid, 232) are often the foundation of colonialist thinking. They have also strongly influenced other hierarchical ways of ascribing certain traits to certain groups of humans such as naziism, anti-Semitism, the treatment of the native Americans by the European colonisers and racism in general. By the British, natives were often seen as being stuck in a stage of evolution towards a civilised human being and society which they themselves had overcome a long time ago (cf. Blackstock 2005, 186). Contradictory to this perspective, their image of the natives was solid once they had made it up:

> Once the British had defined something as an Indian custom, or traditional dress, or the proper form of salutation, any deviation from it was defined as rebellion and an act to be punished. India was redefined by the British to be a place of rules and orders; once the

> British had defined to their own satisfaction what they construed as Indian rules and customs, then the Indians had to conform to these constructions. (Cohn 1996, 162)

This results in the colonised being denied the possibility of ever going beyond that fixed image. Benita Parry draws a similar portray of how

> [o]nce people are segregated because of race, class or religion, delusions or fantasies about each other will grow rampant, and the British in India were obsessed … with those Indian customs which seemed to invite license and debase men…. (Benita Parry quoted in Blackstock 2005, 186; *left out passages and dot indication as found in Blackstock (J. Muss)*).

Even Orwell himself admits to the British exploiting the Burmese and argues it caused them no harm at all:

> It is true that the British are robbing and pilfering Burma quite shamelessly. But we must stress that the Burmese hardly notice it f*or the moment*. Their country is so rich, their population so scattered, their needs, like those of all Orientals, so slight that they are not conscious of being exploited. (George Orwell quoted in Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 225; original emphasis)

This clear depiction of an anticipated superiority of the British over the "slight needs" of the Burmese leads to the question addressed and answered by many Orwell critics: Had George Orwell actually achieved to distance himself from his inherent point of view and transformed into an anti-imperialist writer? Mohammed Alam Sarwar, lecturer of English at the Islamic University of Chittagong, Bangladesh, disagrees by suggesting Orwell portrayed a self-image of a troubled colonialist whose British colonialist heritage was still underneath the surface of his anti-colonialist utterances (cf. Sarwar 2006, 55).

The "White Man's Burden" had a considerable impact on the way the colonisers generally looked at natives and how they treated them which has also found expression in "Shooting an Elephant".

2.2. History of British Colonialism in India

Western imperialism arose during the age of desiring to explore and discover the world (cf. Sarwar 2006, 55) and this kind of annexing territory is the common connotation of the term *imperialism* (cf. Sarwar 2006, 55). The British Empire was not the only colonial empire in world history, but it was amongst the

biggest and as it's influence on Burma is of relevance for the story, the following information is assembled accordingly.

Prior to British involvement, since the 16th century, India had been governed by the Mughal dynasty (cf. Britannica d). One of the dynasty's aims was to unify muslims and hindus which had proven to be difficult und continued to be a struggle for the government of the territory (cf. Britannica d). Following a short invasion by an Iranian conqueror in 1739, the Mughal dynasty did not recover and hereby gave Britain the opportunity to take over the Indian subcontinent (cf. Britannica d). The start of British colonialism consisted of trading purposes performed by private companies of which the British East India Company was one of the most famous; the government had little to do with it expect from granting the trade on paper (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 214; Cohn 1996, 16).

18th and 19th century Britain depended on import and export of products such as tea, cotton and silk from India or rice shipments from Burma (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 214). In the 2nd half of the 19th century the British-governed territory and Britain's administrative power expanded (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 215). When the East India Company struggled with its finances, the British Crown stood in and hereby marked the beginning of the "Raj", the rule of the British government in India (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 215). Opposing to this, Cohn suggests that even before 1800 The British East India Company had already possessed traits which fit the European definition of a state at that time (cf. Cohn 1996, 58). Furthermore, Cohn argues there had been countries in which the British East India Company had acted autonomously (cf. Cohn 1996, 58).

During the majority of the 19th and 20th century, the British empire spread as wide as

> North America, much of the Caribbean region, great tracts of Africa south of the Sahara, the whole of the Indian subcontinent and Australasia, territories in South-East Asia and the Pacific, and even for a time much of the Middle East (Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 209).

The expansion of the Empire was not usually peaceful or done without harm as can be seen on the example of Burma:

> When trading interests in Burma were threatened, three wars were fought with the Burmese empire by an Anglo-Indian army and the country was finally annexed to India. From 1885, Burma was administered as part of India with the Indian Imperial Police enforcing law and order […] (Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 215).

The question of when the Empire ended is not an easy one to answer (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 217). “Shooting an Elephant” and other short stories assembled in the short story collections by Butzko & Pongratz (2005) and Korff & Ringel-Eichinger (2005) give reason to assume it had not been a sudden clean end but rather “an ongoing, complex process that ended with the independence of the colonies, e.g. India in 1947 […], Burma (now Myanmar) in 1948” (Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 217). On the one hand, the so-called decolonisation was described as follows by W. David McIntyre:

> withdraw(ing) from a colony leaving it independent” or “the abolition of all prejudice, of all superiority complex, in the mind of the colonizer, and also all inferiority complex in the mind of the colonized (W. David McIntyre quoted in Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 217)

On the other hand, McIntyre sarcastically calls the end of traditional colonialism “the continuation of imperialism by other means” or people” (W. David McIntyre quoted in Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 217). This suggests that Britain is still keeping its hands in the previous colonies although the era one commonly refers to with the terms “imperialism” or “colonialism” is considered to be over. The reasons for the Empire’s expiry are of diverse natures.

Firstly, several national developments such as certain authors -including Orwell- began to reflect more critical opinions about the British rule in their works (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 218). Furthermore, the United States had started showing interest in global territories (cf. ibid). When Britain was in need of the United States’ support in World War II, it began to feel inferior (cf. ibid) and then after WWII Britain had trouble with its finances including debts in India (cf. ibid). A general change after the war was a change in economic customs from territorial business to an issue of good relationships (cf. ibid).

Secondly, there were global developments including the global criticism of imperialism (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 218). This kind of criticism particularly went against nations such as Germany, Italy and Japan who had tried conquering many states of their own (cf. ibid). This kind of criticism reached Britain and resulted in a change of mind towards British imperialism after World War II (cf. ibid). One of the clearest results was that in 1947, shortly after the big war, India fought for and gained its independence (cf. ibid).

Thirdly and finally, colonial developments such as the revival of nationalism and traditionalism in the colonised regions (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 218) were amongst the reasons for the expiration of British rule. The local governments established by the British often stayed in place after imperial rule

ended (cf. ibid). Many of the new governments in the former colonies still resemble them today (cf. ibid).

When assessing *how* British imperialism ended, the term “dominion” is of great importance. Most colonies were granted dominion status before they became fully independent (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 218). This means that they were allowed to have their own local government, but still had to accept British monarchy as superior to it (cf. ibid). This process is considered to have been more difficult on non-white colonies such as India in comparison to the United States or Australia (cf. ibid).

It was especially complicated for India to gain independence as it was “Britain’s biggest market” and “ ‘jewel in the crown’ of the Empire” (Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 218). Additionally, the internal tensions between the 20% muslim population and the Hindus did not allow for a compromise (cf. ibid). After several wars were fought, two independent states were founded in 1947: India (mainly Hindu) and Pakistan (mainly Muslim) (cf. ibid). Pakistan was then further divided into West and East Pakistan which became Bangladesh in 1971 after a civil war that led to further resettlements to India or Britain (cf. ibid). There is said to have been “widespread rioting and violence” (Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 218) and many people fled to the country where their religion was more largely represented (cf. ibid).

The legacy of the Empire includes the English language, culture, political and social structures, borders which are still widely represented in many parts of the world. In contrast to past times, “Western states now no longer practice direct imperial rule“ (Sarwar 2006, 60), Neoimperialism acts as the post-colonial form of imperialism (cf. Sarwar 2006, 55). The empires, –if one can even call them that today as they are mostly not geographical or territorial empires-, have found new ways and means (cf. Sarwar 2006, 55) to succeed in „rul[ing] and exploit[ing] the natives [and] […] establishing racial and cultural superiority“ (Sarwar 2006, 55). Similar to McIntyre, Sarwar suggests a continuation of a form of Colonialism which has adapted to contemporary times with their new challenges. Opposing to Sarwar’s very pessimistically presented point of view on colonialism, the past also delivered answers which Korff and Ringel-Eichinger propose to deal with as following:

> The legacy of empire affects us all, and we hope that you will learn more about this legacy through the voices that have emerged from it, as the way we respond to them will determine our shared future. (Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 5)

2.3. The Author George Orwell: Biographical parallels

George Orwell himself was “born on June 25, 1903, in Motihari in Bengal as Eric Arthur Blair” (Stansky 1983, 9; Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 67) “into the class of sahibs[1].” (Britannica a; Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 69). He died in January 1950 (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 68). George Orwell was Blair’s his pen name (cf. Stansky 1983, 11).

Eric Arthur Blair’s father had been an employee of India’s British government (cf. Stansky 1983, 9; Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 69; cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 67). This amongst other reasons probably led to Orwell’s rather unusual decision to go to Burma in 1922 in order to work for the Indian Imperial Police (cf. Stansky 1983, 11; cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 68; cf. Britannica a). George Orwell and his family owed their prosperous life to his father being a civil servant in India. Life in India generally entailed financial advantages for the British compared to living in Britain (cf. Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 215). Orwell’s salary as an officer in the Indian Imperial Police was paid for by the taxes the Indians and Burmese payed (cf. ibid) and equals today’s amount of 45,000€ (cf. ibid). Rai describes Orwell’s time in Burma as a “rich store of experience which [...] immigrated into hidden and surprising corners of his personality.” (Rai 1988, 28). Orwell often criticised capitalism (cf. Colls 2013, 2). This has resulted in his works reflecting contrasts such as “freedom, honesty, and plain speech are [...] [and] tyranny, ideological fashion, and pretension” (Collini 2006, 350).

The obvious parallels between Orwell’s work and his life are often discussed and considered to of an autobiographical kind (Stansky 1983, 13). His biography had quite an output into literature (cf. Stansky 1983, 12). He wrote about things and events he was involved in, events he experienced (cf. Connelly 1987, 8). The question whether the given account in “Shooting an Elephant” was inspired by factual events is up for debate and not finally answered among Orwell critics (cf. The Guardian). According to Gerry Abbott, Orwell had been *accused* of killing an elephant back in the 1920’s (cf. The Guardian). When “Shooting an Elephant” was published, many were disappointed in Blair for having shot an elephant, but at the same time, a former colleague of Orwell stepped forward stating Orwell had uttered his wish to kill an elephant (cf. The Guardian). Crick, one of Orwell’s biographers, proposes Orwell “was merely influenced by a

[1] “sahib (Urdu; old-fashioned): term used to address a European man esp. of a higher social status” (Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 75)

fashionable genre that blurred the line between fiction and autobiography" (The Guardian).

> To me, Orwell's description of the great creature's heartbreakingly slow death suggests an acute awareness of wrongdoing, as do his repeated protests: "I had no intention of shooting the elephant… I did not in the least want to shoot him … I did not want to shoot the elephant." Though Orwell shifts the blame on to the imperialist system, I think the poet did shoot the elephant. But read the sketch and decide for yourself. (Gerry Abbott. The Guardian.)

This may be why many of his works convey the image of being a report rather than a made up story (cf. Connelly 1987, 8). A common theme in his works is "the guilt he felt for his complicity in the British class system and the British Empire" (Bolton 1984, 15). He did notice the oppression over the Burmese which he was involved in (cf. Britannica a) and completely disillusioned with colonialism, he handed in his resignation from the Indian Imperial Police in 1927 (cf. Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 69).

2.4. Setting of the Story

"Shooting an Elephant" gives a very clear description of its setting in the very first sentence: "Moulmein, Lower Burma" (p. 69), a town which is called Mawlamyine nowadays (cf. Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 69). The story is set in "the 'Cinderella' province" (Stansky 1983, 11) which is the country of Myanmar nowadays (cf. Britannica e). Comparing it to the innocent, abandoned and usually clothed in dirty cloth fairy tale character whose sisters are always favoured over her creates the image of a peaceful life on the one hand, but also an image of neglect by the British.

Furthermore, the story suggests a Hindu or Buddhist setting rather than a Muslim coined surrounding (cf. p. 69). When the narrator reaches “the quarter where the elephant had been seen [...] [,] a very poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over a steep hillside” (p. 70), the elephant had moved on to “the paddy fields [...] a few hundred yards away” (p. 73). In addition, the narration reveals that the event starts “early one morning” (p. 70), “a cloudy, stuffy morning at the beginning of the rains” (p. 70) which suggests that the events likely took place between May and June (cf. Britannica e).

The plot of “Shooting an Elephant” most likely takes place “in the waning days of the British Raj (Burma was at the time considered to be part of British India – by the British at least)“ (Blackstock 2005, 194, comment in brackets is part of the quote; cf. “Shooting an Elephant”, p. 70). Korff and Ringel-Eichinger put the essay into a group of short stories titled with “Colonial Encounters: Rulers and Subjects” (cf. Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005) which suggests it revolves around issues during the height of the Empire, but deviatingly, the narrator of the story himself implies that the Empire is already dying during the events he is recalling (cf. p. 70). If one takes Orwell’s biography into consideration, the temporal setting could be between 1922 and 1927 as those are the years he spent working for the Imperial Police in Burma himself.

3. The Significance of Elephants

The significance of elephants will be established in the following chapter inter alia by taking a closer look on story-related aspects of their anatomy and history. Afterwards, some general and common connotations and the influence of elephants on language will be analysed. Last, but not least, the focus will be placed on elephants in other literary works, -especially tales and fables which are most likely the richest form of elephant symbolism-. This chapter is the basis for looking at the elephant symbolism in “Shooting an Elephant” which is not entirely different, but has a more distinct focus compared to the common-sense knowledge about elephants.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines symbolism as “something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance especially : a visible sign of something invisible” (Merriam-Webster).

3.1. Biology and History

Elephants are the “largest living land animal[s]” (Britannica b). The grey- or brown-coloured animals (cf. Britannica b) are commonly split into two groups: the Asian elephants and the African elephants (cf. Britannica b) of which the African elephants are usually bigger and have bigger ears than their Asian counterparts (cf. Britannica b). Some of elephants’ rather obvious biological peculiarities include their tremendous ears (cf. Schenda 1995, 55), their highly flexible trunks (cf. Britannica b), their generally monumental-looking physique and their tusks. The “enlarged incisor teeth made of ivory” (Britannica b) serve as tools and protection for the trunk (cf. Britannica b). Amongst African elephants both male and female animals possess tusks whereas amongst Asian elephants the males possess considerably larger tusks than the females (cf. Britannica b). Due to the high value of their tusks’ material, elephants have a long history of being shot (cf. Schenda 1995, 55). In the story dealt with here, however, this is not the reason for the shooting of the elephant. Nowadays elephants are not as endangered as they used to be as a result of hunting restrictions in African and Indian states as well as by resettling elephants to national parks (cf. Schenda 1955, 55) where their life span can be up to 80 years or older (cf. Britannica b). Nonetheless, they are still endangered of becoming extinct (cf. Schenda 1995, 55).

The lifespan of captive elephants can be up to 80 years or higher, otherwise it does not usually exceed 60 years (cf. Britannica b). The first possibility of elephants to reproduce is when they are between 10 and 14 years old (cf. Britannica b). When it comes to their fertile period, the so-called “musth (or “must”) period”, male elephants produce a liquid containing different hormones and a higher amount of testosterone from the one they usually produce (cf. Britannica b). “The animal’s behaviour is erratic; they are uncontrollable (musth is Hindi for “intoxicated”), sometimes even by their own handlers (mahouts)” (Britannica b). These hormones can be smelled by other elephants, especially of the other sex (cf. Britannica b).

As elephants are not indigenous to Europe (cf. Schenda 1995, 55), it was usually a huge attraction whenever there was an elephant passing through (cf.

Schenda 1995, 55). In accordance to their physique, elephants are very strong. Their trunk alone can lift almost double of its own weight (cf. Britannica b). Often, biological findings were directly associated and mixed with assumed character traits and abilities. Some of those come across as frightening legends about monsters rather than observations or facts. For instance, elephants were said to be chaste and musical beings (cf. Schenda 1995, 57), but at the same time they were assumed of being able to swallow humans (cf. Schenda 1995, 57) and being able of sucking snakes out of their caves (cf. Schenda 1995, 57). As a reminiscence to the antique use of elephants as war animals, in pictures from the Middle Ages elephants often carry small towers on their backs which contain knights or warriors fighting their enemies (cf. Schenda 1995, 58). The ambiguous symbolisms of the mysterious and dangerous elephant contrasting images of chastity and intelligence were continued up to the baroque (cf. Schenda 1995, 58).

3.2. General Connotations

Several legends and associations with both African and Asian elephants (cf. The Independent) show that the connotations have changed over the course of time and differ according to the religion, culture and location. Nevertheless, there are connotations which have a widespread, profound past and are still very present extending beyond certain cultural backgrounds.

Ancient Indians, for instance, considered elephants to be honourable, helpful and socially thinking animals which like to live together with other animals. They are said to be sent from heaven as a messenger of the Gods, to be the kings of all animals and to repeatedly have saved humans from danger (cf. Schenda 1995, 59). It is also suggested a white elephant had been Buddha's incarnation numerous times already (cf. The Independent). The rare experience of seeing a white elephant is interpreted as an epiphany (cf. The Independent). More importantly though, Ganesh, a Hindu god, is a hybrid of human and elephant (cf. The Independent).

According to Indian, Chinese and African belief, elephants also stand for “power, dignity, intelligence and peace” (Hallberg 2014) and they are “generally considered a symbol of good luck and [...] good fortune” (Animal Symbols).

Conforming to Asian symbolisms, elephants are very kind beings and possess godlike qualities (cf. Animal Symbols). Consequent, religious offerings to elephants are still made in modern Asia (cf. Animal Symbols). Furthermore, elephants stand for “wisdom, loyalty, strength, fidelity and longevity” (cf. Animal Symbols).

Osten Hallberg, the author of “Animal Symbols”, continues by listing more aspects of elephants connected with their symbolism such as “strength, wisdom, solitude, strong sense of loyalty to the family and intelligence” (Animal Symbols). The obvious physical traits of elephants create contrasts between size and strength along with enormous capability, sensitivity and inexplicable and mysterious psyche (cf. Schenda 1995, 61). The external appearance and inner being of elephants do not match (cf. Schenda 1995, 61). This creates tension which results in faulty reactions by humans as can be seen in “Shooting an Elephant”, but also in the century old, powerful and broad symbolism of this animal (cf. Schenda 1995, 61). Among the gentle inner qualities of elephants are modesty, discretion, reserve, helpfulness and intelligence (cf. Georg Christoph Petri’s *Elephantographia curiosa* and August Wilhelm Schlegel’s *Zur Geschichte des Elefanten* quoted in: Schenda 1995, 56). Some people believe elephants to be lucky charms or signs of luck “[a]nd thus the saying goes keep a lucky elephant at the door to your house so that you can get protection from bad luck” (The Independent) which perfectly leads to the following chapter touching idioms concerning elephants.

3.3. Idioms

Language is not excluded from the influence of elephant symbolism. Several idioms and phrases result from the diverse connotations associated with elephants.

The probably most well known idiom is ”the elephant in the room” or “the elephant in the corner” which paraphrases something that everybody knows, but deliberately ignores. (cf. Oxford Dictionaries; cf. The Free Dictionary) Mostly, “the elephant in the room/corner” is something unpleasant. This idiom most likely refers to the size of elephants as they cannot be overlooked, very much like the

issue that everyone is aware of. In German, there is the phrase “der Elefant im Porzellanladen sein” (Eng.: “like the bull/elephant in a china shop” (Pons.eu)) which basically describes someone being very insensitive in a matter that needed to be handled with care. It can also refer to clumsy people who often accidentally break things. The point of reference for this saying is the massiveness of the elephant which would cause it being unable to move in a small shop with fragile objects. The aforementioned “white elephant” can also be used as a figure of speech describing “a possession that is of little use and that is costly to maintain” (Brewer’s, 1440; cf.The Free Dictionary). The usage is said to date back to when a king gave a white elephant to a court employee he did not like (cf. ibid). As Buddha incarnated as a white elephant several times, the animal is considered to be holy. This is why the new owner could not give it away and taking care of the elephant meant his financial ruin (cf. ibid). Despite this background, a “white elephant” can also be the English equivalent of the German “Schrottwichteln” and hereby labels an occasion when undesirable objects can be traded amongst each other (cf. The Free Dictionary). Another popular point of reference is the memory of elephants. The phrases “having a memory like an elephant” and “an elephant never forgets” (cf. The Free Dictionary) hint at this quality of the monumental mammals. Should one “see pink elephants”, that is not a good sign as it means one is suffering from hallucinations resulting from alcohol or drug consume or withdrawal (cf. The Free Dictionary). Apparently, according to The Free Dictionary, the Disney film character Dumbo coined this phrase when he got drunk unintentionally and saw pink elephants (cf. The Free Dictionary). As stated in Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, “seeing the elephant”, however, is a more positive experience though as it is an American term for broadening one’s horizon (cf. Brewer’s, cf. The Free Dictionary). Using the phrase with that meaning can likely be linked to the fable of “The blind men and the elephant”.

It is noticeable that the size and strength of the largest living land mammal seems to be dominantly depicted among connotations and idioms. The now following subchapter will show whether this is the case for elephant portrayals in Tales and Fables, too.

3.4. Elephants in Tales and Fables

Plenty of the stories about elephants are of Indian origin (cf. Schenda 1995, 59). One exemplar is the already named above “The blind men and the elephant”

which is about six blind men trying to figure out what an elephant looks like by touching it. What they do not know is that every one of them only touches a small part of the massive animal's body and therefore does not have the full picture. Eventually, they gather all their information and put it together like a puzzle (cf. The Independent). Another fable from India is the fable of the white hare in which elephants destroy rabbit holes on the way to the well and the white rabbit reprimands the king of the elephants for what happened. The rabbit tricks the elephant by letting it touch the surface of the well which shows the mirror image of the full moon, the shaking mirror image of the full moon scares the elephant so that it does not harm the rabbits ever again (cf. Schenda 1995, 59). On the contrary, the "Pañcatantra", an ancient Indian collection of fables, tells the story of an elephant who saves a bunch of mice who in return free the elephant from the captivity of hunters (cf. Schenda 1995, 59).

The focus of African elephant tales is on their relationships with other animals (cf. Schenda 1995, 59f). The Kenyan "Akamba", for example, is about an elephant who loses a race against the cunning rabbit whose winning prize is the elephant's back. The elephant's behind is then served to the rabbit's friends for dinner (cf. Schenda 1995, 59f). In the West-African "Hausa" a clever rabbit lets an elephant and a giraffe do agricultural work, but keeps the whole harvest to itself (cf. Schenda 1995, 60). An encounter between elephants and a goat takes place in a Liberian fable in which elephants are shocked by how much a goat can eat and respect the smaller animal very much. In yet another fable a jackal has an elephant and a whale do a tug-of-war (cf. Schenda 1995, 60). The moral of most of the stories containing elephants and other smaller animals is that the smaller animal can win against the bigger one e.g. by using clever tricks (cf. Schenda 1995, 60). This is surprising as elephants are also often counted amongst the cunning and intelligent animals. Another Kenyan myth called "The elephant and thunder" tells the story of how humans achieved to dominate the earth. In the beginning, the elephant, man and thunder live on earth, but they do not get along. Thunder escapes towards heaven as he is scared of the human. The elephant stays and is shot in the back by the man. In its last moments the elephant begs to thunder for help but thunder denies its help stating the elephant had been to naive. The man kills more animals afterwards and iss left to rule over all the earth (cf. The Independent).

In contrast to the above-mentioned countries, elephants are not indigenous to Europe and America. That is why they were admired and heightened as statues and hereby elephants nourished the imagination of humans, especially

children (cf. Schenda 1995, 57). That is likely why children's literature containing elephants is very popular (cf. Schenda 1995, 61). European tales mainly deal with the power of the enormous (cf. Schenda 1995, 60), but at the same time they provide blue, golden, red and white elephants (cf. Schenda 1995, 61). Brecht's work is an excellent example of ambiguous elephant symbolism. On the one hand, he portrays an elephant as being stupid as it carries ten tree trunks at once and breaks a leg while doing so, but on the other hand, an elephant is one of his character's favourite animals as it combines cunning and strength (cf. Schenda 1995, 61).

In a legend from the Middle Ages called "Gesta Romanorum" two women are sent into a forest, one of them with a sword, the other one with a bowl. When an elephant falls asleep on one of the women's lap, she kills the animal. The other woman then collects the elephant's blood in her bowl. This legend is supposed to be a reference to Jesus' death of sin through Eve. The woman with the bowl represents his mother Mary who saves humanity with his blood (cf. Schenda 1995, 58).

A tale from Barcelona gives a answer to the question how elephants have acquired their trunks. The tale revolves around an elephant who wins against a goat in a game of cards and on top of all its money the goat has to give away its tail which the elephant sticks to its nose. This is why the elephant has two tails and the goat only has a stumpy tail. (cf. Schenda 1995, 60).

Just as in the African tales, it is also popular among European storytellers and writers to have mice and elephants as protagonists (cf. Schenda 1995, 60) or antagonists. Other stories explore how the elephant threatens smaller animals such as larks who then gather and fight back together (cf. Schenda 1995, 59).

Possibly referring to their good memory of when somebody once caused them harm, the revenge of the elephant stayed a popular topic in fictional literature (cf. Schenda 1995, 58). For instance, Matthias Claudius tells the tale of an elephant getting revenge on a tailor because he stang the elephant in the trunk with a needle(cf. Schenda 1995, 58f). One more story which is a testimony of a revengeful elephant revolves around an elephant keeper who adds sand to his elephant's food. He does so in order to make it look like there was more food, but the elephant notices and takes revenge on him for it by putting ash into the pot of the elephant (cf. Schenda 1995, 58). In contrast to the preceding story, a legend which shows that elephants are modest creatures is that of an elephant keeper in Syria who only gives the elephant half of its normal food several times.

When one day he gives it the full amount again, the elephant is said to have put away half of it (cf. Schenda 1995, 58).

Taking everything into account, elephant symbolism is very diverse and often contradictory. Nevertheless, there are some patterns visible which create a base for the interpretation questions: How is the elephant in “Shooting an Elephant” depicted? Which of the abovementioned character traits is it portrayed to possess? What is its symbolic meaning?

4. Analysis of the Story

In order to establish a base for the interpretation, the following story analysis provides very general aspects of the story. Serving this intention, a short plot summary will be given. Nevertheless, the analysis clearly focusses on the chosen topic by primarily analysing the characters and the narration. It will be reasoned that the protagonist and the narrator can be assumed to be the same person looking at the events from different perspectives within their life. This finding is fundamental to the interpretations which will then be made in the ensuing chapter.

4.1. Plot Summary

An English officer of the Indian Imperial Police receives a call informing him an elephant has escaped and telling him he should do something about it. Soon it becomes clear that shooting the elephant seems to be an option the protagonist does not approve of although the elephant has already destroyed some property. When the officer gets to the location of the elephant, he also comes upon the dead body of a man who was killed by the elephant. Meanwhile, the elephant has calmed down again in a nearby field. Although the protagonist is more than hesitant, he feels pressured by the natives who are watching to shoot the elephant. He fires several shots at the elephant, but does not aim for the part of the body that would have caused a quick death. Instead, the elephant dies a long

agonising death. The protagonist leaves before the animal is dead as he cannot bear watching and listening any longer. The Burmese then take apart the elephant's cadaver while the protagonist is confronted with the consequences of having shot the elephant by the elephant's owner and by his fellow Europeans.

4.2. Discourse Analysis

4.2.1. Narratological Analysis

The speaker of the story reveals himself right from the beginning as an autodiegetic narrator and continues to narrate his story in the form of an internal character-focalisation as all of the events are told "throughout from his own perspective" (Sarwar 2006, 59). When he says he is "looking and feeling a fool" (p. 73), this is the closest hint to an external focalisation interpreted by the narrator as he could neither see himself nor have an insight on what the natives thought of him. Despite this inability of actually knowing what is thought of him, he simply *feels* looked at as if he looked a fool. Nünning & Nünning's digression on the "limitations of the first-person narrator" is especially suiting in terms of the narrative situation in "Shooting an Elephant":

> The fact that the first-person narrator is part of the same world as the characters gives rise to a further characteristic of the first-person narrative situation: only the internal processes, thoughts and feelings of the narrating and experiencing I can be related. [....] A retrospective first-person narrator can generally review the entire past events leading up to the present of the narrating I, but unlike the 'omniscient' authorial narrator he or she is not able to look into the future. (Nünning & Nünning 2017, 112)

According to the quote, first person or autodiegetic narrators just as the one in this story, rarely give any insights into the minds of other characters and this limited point of view in the narration can likely be related to the opinion the author wanted the narrator to express about the other characters, the natives in particular. This kind of narrator in "Shooting an Elephant" is counted amongst the overt narrators as he clearly gives his opinion and shares his thoughts with the reader.

Whether the narrator in the story is reliable or unreliable is debatable as on the one hand, there is no indication the narrator withholds any information on purpose. On the other hand, one could also argue he is unreliable as there are obvious “discrepancies between the statements and the actions of the narrator” (Nünning & Nünning 2017, 121) for instance that he repeatedly says he does not want to shoot the elephant and he should not shoot it (see e.g. p. 74), but he shoots it anyway. The narrator paints the image of the Burmese being unreliable informants (p. 72), but this also seems to be true for the very story he is telling us although it might not be intentional: “A story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes” (p.72).

The main event of the day the narrator shoots the elephant is embedded into a storytelling frame. During the actual events though it seems as if one was “following the events through the eyes or experiential perspective” (Nünning & Nünning 2017, 114) of the protagonist. This impression is strengthened by the many repetitions within the stream of consciousness of the protagonist during the events. This allows for the assumption „there are two Orwells in the story“ (Sarwar 2006, 56) who do share their report-like syntax and choice of vocabulary besides both embodying an exemplar of Orwell’s “preferred plain-man persona” (Collini 2006, 350). Despite these similarities, they obviously have a different view on what happened as one of them is very close to the action while the other retells the story long from a temporal distance through the role of a narrator or even the author (cf. Sarwar 2006, 56). For instance, the passages “at that age” (p. 75) and “I did not then know that…”(p. 76) confirm the hypothesis as this sounds like the older Orwell looking back at his experience and commenting on it. The retrospective Orwell is closer to a narrative persona whereas the younger one represents the protagonist during the actions. Nünning & Nünning describe this phenomenon as follows:

> “the narrating and experiencing I are the same person, but they are often separated by temporal, and sometimes also moral, distance, as the narrator has gone through a process of reflection and maturation in the meantime.” (Nünning & Nünning 2017, 111)

The beginning of the recalled event is introduced with the words “one day” (p. 70). Orwell calls the shooting the elephant a “tiny incident” (p. 70). It can be assumed he is playing it down as the way the event is narrated suggests the contrary: that is was actually quite a big deal for him. Connelly states Orwell ”wrote clearly and directly without self-censorship” (Connelly 1987, 2) which

needs to be contradicted in this case as the story's self-assessment by the narrator is blurred.

Some other peculiar aspects of the narration are for example that prior to the native woman (p. 72) shouting at the children to get away from the dead body of the coolie, there is no direct speech disrupting the stream of consciousness of the narrator. Furthermore, one might stumble across the narrator using the personal pronoun "it" when referring to the elephant until page 72 but then after he interviewed the Burmese on where the elephant was and what it did, he starts using "he". One way of explaining this might be that he has learned of the elephant being a "he" or maybe he had known before, but only starts empathising with the animal from this moment on. While he approaches the elephant, he compares himself to a toad and the elephant to a steam-roller (p. 76). Some readers might immediately be reminded of the toad being a symbol for a traitor.

After he pulls the trigger for the first time, the use of language changes drastically from a report-like plain writing in rather short sentences and using clear vocabulary without extensive details into a slow-motion-like episode (p. 76f) which is conveyed by using detailed verbs, adjectives, adverbs and many repetitions. This creates the effect of the narrative time almost equaling or even exceed the narrated time. Within this section of the story, aging and the passing of time are important topics used for metaphors and similes. Various facets of them are repeatedly used to describe the colossal changes the elephant goes through after that first shot hits it. Amongst the most impressive and coining are "stricken, shrunken, immensely old" (p. 76); "enormous senility" (p. 76); "thousands of years old" (p. 76) and "as the the ticking of a clock" (p.77).

The ending of the story begins with the narrator withdrawing from the scene and is portrayed within the second narrative frame created by "the old Orwell" (p. 78). He comments on the arguments which followed the shooting of the elephant as if he had expected them. A community of opinions amongst generations is suggested by depicting two points of view. Furthermore, "the older men [who] said I was right" (p. 78) could represent the old Orwell recalling the story, whereas the "younger men [who] said it was a damn shame" (p. 78) could share the opinion of the younger Orwell. Connelly suggests Orwell "thoroughly examined his own reactions rather than blindly accept those reactions deemed suitable by others" (Connelly 1987, 8). If one assumes Orwell processed autobiographical material in "Shooting an Elephant", some disagreement needs to be expressed towards Connelly's utterance as the autodiegetic narrator does not fully finish the self-examination of his reaction. Instead, he ends the story by

mentioning plenty of reasons why shooting the elephant must have been the right thing to do. This creates the impression of him being afraid of a truthful self-assessment of his feelings towards his action and admitting his regret.

4.2.2. The Author-Narrator-Protagonist Triangle

The previous sub-chapter concerning the narrative perspective of the story already pointed to “assuming an identity between the English male protagonists of these texts and their authors, [...] the relationship between subject, narrator and author“ (Blackstock 2005, 184). Amongst many other authors and editors of secondary literature about Orwell’s works, Blackstock and Korff & Ringel-Eichinger also perceive “Shooting an elephant” as an autobiographical piece of literature (cf. Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 5) inter alia as the narrator clearly displays Orwell’s opinion” (Blackstock 2005, 199). Orwell himself comments on issues like this as follows:

> Of course you are perfectly right about my own character constantly intruding on that of the narrator. I am not a real novelist anyway, and that particular vice is inherent in writing a novel in the first person, which one should never do. (George Orwell quoted in: Meyers 1975, 16 f)

The fact that these parallels between the fictive author, narrator, protagonist and their factual author Orwell exist, is not surprising to someone who knows a little about his life. As he worked for the „Indian imperial police in Burma for about five years (1922-1927), [...] his colonial writings must have contained intense and insightful implications on colony, colonizers and the colonized“ (Sarwar 2006, 55). The author Orwell, according to Sarwar’s suggestion, wrote down the events many years later as he still could not forget them (cf. Sarwar 56) and hereby created two Orwells: the young Orwell experiencing the event and his older self reflecting what had happened. Although he has otherwise shown to be rather a critic of Orwell’s truthfulness, Sarwar gives Orwell some credit concerning his “presentation of colonial Burma, the internal sufferings of a sensitive colonial officer and explicit and implicit hatred towards the natives by the colonizers [which] are, in fact, the honest and authentic picture of Burma under imperialism” (Sarwar 2006, 56).

Despite the assumed authenticity of Orwell’s descriptions, disagreement could be uttered towards Connelly’s assessment of the style of Orwell’s works.

He argues they are written “in plain, journalistic English [and that they] [...] lack the rich ambiguity and complexity of his contemporaries” (Connelly 1987, 5). At least concerning the second part of his utterance, this is not the case for “Shooting an Elephant” as the stream of consciousness of the protagonist giving his „first-hand account“ (Sarwar 2006, 59) of the events clearly is depicted as very ambiguous and complex. Although the complexity may not be portrayed in the use of English, it is definitely represented by the inner conflict of the protagonist. Later on, Connelly himself even states that several other literary critics of Orwell’s disagree with him over this matter. The aforementioned critics argue that Orwell’s perspective had not been impartial and that he had not been able of assessing the logic of his own opinion (cf. Connelly 1987, 3). This ambiguity is frequently used to certify Orwell insane or of unsound mind (cf. Connelly 1987, 3). These aspects of contrasts, contradictions and ambiguity within the character also occur in “Shooting an Elephant” in a similar manner as in

> „*Burmese Days* […], [which] clearly illustrate(s) these ambivalent or ambiguous relationships by implicating the English male protagonist […], the narrator, and the implied narrator in a complex and tragic pattern of […] domination and self-destruction. This complicated pattern mirrors the equally complicated attitudes of these [...] authors toward their involvement with the work of the empire, attitudes both revealed and masked by the narrative choices made by each“ (Blackstock 2005, 185).

Although this paragraph of Blackstock’s is originally embedded into the discussion of the relationships between men and women in the story, the utterances made about the author, narrator and protagonist are very suitable for “Shooting an Elephant”. Its protagonist and narrator also shows signs of a “complicated attitude [...] towards [his] involvement with the work of the empire” (Blackstock 2005, 185) which results in absolute despair.

4.3. Character Analysis

4.3.1. The Protagonist

There is quite an explicit amount of information given on the protagonist, although the almost exclusive self-characterisations by the autodiegetic narrator are to be looked at carefully concerning its reliability.

The first-person narrator describes himself as being “sub-divisional police officer of the town” (p. 69), but there is no information on the time and events before this occupation. One might further believe him when he says he was “young” (p. 70) as he sometimes acts very insecurely. For instance, when he first gets the call about the escaped elephant, he does not know what to do (see p. 71) which -considering his position- is not a sign of confidence nor ability. In „Hamlet’s dilemma“ of whether he should shoot or not shoot the elephant (cf. Sarwar 2006, 56), the protagonist chooses shooting the elephant, but not for the obvious reasons. The ending of the story unmasks his true grounds for **“**abandon[ing] his morals and kills the elephant“ (Sarwar 2006, 58).

There might be considerable doubt towards him being “ill-educated” (p. 70) as his use of Latin suggests some sort of privileged education.

Generally he seems rather isolated and alone, but when he realises he might have to shoot the elephant after all, he sends someone to a friend’s house to get a bigger weapon which suggests he does have friends in Burma (p. 72). In the ending, he also mentions the other British colonisers disagreeing over what he did which indicates a rather controversial relationship between them.

The only other human encounters which the British central character is depicted to have are with the Burmese whom he feels “hated by” (p. 69). Once more, this can be seen as an example of the limitations of an autodiegetic narrator as he does not know for sure how the natives feel about him. He comments on their contempt towards him by stating it had been “the only time in my life that I have been important enough for this to happen to me” (p. 69), which allows for assumptions of him having a low self-esteem. Additionally, this implies an explicit characterisation of the natives being bullies and an implicit characterisation of the protagonist not being fond of them. He seems to be very

annoyed by the natives (see p. 70) and his negative experiences with them have led him to being constantly afraid of being bullied. This fear might further symbolise a fear of losing control (cf. Sarwar 2006, 58). The whole setting leaves the officer rather upset (see p. 70) resulting in him openly confessing to his despisal of imperialism (see p. 70). Subsequently, the main character admits to his secret alliance with the Burmese; however, this alliance only seems to be upheld in his mind (see p.70) and does not influence his actions. This contrast suits Orwell's statement: "[T]he oppressed are always right and the oppressors are always wrong'" (George Orwell quoted in Colls 2013, 10). Furthermore, quite at the beginning of the essay, he utters he feels guilty (p. 70).

4.3.2. The Burmese

Orwell's portrayal of the Burmese in "Shooting an Elephant" is under the influence of strong hierarchical believes and European imperialist mindset and also of an autodiegetic narrator with limited abilities and knowledge.

The imperialistic point of view does not include any appreciation for the colonised. Although the main character of "Shooting an Elephant" does express feeling genuinely sorry for them („I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British" (p. 70)), his empathy does not reach any deeper than superficial pity. On the contrary, the Burmese are portrayed in a very ugly, unpleasant and uncivilised way and the events are depicted as if their anger came out of thin air. This has a very strong effect on the reader. (cf. Sarwar 2006, 57).

The Burmese are described to have "sneering yellow faces" (p. 70; ß. 74), to have "hideous laughter[s]" (p. 70) and to be wearing "garish clothes" (p. 74). The nudity of the children on page 72 and the natives "clicking their tongues" (p. 72) seem to intent to emphasise the Burmese being uncivilised. One particular non-European shall not be neglected here although he is not a local: the dead Dravidian coolie[2]. His almost completely exposed body is found in the mud and is depicted in a very grotesque manner with his arms crossed, his head bent to one side, his eyes wide open and his mimic still showing the pain he had suffered (cf. p. 72)

All this descriptions seem to intent to strictly contrast the Burmese and the coolie from the Europeans. The "anti-European feeling" (p. 69) and behaviour of

[2] Southern-Indian labourer without expertise (cf. Korff & Ringel-Eichinger 2005, 73)

the locals is assessed by the narrator as referring back to their hatred towards him (p. 69). To be more exact, the Burmese disagree with the system and the role the British officer plays within it whereas he seems to blame their antipathy on his person. As a result, the narrator's examination which he projects onto his encounters with the natives is not exact. The intention of portraying himself as the natives' bully victim is depicted throughout incidents such as the Burmese pestering European women (p. 69) and them being unfair football players (p. 70). Furthermore, the natives are described as being cowards (p. 69) and the Buddhist priests are even said to be lazy and "jeer[ing] at Europeans" (p. 70). When the narrator is trying to locate the elephant, he also interviews some Burmese on the matter but almost immediately resigns as from his point of view, information from the Burmese is unreliable and controversial in addition to them having no sense for details (p. 72).

Despite his portrayed contempt towards the Burmese, there also some hints of a rather contradictory mindset of the British main character towards them. For instance, on the one hand, he wishes to "drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts" (p. 70) whereas on the other hand, he admits the Burmese are "prostrate people" (p. 70) oppressed by the very system the central character himself is a part of. When it comes to the incident of the elephant ravaging near the natives' homes which were more closely described in "2.4 Setting of the Story", the reader learns the Burmese "have no weapons (p. 70f; 74). This contributes to them being "helpless" against the elephant and further it means that they do not actually endanger the British. In result, the narrator did not have to be afraid of them (p. 76). The helplessness and inferiority of the natives towards the British is once again clearly depicted in the very end of the story when "the [elephant's] owner was furious, but he was only an Indian and could do nothing" (p. 78). Despite this, the narrator does not hesitate to provide yet another contradictory statement on his opinion of the Burmese when he states there was a Burmese sub-inspector (p. 72) with the police and describes some of the Burmese as "experienced-looking" (p. 75). On the one hand, Orwell expresses his moral conflict very explicitly e.g. when his protagonist says he was „stuck between [his] hatred of the Empire [he] served and [his] rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible" (p. 70), but on the other hand, he tends to soft-pedal his feelings (cf. Sarwar 2006, 56) e.g. when he expresses that „feelings like these are normal by-products of imperialism" (p. 70). He does not seem to emphasise with the natives enough in order to defend them (cf. Gomis & Onega 2005, 207).

During the event of finding and preparing himself for shooting the elephant, the portrayal of the Burmese suddenly becomes very one-sided. The group of natives is presented as a group that could not be portrayed more anonymously and grotesquely. Sarwar criticises Orwell's "incapacity to portray Burma as a society of real human beings" (Sarwar 2006, 59) and refers to it as a result of his "disregard of Burmese reality" (Sarwar 2006, 59). He continues by stating the „perspective of the natives [had been] marginalized or totally ignored" (Sarwar 2006, 59). In fact, the narrator does describe the behaviour of the anonymous huge crowd solely from his own perspective. They are portrayed as if they were about to cheeringly witness a sensational event. This impression is supported by the choice of words for when "the whole population of the quarter flocked out of the houses and followed me [...] shouting excitedly" (p. 73). Further, the British central character feels the Burmese "had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that it was going to be shot" (p. 73). When he loads his gun, it is said that there was a "deep, low, happy sigh, as of people who see the theatre curtain go up at last" (p. 76) and a "devilish roar of glee that went up from the crowd" (p. 76). The Burmese are depicted as a "jostling" (p. 73), "immense crowd, [of] two thousand at least" (p. 74). The narrator continues to describe their

> faces [to look] 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 realised that I should have to shoot the elephant after all. (p. 74)

It is in that moment when he himself makes use of a sensory verb in order to describe his assessment of the situation which unmasks his limitedness of what is truly going on in the minds of the observers by expressing he "[felt] their two thousand wills pressing [him] forward" (p. 74). Sarwar interprets the depiction of the natives as „Orwell [...] not [being able to] overcome the limitations of his political context accepting the natives as equal human beings" (Sarwar 2006, 58). Despite a general agreement to this interpretation, the narrator admits "it was a bit of fun to them, as it would be to an English crowd" (p. 73). At least, he assumes that English observers might have behaved in a similar manner which can be understood as a sign of acknowledging similarities between the English and the Burmese, although in this case they are not complementing similarities for either of the parties.

While preparing for the shot, the main character conjectures the Burmese are so eager for him to shoot the elephant, because "they want [...] the meat." (p.

73). Later, the narrator states that “Burmans were already racing past [him] across the mud” right after the elephant fell to the ground (p. 77) and that they “were bringing dash and baskets even before [he] left, and [he] was told they had stripped his body almost to the bones by afternoon” (p. 78). Sarwar criticises the Burmese for hovering over the elephant’s dead body for meat instead of saving it (cf. Sarwar 2006, 57), but his criticism does not take not of the likely possibility that the Burmese might have suffered from great hunger under the British rule. Furthermore, some mention should be made of the fact that ivory is not mentioned at all in that scene, so the interest of the natives was likely not due to the value of the elephant’s tusks.

4.3.3. The Elephant

It is debatable whether the elephant counts as a character but as the focus of this paper is to assess the symbolic role of the elephant, a reason for an analysis of the elephant’s characterisation is provided.

The elephant is already unofficially introduced through the title, but when it’s first mentioned within the plot, it is currently “ravaging the bazaar” (p. 71). Almost immediately after, the phrase “to kill an elephant” is dropped referring to the weapon the police officer possesses. Again, almost directly, the reader learns that the grey mammal is “not [...] a wild elephant, but a tame one which had gone ‘must’” (p. 71). This sets the first contrast as it implies the elephant is not to be blamed for what is happening. As elephants are uncontrollable during their fertile days, the elephant had been chained up. When it escaped, it had “destroyed somebody’s bamboo hut, killed a cow and raided some fruit-stalls” (p. 71). The portrayal of the elephant takes an even worse turn when it is described how it killed a coolie: “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” (p. 72). In the following it is among other names called “the great beast” (p. 72) and a “steam-roller” (p. 75) which refer to its strength, power and monumentality.

In contrast to that, the narrator explains a “working elephant [...] [was] comparable to a huge and costly piece of machinery” (p. 74) and that the animal had a “preoccupied grandmotherly air” (p. 75). Acknowledging the value of the elephant and comparing it to an elderly female relative clearly state that the

narrator did not feel endangered by the large-eared mammal in that moment. Nevertheless, the contradictory descriptions keep escalating. The narrator illustrates the elephant “tearing up bunches of grass, beating them against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth”. Verbs of violence seem to be used here in order to portray the elephant as a frightening creature. Opposing, almost directly afterwards, the animal is described to be “peacefully eating” and to be “look[ing] no more dangerous than a cow”. Furthermore, the storyteller assumes the “attack of ‘must’ was already passing off” and that if that was the case, the elephant “would merely wander harmlessly around” (p. 74). During his peaceful assessments of the elephant he decided to “watch him for a little while to make sure he did not turn savage again, and then go home” (p. 74). When he looks at the crowd watching him, he changes his mind, however. Although the danger is probably already over by then, he shoots the elephant. The only doubts he can think of are that it is a “shame to shoot an elephant for killing a coolie, because an elephant was worth more than any damn Coringhee coolie” (p. 78). “Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly.” (p. 75)and that “the beast’s owner [as] to be considered” (p. 75). The elephant’s death is described in a very detailed and almost horrifying way. The animal is most likely suffering from incredible pain. The themes aging and time play a significant role in the vocabulary on pages 76 to 78 which can be related to the connotation of elephants with longevity. Furthermore, the dying elephant is depicted throughout a diverse choice of adjectives which express both horror and sympathy. As the scene of the elephant dying is the main reference point for the final interpretation, dealing with this scene is postponed onto the next chapter.

4.4. Major Conflict

The story clearly portrays several conflicted situations such as the one between the British officer and the elephant as well as between Europeans and natives and also amongst the British colonisers. Despite the plot and character constellations suggesting the major conflict might be the one between the central character and the Burmese, a different and more dominant perspective of this conflicts is implied. Owing to the fact that the story is written from an autodiegetic perspective, the inner conflict of the narrator and protagonist presents itself at

first glance. This internal struggle results among other things from the imperialist mentality the central character had grown up with and from actively taking part in the system of colonialism. This background clashes with the experiences he makes in Burma. The result is a contradictory perspective on colonialism. In conclusion, the major conflict with emphasis on the “the moral dilemmas of the imperialist“ (Sarwar 2006, 57) cannot be interpreted without the events in the protagonist’s surroundings.

5. Interpretation of the Story

The Foreshadowing within the title already takes away most of the tension, so the story is likely not about *what* happens but what is it about? This is the question, this chapter intents to answer at last. Looking at the parallels between the elephant and the oppressed Burmese as well as the elephant’s significance within the inner conflict of the protagonist, two interpretations will be presented. The chapter will conclude with the interpretation of the elephant standing for a failure of the colonialist system altogether.

5.1. The Elephant as a Symbol of the Oppressed Burmese

First of all, it is important to keep in mind that the narrator provides contradictory and contrasting images of nearly everything, but this subchapter will focus on the elephant and the Burmese in particular. It intents to prove the ambiguously portrayed characters have several aspects in common.

As elephants and Burmese are indigenous to Burma, but the narrator is not, both are -at least at first- rather rare encounters for him. Unproven assumptions and rumours circulating are often the result of people of different faith, ethnicity or social status having few points of contact (cf. Benita Parry quoted in Blackstock 2005, 186). The same seems to be the case for elephants taking into account all the legends, myths and superficial knowledge people have come up with. Inter alia through the officer possessing of a gun, the Burmese and the massive animal take subordinate roles to him. Despite the large number of Burmese, they are shrouded in the anonymity of the crowd. Both the elephant and the natives seem to be collateral damage on the protagonist's pursuit of what he thinks he ought to do. Orwell even once suggested the Burmese were too stupid to notice they were being exploited (cf. George Orwell quoted in Butzko & Pongratz 2005, 225; original emphasis).

Seemingly in accordance to their place in the hierarchy, the animal and the local people are described as beasts, savage, wild and uncivilised and every effort is made to keep up that image. The strong elephant is tied up because of its uncontrollable behaviour which is interpreted as "uncivilised". In a similar manner, the Burmese have been colonised by the British because they are convinced the Asians need to be civilised. Both intentions result in oppression. Later on, elephant's escape and its actions during its 'must' period seem to be blamed on it as well as the Burmese are blamed for getting back at the colonisers and for hovering over the elephant's body. While the elephant is simply unable to control itself due to natural causes, there is a slight possibility that the aggression and violence of the natives are a result of oppression. The natives might be provoked to destructive behavior because they are being oppressed, colonised, exploited. Naturally, as they are human, they are gifted with choice. So are they innocent?

In a nutshell, the elephant symbolises the countries which have been degraded through their conquering by the British (cf. Sarwar 2006, 56) „while the Burmese represent its helpless people" (Sarwar 2006, 56). The Elephant's size

and strength are turned into incapability when it is shot as it suddenly is „powerless to move, yet powerless to die“ (p. 77). This is a metaphor for how the colonised countries developped under British rule. According to Sarwar, the natives and the elephant are the main victims of this situation (cf. Sarwar 2006, 56). Is this the aspect of injustice Orwell intended to expose? Does he demand that neither the elephant nor the Burmese should be blamed for the circumstances forced upon them?

5.2. The Elephant as a Symbol of the Degradation of the Protagonist

In a similar manner to how the ambiguous descriptions of the Burmese and the elephant enabled finding parallels between them, the elephant can also be interpreted as resembling some of the aspects of the protagonist. Both are characterised in a complex and diverse way.

In general, the biggest living land mammal and the protagonist share being strong, including being stronger than the Burmese, despite the obvious degradation process of both which they also share. The degradation of the elephants starts when it goes “must” and can no longer control itself. The main character’s struggle of whether to shoot the elephant is a small conflict which stands for the larger conflict of being stuck between personal opinions and the obligations forced upon him by the system.

The king of all animals (cf. Schenda 1995, 59) is further degraded when it is shot by the human. From the first shot on, there is a sudden change within both characters. The motive of age and time is imposed on the reader. While the elephant seems to experience a very sudden and rapid aging process, an evenly sudden sense of realisation comes upon the narrator. One could assume the “two Orwells” are in a dispute over what they should think and feel. At the same time, this accelerated the degeneration of the central character. However, this comparison raises the question of whether the elephant had had a choice and whether it intentionally killed the coolie. This killing is what undoubtedly lasts upon the elephant and it is the seemingly legitimate reason for shooting it. For the narrator, his involvement in colonialism is the cause of him feeling like a victim, but it could be argued that he did have a choice.

“The elephant’s long agonizing death” (Sarwar 2006, 57) can be interpreted as a sign of how slowly and badly the narrator processes what he did. Sarwar

assumes Orwell unsuccessfully tried to calm down his bad conscience (cf. ibid, 56) by writing the story in a way that would „allow him to live with himself“ (Sarwar 2006, 56). He tries to portray himself as a bully victim. His failure becomes obvious as the story clearly does depict some controverse thoughts and events and his „final expression“ (Sarwar 2006, 56) of only having shot the elephant in order to fit the expectations towards a British official (cf. ibid), unmasks his true reasons. According to the English lecturer's assessment, there has not been a direct need for the elephant to be shot (cf. Sarwar 2006, 57), but that the main character did it solely to save himself from the ridicule (cf. ibid). He was afraid of being "pursued, caught, trampled on and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill" (p. 76) and in his opinion, this must have meant the even worse degradation.

6. Conclusion: The Elephant as a Symbol of Colonialism's Failure Altogether

The two previous subchapters already allowed for assumptions that through the combining element of the elephant symbol, there are more similarities visible between the narrator and the Burmese than one might have initially thought. In a failed colonialist system, there are no winners amongst the involved parties.

As the elephant is portrayed as both an illustrious as well as a degraded creature in "Shooting an Elephant", it is a very suitable point of reference for a synthesised interpretation of colonialism's failure and the roles of the characters within it. On the one hand, it enables including the protagonist and the Burmese on an equal level of interpretation. On the other hand, it provides for a complex symbol of colonialism which resulted in something all three parties have in common: they are experiencing injustice and oppression. The setting and other aspects of "Shooting an Elephant" are likely inspired from Orwell's biographical experiences with the Imperial Police in Burma.

The Burmese are colonised by the British who impose on them their belief they were somehow superior and more advanced in their state of evolution than the Burmese (cf. Blackstock 2005, 186). For more than 200 years, Britain had governed India before British territorial imperialism started to crumble in the early 20th century. The colonised Asians fought for their right of an independent state and achieved their goal after several wars had been fought.

The major injustice the big, grey mammal has to experience, is its death. But even before, the narrator cannot seem to make up his mind about what he thinks of the elephant. His perspective repeatedly changes and creates a puzzling image of the elephant which clearly also influenced his decision of whether to shoot the animal or not. After he fires the first shot, the elephant goes through a process of degradation from a highly appreciated animal of great strength, masculine power and internal qualities to being described with words such as “stricken, shrunken, immensely old”, “paralysed”, “desperate” and “agony” (p. 76). All the glorious as well as the mysterious connotations seem to fade away very slowly while the elephant dies a slow and painful death.

The protagonist feels oppressed by his own system as the imperialist mentality of “The White Man’s Burden” does not stop after civilising the colonised, but also addresses the fellow colonisers which includes himself (cf. Blackstock 2005, 186). Consequently, the oppression the central character is suffering from, is one that he at least partly inflicts on himself. When he feels he has to act powerfully for the sake of ensuring his power (cf. Stansky 1983, 11), he exposes being “a victim of imperialism, a captive of its by-products, of isolation and moral corruption, and of ist code of behaviour“ (Sarwar 2006, 58f). Still, he manages somehow to raise sympathy for his self-inflicted suffering. However, it shall not be denied the Burmese also expected him to stay in his role which „creates the irony of master becoming slave to fulfill his racial and imperial obligations“ (A.K.M. Rezaul Karim paraphrased in Sarwar 2006, 56) at the cost of his personal likes and dislikes“ (Sarwar 2006, 59).

As mentioned in 2.4 and as implied by the narrator on page 70, the plot of “Shooting an Elephant” most likely takes place “in the waning days of the British Raj (Burma was at the time considered to be part of British India – by the British at least)“ (Blackstock 2005, 194, comment in brackets is part of the quote; “Shooting an Elephant”, p. 70). The Burmese’ sufferings of oppression, the death of the animal and the degradation of the protagonist are a result of the elephant in the room: the failure of colonialism altogether. In the end, it oppresses all parties and makes them cause each other an incredible amount of pain.

Expressing it with Sarwar's words: „Together with the officer, the Burmese and the elephant portray an institution that is only capable of harm" (Sarwar 2006, 57). The story clearly presents that the main character is "repelled by the bastard versions of both cultures that the British rule in Burma has produced" (Blackstock 2005, 198). Was it Orwell's objective to expose the injustice and lies which preserved colonialism including the lies which he told himself through "Shooting an Elephant"? Whether it was his intention or not, the lies *are* exposed, the story is out there -whether its plot is factual or not- and the conflicts of territorial imperialism are presented in a detailed manner that one would absolutely not expect from a short story.

The incident of shooting the elephant caused the colonialist dilemma of the protagonist to accelerate, but it was not at all the starting point. In the end, the fear of being made fun of triumphed over the pressure of keeping up the authority of the British as well as the increasing inner contempt towards colonialism. The final sentence uttered by the "older Orwell" gives us clues on his true grounds. It would certainly be an interesting research aspect to focus on the "two Orwells" in the story and primarily target the discourse level as, although it is quite short, the story has a lot of unexploited potential.

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*Note: All quotes and corresponding page numbers from "Shooting an Elephant" were taken from

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