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Auszug aus:

Orwell - Shooting an Elephant

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Thema: George Orwell – Shooting an Elephant (Interpretation)

TMD: 5155

Kurzvorstellung des Materials:

George Orwell is one of the most important British writers of the 20th century.

His works “Animal Farm” and “1984” made him famous all over the world; this material deals with his famous work “Shooting an Elephant” (1936)

Übersicht über die Teile

Interpretation, additional remarks
(Ohne Primärtext!)

Information zum Dokument

- Ca. 6 Seiten, Größe ca. 101 KByte

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was coated with mud, the eyes wide open, the teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony. [...] The friction of the great beast's foot had stripped the skin from his back as neatly as one skins a rabbit." (ll. 75-80)

In this fourth paragraph, the situation gets more critical and because of this the tension rises and the reader gets more and more excited. He wants to know what happens next.

In the next paragraph, the hunt for the elephant comes to its climax. Many Burmese, seeing the gun and the rifle and thinking that the narrator is going to kill the elephant, follow him. They do not know that the narrator is armed with the weapons for his own protection. It becomes clear that they only are interested in the elephant because they think he is going to be shot: "They had not shown much interest in the elephant when he was merely ravaging their homes, but it was different now that he was going to be shot." (ll. 89-90)

Here the propensity to violence of the Burmese people becomes very clear. The crowd gets bigger and bigger and the narrator feels very foolish: "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." (ll. 94-96) Finally, they find the elephant that stands out against the enraged crowd: "The elephant was standing eight yards from the road, his left side towards us. He took not the slightest notice of the crowd's approach. He was tearing up bunches of grass, beating him against his knees to clean them and stuffing them into his mouth." (ll. 99-102). In contrast to the crowd, the elephant now seems very peaceful and calm.

This passage constitutes the end of the hunt for the elephant and at the same time an interruption of the action. The elephant, which was described before as a furious beast now seems very peaceful whereas the Burmese crowd now seems furious. The end of this passage constitutes an important aspect regarding to the course of the short story, because now the narrator has to make an important decision: shooting or not shooting the now harmless elephant.

The next passage shows the feelings of the narrator towards the elephant and his thoughts about the whole matter. He thinks that it would be wrong to shoot a now harmlessly eating elephant and decides to watch him some time and then go home: "As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not shoot him. [...] And at that distance, peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow." (ll. 103-107)

This paragraph reflects the real feelings towards the shooting of the elephant. The animal is now described very peaceful and harmless.

The next passage constitutes the 'enlightenment' of the narrator. It is in this passage when he understands the real nature of imperialism. He turns around and sees the faces of the immense outraged crowd: "I looked at the sea of yellow faces above the garish clothes-faces all happy and excited over this bit of fun, all certain that the elephant was going to be shot. They were watching me as they would watch a conjurer about to perform a trick. They did not like me, but with the magical rifle in my hands I was momentarily worth watching. And suddenly I realized that I should have to shoot the elephant after all." (ll. 115-120)

This moment constitutes the 'enlightenment' and insight of the narrator. He understands that he is going to shoot the elephant just because the crowd expects it of him and he realizes the way imperialism works, which becomes especially clear in the following sentences: "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 peace; but in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind.” (ll. 121-126)

And then follows the probably most important sentence and the essence of this work by George Orwell: “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom he destroys.” The narrator realizes that the ‘white men’ or the oppressors are nothing else than “conventionalized figures” (l. 128) and that they are their own prisoners. They have to do what the ‘native people’ expect of them and in this case, when they see a white man with a gun they expect him to kill someone. Because of this, the ‘white man’ (in the East) is never free: “He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.” (ll. 130-131)

Because of this, he has to shoot the elephant; he does not want the crowd to laugh at him: “And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at.” (ll. 136-137)

This is the most important passage of the whole short story, because here the narrator begins to understand the real nature of imperialism and he realizes that the oppressors themselves are the ones who are not free. This paragraph contains the essence of the whole story: it carries a clearly anti-imperialistic message that becomes most evident in this main paragraph of the story. It becomes clear that after realizing this, the narrator has no choice: he has to shoot the elephant.

Although, like already said before, he has no choice, the next paragraph shows that the narrator does not want to shoot the elephant and that he has real feelings of guilt, especially when he watches the peaceful animal: “I watched him beating his bunch of grass against his knees, with that preoccupied grandmotherly air that elephants have. It seemed to me that it would be murder to shoot him. [...] Somehow it always seems worse to kill a *large* animal.” (ll. 138-142)

He takes also other aspects into consideration, for example the value of the elephant: “Alive, the elephant was worth at least a hundred pounds; dead, he would only be worth the value of his tusks, five pounds, possibly.” (ll. 143-145) As a last step before he acts, the narrator asks some Burmese people after the behavior of the elephant and they seem to affirm the conviction of the narrator (in *not* shooting the elephant): “They all said the same thing: he took no notice of you if you left him alone, but he might charge if you went too close to him.” (ll. 147-148)

This paragraph shows the last thoughts and actions of the narrator before the shooting of the elephant. Once again it becomes clear that he does not want to kill the elephant and that it would be wrong to do it; but he knows that he has to do it because of the pressure of the Burmese crowd.

In the beginning of the next paragraph, the narrator thinks about the things he *ought* to do but will not 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.” (ll. 149-152)

There is one moment of hesitation when the narrator describes with some irony his situation: “For at that moment, with the crowd watching me, I was not afraid in the ordinary sense, as I would have been if I had been alone. A white man mustn't be frightened in front of ‘natives’; and so, in general, he isn't frightened.” (ll. 156-159)



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