“Shooting an Elephant” Questions

A) The Reluctant Imperialist

1. How does Orwell feel about the British presence in Burma? How does he feel about his job with the Indian Imperial police? What are some of the internal conflicts Orwell describes feeling in his role as a colonial police officer? How do you know?

2. He wrote and published this essay a number of years after he had left the civil service. How does Orwell describe his feelings about the British Empire, and about his role in it, both at the time he took part in the incident described, and at the time of writing the essay, after having had the opportunity to reflect upon these experiences? Point to examples in the text to support your view.

3. What did Orwell mean by the following sentence: “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.”

* Discuss the following passages and what they tell us about Orwell's conflicted feelings towards the project of empire and the people who have been colonized. The two passages included here may help you to begin thinking about the tension in the text; however, wherever possible you should utilize other examples from throughout the essay to think about the questions which follow.

“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… 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 the 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.”

* In saecula saeculorum is a liturgical term meaning "for ever and ever".

1. Orwell states that he was against the British in their oppression of the Burmese. However, Orwell himself was British, and in his role as a police officer he was part of the oppression he is speaking against. How can he be against the British and their empire when he is a British officer of the empire?

2. What does Orwell mean when he writes that he was "theoretically… all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors." Why does he use the word "theoretically" in this sentence, and what does he mean by it?

3. How does this "theoretical" belief conflict with his actual feelings? Does he show empathy or sympathy for the Burmese in his description of this incident? Does he show a lack of sympathy? Both? Focus on the kind of language Orwell uses. How does he convey these feelings through his use of language?

4. Does Orwell believe these conflicting feelings can be reconciled? Why or why not?

5. What does he mean by "the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East"?

* Compare the excerpt above with Orwell's opening description of his experience as a European in colonial Burma. Again, the two passages included here may help you to begin thinking about the tension in the text; however, you should utilize examples from throughout the essay to think about the questions which follow.

“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
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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.”

1. Knowing that Orwell had sympathy for the position of the Burmese under colonialism, how does it make you feel to read the description of the way in which he was treated as a policeman?
2. Why do you think the Burmese insulted and laughed at him?
3. The first sentence of this paragraph is "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." What does he mean when he says he was "important enough" to be hated?
4. As a colonial police officer Orwell was both a visible and accessible symbol to many Burmese. What did he symbolize to the Burmese?
5. Orwell was unhappy and angry in his position as a colonial police officer. Why? At whom was his anger directed? What did the Burmese symbolize to Orwell?

B) The Price of Saving Face

Orwell states "As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him." Later he says "...I did not want to shoot the elephant." Despite feeling that he ought not take this course of action, and feeling that he wished not to take this course, he also feels compelled to shoot the animal. In this activity you will be asked to discuss the reasons why Orwell felt he had to kill the elephant.

* Read the following excerpt and discuss the questions which follow.

“It was perfectly clear to me what I ought to do. I ought to walk up to within, say, 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 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.... 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 probably that some of them would laugh. That would never do.”

1. Orwell repeatedly states in the text that he does not want to shoot the elephant. In addition, by the time that he has found the elephant, the animal has become calm and has ceased to be an immediate danger. Despite this, Orwell feels compelled to execute the creature. Why?
2. Orwell makes it clear in this essay that he was not a particularly talented rifleman. In the excerpt above he explains that by attempting to shoot the elephant he was putting himself into grave danger. But it is not a fear for his "own skin" which compels him to go through with this course of action. Instead, it was a fear outside of "the ordinary sense." What did Orwell fear?
3. In colonial Burma a small number of British civil servants, officers and military personnel were vastly outnumbered by their colonial subjects. They were able to maintain control, in part, because they possessed superior firepower- a point made clear when Orwell states that the "Burmese population had no weapons and were quite helpless against (the elephant)." Yet, Orwell's description of the relationship between the Burmese and Europeans indicates that the division of power was not necessarily that simple. How did the Burmese resist their colonial masters through non-violent means? Show examples from the text to support your ideas.
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C) Reading Between the Lines
Read the following passages from the essay, which you should then use as a jumping off point for answering the following questions. Answers may be supplemented with other examples from the text.

Metaphor

“But at that moment I glanced round at the crowd that had followed me. It was an immense crowd… 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. I 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…”

1. In this passage Orwell uses a series of metaphors: "seemingly the lead actor," "an absurd puppet," "he wears a mask," "a conjurer about to perform a trick." as well as comparing the colonial official to a "posing dummy." Examine this series of metaphors individually as well as collectively in order to find the overarching metaphor for the entire incident.
2. If Orwell is "seemingly the lead actor," who is the audience? What is the 'part' he is playing?
3. if he is "an absurd puppet," then who is the puppeteer? Does Orwell as the puppet have only one person or group pulling his strings, or is there more than one puppet master?
4. How are the metaphors of the "absurd puppet" and the "posing dummy" similar?
5. How does his description of himself seemingly the lead actor make this metaphor similar to the "absurd puppet" of the next phrase?
6. How is Orwell's description of the colonial official as 'wearing a mask' similar to his own part in this situation as the "lead actor"?
7. Each of these metaphors has a theatrical basis. In the following paragraph he even states: "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." What is the 'theater' in which this 'scene' is being 'played'? What is the 'play'?

How does Orwell use metaphors in order to describe a people and a situation geographically and culturally unfamiliar understandable to his readers?

Irony

“…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. “

1. When irony is employed by a writer the true intent of his or her words is covered up or even contradicted by the words that are used. Where is irony employed in this excerpt, and what is Orwell's true intent?
2. The use of irony often also presumes there being two audiences who will read or hear the delivery of the ironic phrase differently. One audience will hear only the literal meaning of the words, while another audience will hear the intent that lies beneath. Who are the two audiences to whom Orwell is speaking?
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Connotation and Denotation

In this section a series of sentences and phrases will be supplied which should provide examples for you to discuss the differences between the connotative and denotative meanings. Explain that denotative meanings are generally the literal meaning of the word, while connotative meanings are the "coloring" attached to words beyond their literal meaning. For example, the "army of people" Orwell refers to in his essay bring to mind not only a large group of people, but also a military and oppositional force. Explain the connotative and denotative meanings of the following examples.

1. One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening.
2. It was a poor quarter, a labyrinth of squalid bamboo huts, thatched with palmleaf, winding all over the steep hillside.
3. I marched down the hill, looking and feeling a fool, with the rifle over my shoulder and an ever-growing army of people jostling at my heels.
4. 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.
5. He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.

D) Persuasive Perspectives

Orwell was both an accomplished and a prolific essayist whose work covered a large number of topics. Many of his essays are written as third person commentaries or reviews, such as his "Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of Gulliver's Travels." Orwell often chose to include himself in his essays, writing from a first person perspective, such as that employed in one of his most famous essays, "Politics and the English Language."

In these works Orwell uses the first person perspective as a rhetorical strategy for supporting his argument. For example, he opens his 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language" with the following lines:

“Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language- so the argument runs- must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism,…. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes. “

In the paragraph which follows the above excerpt Orwell switches from the first person plural to the first person singular. By the second paragraph, however, he has already included his audience in his argument: we cannot do anything; our civilization is decadent. If we disagree with these sentiments, then we are ready to follow Orwell's argument over the following ten pages.

While he does not use the inclusive "we" in "Shooting an Elephant," Orwell's use of the first person perspective is a rhetorical strategy. Discuss Orwell's decision to utilize the first person perspective rather than the third person perspective. You might ask question such as:

1. How does seeing the incident through both the eyes of Eric Blair, the young colonial police officer, and George Orwell, the reflective essayist, support Orwell's argument?
2. How does the story change by having the narrator not only present, but active, in the action of the story?
3. How does the use of the first person perspective create a sense of sympathy or understanding for Orwell's position?
4. How would "Shooting an Elephant" be altered if it were written from a different perspective, such as in the third person? What would be gained by this shift in perspective? What would be lost?