

George Orwell & Lawrence Durrell

Objectives

1. Describe the colonized and colonizer.
2. Recognize *representations* of the colonizer and colonized.
3. Describe basic material or economic relationships between the colonizer and the colonized.
4. Identify representations of the colonized in academic disciplines and popular culture.

Reading Assignment

Durrell, Lawrence. "From the Elephant's Back." *From the Elephant's Back: Collected Essays and Travel Writings*, edited by James Gifford, U Alberta P, 2018, pp. 1–24.

Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant." *Postcolonial Literature*, XanEdu, 2018, pp. 7–12.

Commentary

[George Orwell](#) (1903–50) and [Lawrence Durrell](#) (1912–90) were both colonials, knew each other, and corresponded. Orwell, whose real name was Eric Arthur Blair, was born in British India, as was Durrell. However, they had very different experiences of the British Raj. Orwell's father came to India to work in the Opium Department of the Indian Civil Service, and he returned to England as an infant – he later returned eighteen years later in 1922 to work in Burma, the experience of which led to his essay "Shooting an Elephant." In contrast, Durrell's parents and grandparents were born in British India and he was raised there. Also, his father was not a colonial official and worked in private business as an engineer, most often with Indian business partners. Durrell was only sent "home" aged eleven in 1924 by his parents, who had never yet been to England, and he never returned to India. Because his parents were not born in Britain, Durrell was later designated as a "non-patrial" during British efforts to reduce emigration by British subjects from India, Pakistan, and the West Indies. This meant that while he had a British

passport, he needed a visa to enter the United Kingdom and did not have the right to settle there.

Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant" articulates his experience serving in the Burma police, and it was published in 1936. Orwell's elephant is an artefact of the period of British rule, even though it symbolizes the coming collapse of the British Raj. Durrell's essay "From the Elephant's Back" first began as a lecture in 1981 in French (Durrell left England in 1935 and had lived in France for 25 years by this point). Durrell's elephant was published 35 years after Indian independence and is a part of the postcolonial period, even though it looks back to remember the British Empire. Hence, they are quite different.

Orwell's Elephant

Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" is one of his most widely taught essays, perhaps second only to "Politics and the English Language." The first thing for us to recognize is his ironical tone. The opening of the essay adopts a voice unusual to Orwell's essays with its pettiness, but this makes more sense when we remember the anti-heroes of his novels – Orwell's protagonists are often quite unlikable. They are petty and trivial, very often nursing hurt feelings over perceived wounds, and they tend to treat others quite poorly. Orwell, in his essays, typically takes a very different voice that seeks social justice, so the opening complaint of being discriminated against as a colonizer will strike his readers as unusual. Orwell objected to British imperialism, so the opening image of the author saying "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" (Orwell 7) is unexpected. After all, the Burmans are the victims in this relationship, not the Europeans who exploit and police them...

This posture begins to make more sense when we remember Orwell's primary audience: the English at home, reading in England. He seeks their sympathy, and the key ambition of his essay is to show how both the colonizer and the colonized are mutually degraded by their colonial relationship with each other. The colonized Burmans are degraded by being dominated and could only resist "in an aimless, petty kind of way" (7). However, in the same relationship, Orwell as the subdivisional police officer charged with dominating them becomes increasingly petty. He turns this opening in the second paragraph by recovering his more expected analytic tone that is much more like what we expect from him. As Orwell presents the problem, he becomes of two minds because of the situation he was in with the Burmese: "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" (7). In this, "beasts" is of course ironical in context – this is the kind of racist insult Orwell would hear others make sincerely, and his repetition of it in the situation shows how his own thinking increasingly took on that racism even as he critiqued it and "was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British" (7).

After presenting this mutually degrading relationship in which two sets of people take on roles they despise (the colonized and the colonizers), Orwell then gives us the story itself, which is an allegory. This opening, however, should prepare us as readers for the meaning of his story of the escaped elephant. Orwell, after all, took on his job because he had fewer reasonable economic opportunities at home. That is, he was not in Burma to be a loyal British subject forwarding the Empire – he was there because he needed a job, and this one paid... Likewise, the Burmese who mocked him (in his argument) take on their servile role also because it is the only kind of resistance available to them. They are *both* caught in the trap of colonialism itself, although obviously one has a much more lucrative and easier position within that trap.

This problem then frames the shooting of the elephant. As Orwell writes, "As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him" (9) yet he "has got to appear resolute" (10) in order to hold onto his position of authority over the Burmese. The lengthy indecision that takes nearly two pages shows this conflict in detail before Orwell ultimately decides to get on with what we already know, from the title of the essay, is inevitable: the shooting. How we read this process is the crux of how we read Orwell's views on colonialism, or at least how he could *show* those views to a British readership that would not tolerate being *told* them explicitly.

The closing gesture of the essay tests us further as readers. Orwell has already said in the opening of the essay that in his naïveté of youth, "I did not even know that the British Empire is dying" (3). This cues us to read in the elephant's death, the Empire's coming death as well. It is as inevitable a part of the colonial relationship as are the roles taken on by the colonizer and the colonized with which Orwell opens the essay. As the elephant is shot for the third and final time, and while it is dying,

in falling he seemed for a moment to rise, for as his hind legs collapsed beneath him he seemed to tower upwards like a huge rock toppling, his trunk reaching skywards like a tree. He trumpeted, for the first and only time. (11)

This suggest that Orwell's moment in Burma, in which his dominance over the colonized seems total, is also the moment of the elephant's

death, towering upwards in the act of falling. The recognition Orwell experiences in this moment is that it is “dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die” (12) like the Empire itself, which could neither cease its colonization and exploitation nor change the inevitable collapse that colonialism drove it toward. The Empire itself is “towering upwards in the act of falling..., powerless to move and yet powerless to die.” And then it dies.

Durrell’s Elephant

Durrell takes a profoundly different approach from Orwell. His opening speaks to potential reconciliations. Rather than setting up an opposition, Durrell writes of himself as “Anglo-Indian” (“From” 13). He remembers himself as a child in British India as well as the elephant as a child, named Sadu. The elephant is an orphan; its parent having been shot. Without adults between them, Durrell’s argument is toward integration. It is a syncretic approach, and this reflects Durrell’s novels just as Orwell’s irony does his. As an example, when Durrell describes his father’s railway (the “toy railway” climbing the hills near Darjeeling, which still operates today), he immediately compares it to the “railway lines of the Gard” in the south of France where he lived (17). Likewise, the school he attends in Canterbury when he is sent away to England “resembled very closely the school I had quitted in Darjeeling” (17). In Durrell’s response to colonialism, places and people are linked to each other rather than set in conflict.

Our challenge as readers is to consider how Durrell’s syncretic thought works. In one respect, he avoids the darkness of colonialism by only using its scenarios from scenes of his childhood. This permits the building of bonds and relationships. When he returns to it more seriously, it is to argue for an emerging modern recombination of East and West, but he does this by drawing from the discourse of “two cultures” (20). His reference in this is specific: C.P. Snow’s lectures on the two cultures of Science and the Humanities, which became the book *The Two Cultures & the Scientific Revolution* (1959). Snow’s argument was that Western cultures have separated scientific and humanistic thought so much that people with advanced knowledge of one rarely have a rudimentary knowledge of the other. The example most often drawn from Snow is comparing Shakespeare to the Second Law of Thermodynamics to ask how many people with a deep familiarity with one also have a rudimentary understanding of the other. The answer is relatively few without a Liberal Arts general education... You may think of Said’s argument about [Orientalism](#) and Foucauldian “styles” of knowledge for this issue, such as how Mathematics either is or is not an “Arts” subject.

Is the style of knowledge that separates the Humanities and the Sciences helpful or harmful? Should we strive for, at least at the undergraduate level, students to have a wide familiarity with both intellectual fields? Should that broadening of intellectual capabilities also include practical training or skills for jobs? You, as a student, likely have strong feelings about this.

Durrell's point in referring to Snow is that these pursuits are not entirely separate from each other, and the great challenge is for us to find their points of reconciliation – this is a syncretic way of thinking. It seeks integration across difference or finds ways to compromise between differences. In a sense, it seeks what different groups have in common and compromises where they are distinct. The gesture that emerges from this in Durrell's essay is that the former colonizer and colonized likewise must work to find their points of reconciliation. His examples of this are specific: "Valéry studied mathematics, [Eliot](#) was familiar with the precepts of Patanjali, [Rilke](#), and [Yeats](#) also" (20). These are the poets of his time period, and he is pointing out that they all engaged in other pursuits as well, including the scientific and the religious, the modernist and the esoteric. T.S. Eliot studied Sanskrit and the *Upanishads* while at Harvard for his PhD, and Yeats collaborated with Shree Purohit Swami on a selected translation of the *Upanishads*. Durrell's reference to Heraclitus is in the same tradition, emphasizing the ancient philosopher's fame for harmonizing forms of difference and accepting instability as normal.

This Heraclitean or syncretic paradigm has much appeal, but it may also risk effacing or minimizing forms of difference. Where it finds commonality, it is less able to find genuinely irreconcilable cultural differences. However, the opposite tendency we see in Orwell's emphasis on difference also has the potential to lead to conflict and social divisions such as racism.

Questions for Self-Review

1. Durrell and Orwell argued with each other whenever they interacted. From reading their essays, why do you think this was so?
2. What do you think is the most important difference between Orwell's and Durrell's elephants?
3. How do Orwell's representations of the Burmese make you feel?
4. How does Durrell's reconciliation of Orient and Occident make you feel?
5. Are these colonial or decolonizing essays? Why?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading

Carr, Craig. *Orwell, Politics, & Power*. Bloomsbury, 2010.

Gifford, James. "Introduction." *Pied Piper of Lovers*, by Lawrence Durrell, ELS Editions, 2008, pp. vii–xvii. <https://tiinyurl.com/y8puwxcw>

Keskinen, Kenneth. "'Shooting an Elephant' – An Essay to Teach." *The English Journal*, v. 55, no. 6, 1966, 669–75.

Meyers, Jeffrey. *Orwell: Life & Art*. U Illinois P, 2010.

Nambiar, C. Ravindran. *Indian Metaphysics in Lawrence Durrell's Novels*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

Schweizer, Bernard. "George Orwell." *Radicals on the Road: The Politics of English Travel Writing in the 1930s*, U Virginia P, 2001, pp. 17–36.

Snow, C.P. *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge UP, 2012.

Taneja, Gulshan. "An Indian View of an Indian View: Durrell's India." *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, no. 40, 2011, 121–142. <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/2477>

Vassanji, M.G. "Looking at Them: The View Across the Street." *Transition*, no. 119, pp. 22–36.

Author: James Gifford
Editor: Lucie Kotesovska

