

Extended Essay

English B HL

The White Man's Burden or the White Man's Trap? Psychological Ruin and the
Collapse of Imperial Faith in Lawrence and Orwell

What are the ways in which T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and George Orwell's
"Shooting an Elephant" portray the personal cost of service to the empire and the loss of faith
in British imperial values?

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Introduction

The British Empire had its largest territory at the beginning of the twentieth century, but behind this lay a moral crisis. Writers who had once celebrated imperial heroism began to portray empire not as an original mission, but as a psychological and moral trap. These two works, T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) and George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), present powerful, first-person narratives of individuals who served imperial systems but feel morally guilty for this service. Both narrators, Lawrence among Arab rebels in the Middle East, Orwell as a police officer in colonial Burma, express not pride, but shame, guilt, and a crushing sense of performance. This essay argues that both texts reveal the personal cost of serving the empire through sincere psychological portrayal, symbolic settings, and ironic narration. Through these techniques, they reflect a broader collapse of faith in British imperial ideals.

While the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, a secret deal between Britain and France to divide Ottoman Arab lands, symbolizes imperial betrayal, this essay treats it only as historical background. As David Fromkin notes in *A Peace to End All Peace*, "The Middle East became what it is today both because the European powers undertook to re-shape it and because Britain and France failed to ensure that the dynasties, the states, and the political system that they established would permanently endure." (p. 563). The broken promise to the Arabs in World War I changed how the empire was seen in the Middle East. However, rather than analyzing treaties, this essay explores how literature reflects the psychological disillusionment that followed. The works of Lawrence and Orwell, although differing in setting, use a similar narrative technique that is raw and personal and involves elements of shame and symbolism in order to illustrate that it is not just the colonized that are corrupted by the Empire, but also those who work for it. This essay will use a literary critique approach in order to compare and contrast the works of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and "Shooting an Elephant."

Historical Context: Empire in Crisis

The confidence in the Empire was beginning to wane as well, particularly after the start of World War I. The war made clear the weakness of its control over its lands and its empty moral foundations. The 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement, in which Britain and France secretly divided Ottoman Arab territories.

It manifested in these historical changes in the biographical narratives of these imperial civil servants, such as T.E. Lawrence and George Orwell, who each realized that to be in the service of an empire one must compromise one's own sense of morality.

Moving away from the Victorian ideals of certainty and heroism, instead emphasizing doubt and decay, the writers portrayed the betrayal of Arab independence by the likes of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the injustices of imperial rule as perpetuated by Orwell's work. Through the use of the confessional and the ironic, it becomes clear that the empire had corrupted its agents and hidden the humanity of the colonized.

T.E. Lawrence: The Suffered Agent of Empire

In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T.E. Lawrence writes about his time in the Arab Revolt (1916-1918) in a humble light, being a man who tries to face reality. Lawrence writes about his time in a very honest, vulnerable, and critical light, while at the same time being an ambassador trying to introduce this sad state of affairs to other societies. Lawrence first admits that he suffered from "a constant and painful shame" (Lawrence, Chapter 48). This admission is attributed to the empire's hypocrisy, particularly because while Lawrence pretended that after defeating the Ottomans, the Arabs were going to gain independence. First, Lawrence admits that "I was constantly and painfully ashamed" (Lawrence, Chapter 48).

The reason for the imminent collapse of Lawrence's psychology is that he is compelled to apply a system he dislikes and finds very painful to his soul. The sin of shame is thus observed not only because of the lies presented by his country but also because of the dilemmas presented by the disunity of his identity. For example, Lawrence is in a situation where he is torn apart by his love for the Arabs and his romantic ties with people like Feisal while working in the imperialist society that compelled the Arabs to submit to their rule.

Briefly, Lawrence declares that instead of being a leader and a guide, he is a 'fraud, a puppet, and a traitor', terms which expose the moral bankruptcy of the colonizer. Lawrence, a man from the colonial empire, instead of establishing a divide between the colonial and the colonized, starts to establish an immaculate connection with people who are 'not colonial.'

The cost of this conflict is clearly shown by making constant mention of it through the text. When Lawrence finds himself crossing a desert, he expresses his pain to his audience through genuine expressions:

"My head was aching with fever and I could not think... The puffs of feverish wind pressed like scorching hands against our faces, burning our eyes. My pain made me breathe in gasps through the mouth; the wind cracked my lips and seared my throat till I was too dry to talk..." (Lawrence, Chapter 32).

That physical breakdown, which also means moral breakdown, highlights that having served the empire has literally consumed body and soul. Contrary to the unstoppable and extremely hardy British soldier in Victorian literature, Lawrence strongly holds himself up to his reader as vulnerable, tired, and ill, which means an absolute repudiation of the ideals of masculinity of the empire. Rather than glorifying manhood in the pursuit of empire, Lawrence also

constructionally exposes vulnerability in relation to being fevered, overcome with dysentery, and exhausted.

The desert, often romanticized in imperial literature, becomes a symbol of moral emptiness in Lawrence's hands.

“The bed of the valley was of fine quartz gravel and white sand. Its glitter thrust itself between our eyelids...” (Lawrence, Chapter 32).

This sensory overload is what is causing him distress. The desert is no escape, but rather a setting of isolation. Contrary to the traditional imperial tales that saw foreign lands as empty lands to be protected by the British, Lawrence portrays the desert as a place that defies control and moralization.

The structure of Lawrence's narrative also serves to enhance his critique. Rather than a linear chronology, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* establishes a repetitive cycle that combines philosophical reflections and tragicomic tales with those of battle. The disjointed nature of the text corresponds to the psychological condition of Lawrence, a mind that cannot sustain the conflict of consciences and the moral contradictions of societies. In what he wrote about the capture of Damascus, there is no mention of triumph: “Shamefaced with triumph... we drove back” (Lawrence, Chapter 82).

Perhaps most importantly, Lawrence employs a method of confession that encourages the reader to become a party to the crime. Lawrence does not separate himself from the violence of imperialism with jargon. Rather, he simply states: “I had to order the Indians from Azrak back to Feisal, and to return myself” (Lawrence, Chapter 93). This brings the reader face to face with the cost of imperialism in human terms and shatters the illusion of good faith rule by uncovering its violent foundations. Lawrence's memoirs are more than simply a record of

history, but also fulfill a moral duty. They highlight the psychological cost of living within and serving an empire built on deception.

Lawrence's relationship with his camel Wodheihā further illustrates his complex circumstances. As the camel struggles to walk in the snow, Lawrence recounts how he “beat its rump for a long time” and finally “used my bare feet and hands as tools to clear a beautiful path one foot wide, three feet deep, and eighteen paces long” (Lawrence, Chapter 89). The care he takes of the animal and his experiencing the physical pain alongside the animal humanizes him, while also revealing the contradiction of his role as a servant of the imperial system.

George Orwell: The Hollow Performance of Power

Lawrence recounts the empire's crisis in a long, comprehensive memoir, while Orwell condenses the completely same crisis into a single moment. The narrator, a police officer in Burma, confesses, “Theoretically—and secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British.” (Orwell, 1). Although he is morally on the side of the Burmese, his primary duty is to serve the imperial system. This conflict between belief and action makes him fall into a false trap of expectations. The painful truth Orwell revealed is that an empire not only expects obedience from its citizens, but also expects results.

The central event, the shooting of a mischievous elephant, is transformed into a metaphor for the ridiculous order of the empire. Orwell understands that the elephant was “peacefully eating, the elephant looked no more dangerous than a cow” (2). He stresses that it is unnecessary to shoot it, even from an economic point of view, “comparable to destroying a huge and costly piece of machinery” (2). However, society demands it. And so he understands: “I should have to shoot the elephant after all. The people expected it of me” (3). This is evidence that the service to the empire leads to a psychological conflict for the individual, as his own thoughts have to be abandoned in order to maintain the illusion of power and its continuity.

The part of the book where Orwell talks about the death of the elephant is one of the strongest examples of unnecessary suffering in literature. He talks about the suffering of the animal in a very clinical manner: “He was breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps, his great mound of a side painfully rising and falling” (4). It takes several shots to kill the animal, and Orwell admits: “still he did not die. His body did not even jerk when the shots hit him” (4). The elephant takes half an hour to die. Its drawn-out suffering mirrors the slow moral collapse of imperial service. Orwell tries again and again to end its pain, but cannot just as he cannot escape the role forced on him.

He admits: “I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind me” (Orwell, 3). Empire, he shows, is not about justice or strength, but performance. The white man is as trapped by it as anyone else: to hesitate is to lose face; to be laughed at. “When the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys” (3). This sacrifice of personal independence provides the moral foundation of the essay.

The elephant's prolonged death, “breathing very rhythmically with long rattling gasps” (4), shows the heavy but painful moral decay of serving the empire. The pain Orwell feels is not something he can easily ignore or intervene in.

At the beginning of the work, the tension in the line “I was hated by large numbers of people” (1) is palpable. “He holds the rifle, but he is ridiculed, tripped, spat on.” He sweats, shivers, feels like a “fool” (2). These are moments that emphasize that the struggle is real, not imaginary.

The way the work is written is not limited to conveying the themes presented in the work. It is also about bringing light to the context of the work: first an event, then a path of reasoning. Each paragraph leads on from the last and adds strength to the argument that the smallest imperial deeds cause lasting ethical scars. The Indian laborer died, “arms crucified

and head sharply twisted to one side... teeth bared and grinning with an expression of unendurable agony” (2), foretells the elephant's pain to the reader and grounds individual violence in systematic corruption. This narrative technique gives his criticism both personal and universal validity and seizes the opportunity to reveal how imperial systems corrupt everyone they lay their hands on.

Narrative Techniques: Confession and Irony as Tools of Critique

Both Lawrence and Orwell employ personal narratives to reveal the true cost of the empire, but they apply their narratives in very different shapes. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* may appear to be a war story, but it is actually a confession. From the outset, he states that the book is “not about the Arab revolt, but about my place in it.” He focuses not on battles and conquests, but on doubt, shame, and moral breakdown. Thus, the text shows how the empire shattered itself.

Orwell's essay “Shooting an Elephant” is shorter, but it holds phrases as harsh as those in Lawrence's essay. The protagonist of the essay confesses that he killed the elephant “just to avoid looking like a fool.” The whole essay is based on the contradictions between what he felt and what he had to do. He is caught, not by the law, but by the expectations of the crowd. As he says: “When the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys.” (3)

The physical objects in both essays acquire a symbolic meaning through detailed description. In Orwell's essay, the rifle changes from a symbol of control to a symbol of imperial display, the protagonist admits, “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys” as he holds the gun that turns him into a “hollow, posing dummy” (Orwell, 3).

Comparative Synthesis: Two Faces of Imperial Guilt

Although both texts were written in different eras and locations, they convey the same message: the empire corrupts those who support it. Lawrence and Orwell both narrate in the first person, not as heroes, but as men who find themselves trapped in a situation from which they cannot escape. Lawrence does not hesitate to say, “I was continually and bitterly ashamed” (Introductory Chapter); Orwell, on the other hand, reveals that he shot the elephant because “I often wondered whether any of the others grasped that I had done it solely to avoid looking a fool.” (Orwell, 4). The first text describes the years of war, while the second describes an event that occurred in the span of an afternoon. Yet both texts employ unadulterated storytelling to convey the impact of the empire on the conscience.

Symbols are treated in a similar way in both texts. Lawrence's symbol of the desert represents both freedom and emptiness; Orwell's muddy rice paddies represent moral constriction. These scenes are not neutral ground but an active part of the narrative, reflecting the psychological states of the protagonists. Orwell creates a physical definition of moral uncertainty when he describes the ground as “miry waste of paddy fields... soggy from the first rains” (2). Both authors reject the trend of using scenery as a backdrop to strengthen the narrative and instead use the environment as a mirror reflecting psychological states.

Both texts indicate the absence of the traditional imperial male protagonists. Referring to the Victorian model of a man who is decision-making and emotionally controlled and courageous, Lawrence appears as weak and emotionally and morally indecisive. In turn, Orwell portrays an indecisive and conflicted man who is powerless. The absence of confidence goes beyond the imperial theme as it relates to male power. The portrayal of the colonizers as human characters with flaws and weaknesses destroys the ideology of imperial supremacy.

The most essential thing about these texts is that the obedience of the empire demands people's morality. Orwell asserts that his shooting of the elephant had nothing to do with its significance because “people expected me to do it” (Orwell 3). The memoirs of Orwell depict the painful metamorphosis of values of the empire because of society's expectations towards it. These homegrown moral values of the empire were presented instead of emphasizing its dependability by English literature.

The performance-oriented nature of imperial power is asserted as the central theme of both texts. Although Lawrence asserts that he is forced to stress his impressions of the supremacy of the British while recognizing their weaknesses, he goes further and makes it very clear that “A sahib has got to act like a sahib” (Orwell 3). In other words, the knowledge of a person who is responsible for either directly participating in imperialism or fulfilling any related role creates a conflict.

The Body as Site of Imperial Conflict

In both of these works, the focus lies on the role of the physical body in bringing out the contradictions of imperialism. Lawrence and Orwell portray the vulnerable and oppressed nature of the bodies of the colonial subjects, which are threatened by the imperial ideology of the white man's physically superior body.

In his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence recurrently indicates how physically drained he was when working for the empire. He calls himself "sick and unfit for long walks" and has "fever and dysentery" that made him "practically unable to work." (Chapter 31). His body becomes a representation of the imperial violence exercised not only on the colonized people but also on the colonizers themselves.

The physical aspect is also concentrated on by Orwell's text. When one reads the introductory statements to the piece, one finds the physical aspect of colonialism introduced through "the sneering yellow faces of young men that met me everywhere" (1). The body acts as an instrument of colonial power as well as a site for resistance through colonialism. His physical engagements like being tackled on the football pitch and the spitting of betel juice on his body challenge the colonial power's invincibility.

The key moment of the essay is the description of the critical state of the corpses of the Indian worker and the dying elephant. The description of the Indian worker's body, "his arms stretched out, his head turned sharply to one side. His teeth exposed and a smile of unbearable pain on his face" (Orwell 2), is a vivid representation of imperialism and violence. The body is described physically, and the description is effective because of the details involved. The body of the Indian worker is evidence of the human price that is involved when imperialism is employed.

This death agony-the prolonged thrashing of the elephant-exposes Orwell to the process. He depicts multiple shootings at the elephant, a gradual collapse, and the description

“it took him half an hour to die” (4) which makes reflection on imperial violence so powerful through physical details rather than with the help of an abstract argument. The elephant body turns out to be the empire itself-immense, slow to die, and requiring repeated suffering to suppress.

Both authors capture the physical reality underlying imperial ideals through their use of bodily imagery. Lawrence's fire-laden body and Orwell's sweating palms symbolize the empire as a physical reality of discomfort, suffering, and vulnerability. The emphasis of both authors on physical exhaustion, Lawrence's melting body and the death of the slow-moving elephant, reveals imperialism's tendency to devour its own society. The physicality of imperial critique defies the ideals of empire through abstract reasoning.

The spaces in both stories, the Lawrence desert and the Orwell rice field, are spaces of contestation for imperial bodies. Lawrence speaks about how white bodies labor in a desert environment, while the narrator in Orwell's story needs to move through a ‘muddy rubbish’ land. The spaces defy imperial control and indicate that not just is the empire morally weak, but its physical weakness is also a part of its weakness.

Conclusion

The *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and “Shooting an Elephant” represent the real life of mankind in the form of the empire. Both authors demonstrate how being the instrument of the imperialist damages the conscience. Lawrence lost hope after the disconnection of promises; in contrast to his situation, Orwell failed to fulfill societal expectations in life. The empire not only dictates in terms of ruling others but also weakens the performers in its interior.

How do T.E. Lawrence's work *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and George Orwell's “Shooting an Elephant” depict the personal cost of serving an empire and the collapse of faith in British imperial ideals? In connection with this research question, the importance of the Sykes-Picot Agreement serves as a background for Lawrence's representation of the corruption of morality. Conversely, both these texts represent generic views on power, morality, and personal integrity. They convey a message that the strength of any empire should not be measured by the amount of land it occupies or any other kind of assets it possesses. Instead, it should be estimated by the number of souls it has ruined. In connection with a close reading of the text methodologically, it does not provide a clear idea of the historical background of the Sykes-Picot Agreement.

These works demonstrate a broader contemporaneous failure of belief in the ideals of the British empire in the interwar period. Whereas the imperialism in the literature of the Victorian period celebrated the imperial confidence, these works demonstrate the imperial doubt. Where at least the imperial histories are meant to serve up moral certitude, instead there is confusion about the morals. The narrative style of the works of Lawrence combined with the irony of the works of Orwell represent a formal innovation which is every bit as interested in

the thematic concerns as the latter in the former, and it demonstrates the ways in which even literary form can be used as an instrument of critical politics.

The literary methods employed in both Lawrence's fractured confessional narrative and Orwell's condensed ironical tale are formal innovations that are consistent with their thematic preoccupations. Indeed, their focus on corporeal experience, psychological inwardness, and moral complexity introduced new narrative territories that could then represent imperial experience. Narrative methods of this kind had their influence on successive generations of postcolonial writers who further explored the psychological elements of power that both Lawrence and Orwell first analyzed.

The Saidian interpretation of imperial literature 22 historically situates the moral collapse of Lawrence and Orwell, and the legacy of Lawrence and Orwell is as relevant to the history of literature as it is to the understanding of power in the modern age. The modern questions of intervention, occupation, and personal experience of involvement in political systems all have a bearing on the questions posed by Lawrence and Orwell. The insight that true freedom is only possible with moral autonomy is as valid and relevant for the modern age as it was when it was first articulated by Lawrence and Orwell.

The persistence of the power of these texts is their refusal of easy answers. Neither Lawrence nor Orwell have any clear deliverance or solution. More than that, though, is the way the work reveals the complexities of morality in all its uncomfortable realities. It is the uncomfortable realities presented in the work that give the reader the sense of timelessness required for every new generation to consider the power structures in place and the price we are willing to sacrifice in terms of our integrity in order to serve those structures well. In the new era of empires and domination, the insights presented in the work are a crucial key to understanding what power does to those who wield it.

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