

Three Summaries of “Shooting an Elephant”

One sentence summary:

In George Orwell’s narrative essay “Shooting an Elephant,” he describes the experience of shooting an angry elephant against his own conscience in response to the pressure from the native Burmese bystanders.

One paragraph summary:

In George Orwell’s narrative essay “Shooting an Elephant,” he recalls a time when he was forced to shoot an angry elephant while serving as a police officer in occupied Burma. Initially, Orwell did not plan on shooting the elephant, because this once “must” (82) elephant was peacefully eating grass when he found it. However, to “avoid looking a fool” (88) and under the pressure of the native Burmese bystanders, he ultimately chose to shoot the elephant. Considering that the elephant had killed a native man while on his rampage, Orwell was legally in the right, but this did not stop the incident from haunting his conscience for years to come.

Three paragraph summary:

In George Orwell’s narrative essay “Shooting an Elephant,” he describes his experience of killing an elephant while serving as a police officer in English-occupied Burma. At that time, the relationship between the natives and colonists was tense; the natives often jeered at the colonists with a bitter “anti-European feeling” (80). Orwell claims that he was against European oppression “theoretically—and secretly, of course,” but even though he sides with the natives politically, he is often the target of their cruel jokes and admits that he does not like them very much (81).

One day, Orwell receives notice that a “must” elephant is ravaging the bazaar (82). As Orwell tracks the elephant, he discovers that a native man has been trampled to death. In order to defend himself if necessary, he sends for an elephant rifle and begins tracking the loose animal. The excited crowd follows him, anticipating an entertaining showdown between Orwell and the elephant and also interested in the animal’s meat. When they find the elephant, however, it is peacefully eating grass. Orwell immediately sees that the elephant is no longer a threat. His reason tells him that he should not shoot the elephant, and yet he believes that he “had got to shoot the elephant... to come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at [his] feet, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible” (85).

In order to avoid being humiliated in front of the natives, Orwell decides that he must shoot the elephant. And when the elephant does not die, he continues shooting until he runs out of ammunition, and then leaves. Half an hour later, the elephant finally dies and the natives strip its meat. Orwell knows that he is legally in the right because the elephant killed a native man, but that does not stop the incident from haunting his conscience for years to come. In the end, he is left wondering whether “any of the others grasped that [he] had done it solely to avoid looking a fool” (88).