

Generic Hybridization: The Short Story blends with the Narrative Essay in George Orwell's masterpiece Shooting an Elephant

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Abstract

One of the lingering issues for literature is the continuing problem of genre delimitation and text labelling. This essay considers this issue in terms of hybridization or genre blending by contemplating the manner in which a narrative essay merges with a short story to achieve a particular effect of roundness of tale and sharpness of storytelling. The case study is George Orwell's renowned and most commented piece Shooting an Elephant.

I. Introduction

Texts are never plain and simple. At least the good ones are not. Great authors always try to explore different literary strategies to bring to the avid reader's library something new and exciting. Those who successfully play with all the elements at their disposition, often become greatly notorious. For instance, endless sentences are what define Saramago. And playing around with grammar defines Zephaniah. But what is it that defines George Orwell? Certainly, he showed the world his point of view about the politics of his time and even introduced the notion of "Big Brother", which has inspired TV shows worldwide and a satirical award ceremony that celebrates - puts in the limelight - those who abuse their power.

But literary-wise, what is it that makes Orwell the always-talked-about author that he is? Let us focus on his autobiographical text *Shooting an Elephant* and the reasons why it has had such an overwhelming impact on the critics. The text is actually simple and clear-cut. Its vocabulary, though sharp, is reachable. It is in its form that there is a twist: Is it an essay, more specifically a narrative essay, or is it a short story?

Throughout the years, different voices have discussed this issue and little has been agreed on. Today, while some are convinced that the text is an essay, others keep on maintaining it is, indisputably, a short story. Amid this discussion, one thing is clear: the text has remained "the talk of the - literary - town".

In this essay, I will attempt to conclude on whether *Shooting an Elephant* is actually a short story or a narrative essay. In doing so, I expect to finally find an answer to this so uttered question. I believe that this analysis can also provide us with an opportunity to look closer at those elements that brought about this confusion in the first place.

To do so, I will base myself on several theories on the short story genre and on some guidelines to write a narrative essay. Then, I will attempt to closely analyze the text in terms of its structure and contents and see whether these elements fit in with any of the above mentioned criteria.

II. Theoretical Frame

Herein, I will attempt to reduce a considerable amount of information on both genres to a minimum, explicit and fairly complete set of prescriptions. This simplistic summary that I will assemble will become the basis for this essay's analysis. That is, the key notions there discussed will be then considered individually and according to their presence - or lack of presence - in *Shooting an Elephant*.

i. The Short Story

American famous author, Edgar Allan Poe, was the first one to theorize on this genre. According to him, “the ordinary novel (...) cannot be read at one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality. (...) simple cessation in reading, would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity. In the brief tale, however, the author is enabled to carry out the fullness of his intention, be it what it may. During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer's control. There are no external or extrinsic influences resulting from weariness or interruption.”¹ Basically, “Poe has given us the two distinguishing characteristics of all true short stories which set them apart in a class by themselves as a distinct literary type - brevity and the necessary coherence which gives the effect of totality”² To this very much to-the-point definition, American writer and first professor of dramatic literature, Brander Matthews, adds that “the difference between a Novel and a Novelette is one of length only: a Novelette is a brief Novel. But the difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a difference of kind. A true Short-story is something other and something more than a mere story which is short. A true Short-story differs from the Novel chiefly in its essential unity of impression. In a far more exact and precise use of the word, a Short-story has unity as a Novel cannot have it.”³ Then, Matthews specifies on what the “unity” they all refer to is by stating that “a Short-story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion (...) the precise difference between the Short-story and the Novel [is that] the Short-Story is the single effect, complete (...) while the Novel is (...) broken into a series of episodes. Thus the Short-story has, what the Novel cannot have, the effect of totality, as Poe called it, the unity, of impression (...) it impresses the reader with the belief that it would be spoiled if it were made larger, or if it were incorporated into a more elaborate work.”⁴

As for the kind of writer the short story demands, he considers that “the writer of Short-stories must be concise”⁵ and that “the story which is short can be written by anybody who can write at all; and it may be good, bad, or indifferent; but at its best it is wholly unlike the Short-story”⁶ Afterwards, he further specifies on the differences between the short story and the novel and, in doing so, he establishes more characteristics of the former genre: “it cannot be said too emphatically that the genuine Short-story abhors the idea of the Novel. It neither can be conceived as part of a Novel, nor can it be elaborated and expanded so as to form a Novel. A good Short-story is no more the synopsis of a Novel than it is an episode from a Novel. A slight Novel, or a Novel cut down, is a Novelette: it is not a Short-Story.”⁷ Finally, Matthews reminds us that “although the sense of form and the gift of style are essential to the writing of a good Short-story, they are secondary to the idea, to the Conception, to the subject. Those who hold (...) that it is no matter what you have to say, but only how you say it, need not attempt the Short-story; for the Short-story, far more than the Novel even, demands a subject.”⁸ Last but not least, James Cooper Lawrence, writer, even made an effort to describe different types of short stories and characterize them. According to him “it will (...) be possible to classify short stories in the following manner: First, as to substance [short stories may be] (A) Stories of Fact [or] (B) Stories of Fancy. Second, as to form, [short stories may be] (A) Stories told historically, (B) Stories told dramatically [or] (C) Stories told didactically (...) In the telling of a tale, what is not fact is fancy. (...) The same story may be told in three different ways. The man using the historical narrative method seeks primarily to convey the impression that here is the matter-of-fact story of things just as they happened. The man using the dramatic method seeks a single effect; while the didactic method involves as the chief consideration, the effort to teach a lesson”⁹ and explains his reasons for exploring alternative models of short stories by declaring that “Poe created a new literary type when he laid down his rules for the short story. But Poe’s rules applied only to one class of short stories, those told to produce a single effect.”¹⁰

¹ CRITICISM, Edgar Allan Poe, p.28

² A THEORY OF THE SHORT STORY, James Cooper Lawrence, p.274

³ THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SHORT-STORY, Brander Matthews, p.15

⁴ THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SHORT-STORY, Brander Matthews, p.16-17

⁵ THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SHORT-STORY, Brander Matthews, p.22

⁶ THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SHORT-STORY, Brander Matthews, p.25

⁷ THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SHORT-STORY, Brander Matthews, p.25-26

⁸ THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE SHORT-STORY, Brander Matthews, p.31-32

⁹ A THEORY OF THE SHORT STORY, James Cooper Lawrence, p.278

¹⁰ A THEORY OF THE SHORT STORY, James Cooper Lawrence, p.283

Basically, when considering Poe's theories and Mathews' and Cooper Lawrence's reformulations relevant and accurate, the short story can be defined, essentially, as a piece of writing characterized by its brevity, which should allow for the text to be read in one sitting. Moreover, the short story should be concise and create an effect of totality. This effect will be built by the brevity of the text but also, by the fact that the short story should only explore a single episode. That is, it will usually present a single character which experiences a single emotion brought about by a single event. The fact that the short story is, by definition, concise, calls for a strong single theme to be explored and for this exploration to happen efficiently. Therefore, short stories are often written with an exact and precise use of language.

ii. The Narrative Essay

Essays have long been associated to the academic field. However, various definitions of the word "essay" prove quite the contrary: essay writing is not that restricted. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary an essay is "an analytic or interpretative literary composition usually dealing with its subject from a limited or personal point of view".¹¹ In other words, an essay is essentially a non-fictional prose always influenced by the author's point of view and therefore subjective. Mostly, essays are narrated in the first person, thus intensifying the sense of non-fictional personal experience all essays seek to transmit. There are different types of essays. Traditionally, essays have been classified as argumentative, expository, descriptive or narrative. The latter, specifically, seems to be the less academic one in the sense that it is the one that has more in common with story-telling. "These essays are often anecdotal, experiential, and personal (...) If written as a story, the essay should include all the parts of a story. This means that you must include an introduction, plot, characters, setting, climax, and conclusion. (...) The essay should have a purpose. (...) The essay should be written from a clear point of view."¹² Narrative essays should still be very concise because they are still the recount of a single event or anecdote. Therefore, "[A] Crucial aspect of narrative essays is that the story must have a main point. And, the best way to conclude it would be to describe the point or lesson that you learnt from the experience. (...) Make sure that your narrative essays begin with a general statement (...) You would have to provide maximum details about the characters (...) and the location in order to make the event vivid to the readers. (...) The last paragraph in any narrative essay would present the main lesson learnt from the entire experience (...) It should be something that all the readers can relate to. And, this should be the main point of the entire essay (...) you would describe the experience in a chronological order. (...) The main point of the essay needs to be mentioned in the opening sentence, and the body of the essay should be as descriptive as possible to tell who the characters are and what the setting and location are. The conclusion should shed light on the lesson that you learnt from the experience described."¹³

Narrative essays, as all other essays, are very structured. It is this quality that has in fact made them such a popular genre in education. Even when their purpose is to tell a story, these essays should still maintain a very methodical progression from idea to idea. In much the same way as all other essays, the narrative ones should follow one fundamental structure: "you do need a solid introduction. It will probably contain something about how you have interpreted the question, and it is often a good idea to state a thesis (...) which you are going to illustrate or explore in the body of the essay – although you may prefer to save the 'findings' of your exploration to the end, in which case you have to introduce the question carefully at the start. And you need a tight, powerful conclusion which is the logical consequence of everything that has gone before. The good essay has developed a number of related strands which the conclusion ties together. It may also contain an extra, surprising thing which you saved to throw in at the end with a flourish (...) don't use superfluous words, phrases or sentences. (...) by not inflating [an] essay with space-filling nonsense, the pithy writer has got room for lots of analysis."¹⁴

In essence, what these guidelines on writing narrative essays transmit is simple. Narrative essays are non-fictional pieces of writing which are often anecdotal, experiential and personal. Because they are personal, they are typically written from a limited point of view – narrating in the first person is expected. And, because they tell a story, they must include all the instances that are canonical for story-telling: an introduction, plot, characters, setting, climax, and conclusion. These essays must have a main point. Thus, they normally commence with a general statement followed by an opening sentence indicating what the main point of the essay will be.

¹¹ Merriam Webster Dictionary

¹² WHAT IS A NARRATIVE ESSAY? , Purdue Online Writing Lab

¹³ NARRATIVE ESSAY: 'HOW TO GUIDE', The Narrative Essay.org

¹⁴ ESSAY-WRITING: THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE, Institute of Communications Studies - Study Skills

This sentence would be the equivalent to the thesis statement of the conventional essay. As for the body of the essay, it should provide the reader with maximum details so as to make its point sharply. The last paragraph or conclusion should present the main lesson learnt from the entire experience. It is because of the fact that essays are intended to make a clear point, that one is not supposed to inflate language. By avoiding embellishing the essay with space-filling nonsense, one makes room for lots of analysis; which is, bottom-line, the point of this genre.

III. Contents and Analysis

Overall, *Shooting an Elephant* is the story of, presumably, young Orwell as a police officer serving in Burma in times of intense anti-imperialistic feelings. His position as an English subject and a law enforcer obliges him to put himself at the service of British interests. He faces quite a predicament because, although he does not sympathize with the colonizers' oppressive methods, he can not avoid being regarded as the enforcer of that very oppression by the colonized. Therefore, on top of secretly despising the Empire, he is despised by the local people as well.

The story develops as he receives a call regarding an elephant that has been ravaging the bazaar. Hence, the young officer does as he is told and heads for the town. After observing the disaster the elephant has left behind, the officer asks an orderly to fetch him an elephant rifle. The rifle, which is supposed to be a means of protection only, immediately draws the attention of the local multitude. The crowd begins to follow him expectantly, awaiting some entertainment and hoping to get close enough as to strip the elephant to the bones.

Consequently, the young officer feels compelled to kill the elephant and please the multitude, albeit knowing that there is no need to commit such an atrocious act. The elephant, after all, is not wild and it seems that its momentary aggressiveness has passed. After delaying the deed as long as possible, he finally gives in and shoots. The elephant does not die instantly and the officer, feeling guilty and unable to watch the animal's suffering, leaves the scene.

It is through this incident that the officer finally understands the true nature of imperialism. This is the first time in his life that he "*grasp[s] the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East.*"¹⁵

Shooting an Elephant explores several themes, most notably the ones related to imperialism, conscience and the dynamics of the relationship between conquerors and conquered. In essence, the main point Orwell makes by writing this text is that imperialism inevitably limits the freedom of both the colonizers and the colonized.

As for the author's usage of symbols, its richness is patent. The elephant's death and the officer feeling pressured and then guilty, help illustrate the fact that imperialism is a double-edge sword that is bound to damage both parties. There are of course several other symbols such as the powerful mad elephant and the cross-like position in which the Indian dies.

Shooting an Elephant is, undeniably, a very complex text. Its complexity is multidimensional. That is, it relies on its theme, its symbols and its form. But the most notorious of its complexities is indisputably the latter. While the theme of the story might be controversial itself, and its symbols at times too elaborate; it is the text's form the aspect that has had the most impact on the critics. Is it an essay, more specifically a narrative essay, or is it a short story?

Given the fact that the text's form seems to be the centre of the debate, it is only natural that this essay will discuss just such issue. Therefore, and as stated above, the analysis will now progress from idea to idea and from theory to Orwell's text.

According to Poe's pioneer theorizations and later additions and reformulations by Mathews and Cooper Lawrence, a short story must mainly be brief enough so as to be read in one sitting. *Shooting an Elephant*, being only 3,267 words long, definitely makes the cut. As for what the authors call "an effect of totality", the text proves, again, to be a perfect example of a short story. It does explore only one episode, more specifically, the occasion in which an officer must kill an elephant and ends up experiencing an epiphany.

¹⁵ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.2

Theoretically, “one episode” refers to “a single character which experiences a single emotion brought about by a single event”. The single character would be the narrator, presumably George Orwell himself. The emotion that he experiences would be comprehension. The reader does not need to infer what the narrator feels since the text itself is quite explicit. “One day something happened which in a roundabout way was enlightening (...) it gave me a better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism”¹⁶, states the narrator. He then admits that “in the East; a story always sounds clear enough at a distance, but the nearer you get to the scene of events the vaguer it becomes.”¹⁷ This particular observation actually refers to the fact that no one seems to be able to tell the officer where the elephant was. However, when read carefully, one can also assume that this is actually Orwell’s way of commenting on how lost the officer is while living in the midst of the conflict. The previous statement reinforces the idea of sudden illumination that is repeated all throughout the text by making a strong statement about the before and after of the elephant episode. The concept of sudden understanding is referred to in several instances. With phrases such as “it was at this moment (...) that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man’s dominion in the East”¹⁸ and “I perceived in this moment that when the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom that he destroys”¹⁹, the author emphasizes on the notion that it is that moment, a single episode, that changes the young officer’s life.

The fact that short stories are supposed to explore a single episode and be brief, obviously calls for the text to be as concise and effective as possible. Hence, short stories are generally written in a very direct, efficient manner. Language is used punctually and authors try to find the exact words so as to avoid over-extensive phrases which do not really add to the meaning. In *Shooting an Elephant*, examples of an economic way of using language abound. “All this was perplexing and upsetting”²⁰, “it was an immense crowd”²¹ and “but I did not want to shoot the elephant”²²; are just a few examples of how Orwell prefers to stay straight to the point. He does not embellish those phrases but leaves them as simple as possible, just as long as they convey the meaning effectively.

As seen above, and given the fact that *Shooting an Elephant* seems to accomplish everything a short story should, it would be accurate to say that the text is indeed a short story. After all, it is certainly brief and concise. It does produce an effect of totality. It does focus on one episode only and it does so thoroughly.

On the other hand, narrative essays, although still telling a story, are supposed to be non-fictional pieces of writing which are often anecdotal, experiential and personal. Apparently, *Shooting an Elephant* is, at least, semi-autobiographical. Even though there is no hard evidence to prove such fact, it has been recorded that, in his youth, Orwell was indeed a British officer serving in Burma. Therefore, it can be presumed that at least the setting in time and place and the general circumstances in which the story develops are autobiographical. What is left unanswered is whether or not the elephant anecdote really happened. Still, it could be assured that at least a portion of the text is anecdotal, experiential and personal.

Because these essays are supposed to be non-fictional, it is only normal that they would be written in the first person, thus reinforcing the idea of personal experience. In *Shooting an Elephant*, the whole of the text is written in the first person and, furthermore, the narrator does not only tell the facts, but actually thoroughly describes his own feelings. Such a strong point of view helps the reader believe that this is an anecdote.

The fact that this type of essays focus on telling a story implies that they should be structured just as any other narration is. That is, a narrative essay should have its introduction, its plot and characters, its setting, its climax and its conclusion. These stages are quite clear in *Shooting an Elephant*. The first two paragraphs of the text could be labeled as the introduction since they familiarize the reader with the setting in place and time and to the general state of matters that frames the story. Through phrases such as “in Moulmein, in lower Burma”²³ and “the British Empire is dying”²⁴, a specific location and an approximate date are established.

¹⁶ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

¹⁷ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

¹⁸ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.2

¹⁹ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.2

²⁰ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

²¹ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.2

²² SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.3

²³ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

²⁴ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

Then, the narrator specifies on the current state of matters and the circumstances in which he is living. “As a police officer”²⁵ informs the reader about the nature of the narrator’s participation in the empire. “I was hated by a large number of people”²⁶ sheds light on the complicated relationship between colonized and colonizers and is also a way of foreshadowing that this text will explore this issue. Lastly, “I had already made up my mind (...) I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors”²⁷ introduces us to the narrator’s initial point of view and somehow foreshadows that his way of seeing the world will soon change. Plot and characters are introduced gradually and the climax of the story occurs when the officer kills the elephant. Last but not least, the conclusion would take up the last two paragraphs: the first one dealing with the aftermath of the shooting and the second one in the form of a coda.

As for the opening sentence that is supposed to indicate what the main point of the essay will be, it is not that clear. *Shooting an elephant* is, of course, an effective text. Yet, it is not that obvious. There are several instances in which the reader is told that the text will discuss imperialism and what it does to both parties, but these instances are spread throughout the two first paragraphs so there is no single phrase that could be labeled “thesis statement”.

Supposedly, essay conclusions should comment on the lesson learnt. Once again, *Shooting an Elephant* proves less explicit. The last paragraph, although interesting and revealing, does not exactly comment on what the narrator has learnt but actually deals with how others interpret the recent event.

Regarding the type of language that is supposed to be used in essay writing, it is very similar to the one expected in short story writing. The both need to be concise and the writer should avoid inflating the language so as to leave room for the actual analysis. As stated when discussing the language of the short story, *Shooting an Elephant* is indeed concise and, therefore, fits in with both the short story and the narrative essay generic prescriptions.

Consequently, and summarizing the previous analysis, it could be said that the text is not quite a narrative essay. After all, it lacks some basic elements such as the thesis statement and the reflective conclusion. Those functions are seen to throughout the text but, by not being structured as single units, they do not respect the typical organization of essays.

V. Conclusion

All in all, I believe that, if one had to define *Shooting an Elephant* as either a short story or a narrative essay, one could say that, according to what was developed throughout this analysis, the text would be considered a short story. However, I believe there is more to literature than just writing according to a structured guideline. And, on that note, I also believe that the greatest authors are those who bring new and groundbreaking ways of writing to literary tradition. That is what makes them become special and stay “the talk of the town”.

Shooting an Elephant is, in my opinion, an intentional combination of genres. I believe George Orwell wrote a tremendously effective text and he made sure it would be impactful by playing around with different and atypical structures. After all, as a piece of literature, although interesting and engaging, it is quite simple. But its genre twist assures it a place among the most commented texts critic-wise.

Then again, I also consider genres little more than a set of prescriptions which can be broken for purposes of aesthetics. Furthermore, many of the greatest authors have earned their way through the literary world by proving they can write more than just a text consisting of the basic elements. They have experimented with grammar and vocabulary and flashbacks and flash-forwards. But there are not many authors that have become famous just for sticking to genre directives and filling those structures with interesting contents.

Shooting an Elephant defies tradition. It is a critic to an imperialistic society. It is full of irony. And it combines two genres. Orwell’s criticism of imperialism is deep and elaborate and so it should be no wonder that its literary manifestation should be just as multifaceted and complex.

²⁵ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

²⁶ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

²⁷ SHOOTING AN ELEPHANT, George Orwell, p.1

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