

Literature and Political Studies: A Study of Using George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* in Political Studies Courses

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Abstract

This study expresses how literature can enhance political studies courses. It aims to describe how to combine the study of politics and political history by using classic short stories or novels. The approach merges the political studies and English disciplines to introduce students to the ways in which politics affect literature and how literature can help us understand political values and the human condition. The study uses George Orwell's *Shooting an Elephant* to explore the nature and consequences of imperialism, and to critically engage students and generate their interest in the study of political history of Myanmar, Thailand's biggest neighbor and an ASEAN member. While literature cannot replace lectures, textbooks, and case studies, it can effectively complement traditional teaching tools. The study finds that crossing the disciplinary borders between political studies and literature increases student understanding of the topic and the extent to which they can engage in class discussion.

Key Words: Literature, Political Studies, Politic, Political Ideology, Imperialism, British, Burma

Introduction

Politics is a difficult idea to relate to students. Some of the most important works of political theory and practice are fiction. Works of political literature are often the best introduction to politics since they use people to develop abstract concepts. It can be a political tool, a vehicle, or a symptom of the cultural and ideological climate. Students of political studies

can look at a piece of literature from a time period as a way to understand the ways of thinking, beliefs, prejudices and ideologies of that time.

Shooting an Elephant by George Orwell (Eric Arthur Blair) has been appreciated for its all-around qualities. It is “vivid, passionate, but simple, clear and direct” and is “an example of political writing at its best” (Alam, 2007). The story places humanity, violence, politics, power, dominance, race, culture and reality on the same platform. It is about the shooting of an elephant which in reality becomes a matter of ego and pride for an alienated white man working for the British imperial Police in Burma (Nellufar, Azad, & Ferdoush, 2013). By using political literature, the concept of politics becomes more comprehensible to students.

Orwell once wrote in his essay *Why I Write* (1946):

When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art’. I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.

Throughout *Shooting an Elephant*, Orwell portrays the absurdity of power by directly addressing the readers from his experience during his service as a British imperial police officer in Burma. The dilemma he encounters in the story is a vivid example of an agony facing a white British imperial police officer who attempts to maintain his dignity in a colony. The story is a striking example of how a government official uses the language of narration to convey political ideas; it captures a moment in history.

Theoretical Rationale

“Language is political from top to bottom” (Joseph, 2006, p.17). Incidentally, politics is concerned with power: the power to make decisions, to control resources, to control other people’s behavior and often to control their values. Voloshinov’s (1973, p. 58) position: “Linguistic creativity ... cannot be understood apart from the ideological meanings and values that fill it.” “Another bone of contention is the extent to which ‘the gift of speech’ is bound up with politics. Every sentient species forms social bonds and groups, which are created and maintained through grooming, display and other ritual practices that manifest hierarchies within groups and territorial boundaries between them. What then puts human politics on a different plane from animal politics? Is it just the greater proficiency that the language affords? Or the fact

that the language enables us to *think* politically? Or does language itself have a deeply political dimension, one that runs to the very core of its functioning? (Joseph, 2006, p. 2). It can be argued that the choice of literature as a source material to explore and examine politics is based on this premise that language of literature does have such a political dimension.

As a political critic Chomsky (1986) has made it one of his central arguments that governments and media conspire to ‘manufacture consent’. In Chomsky’s (1986, p. 286) view, ‘Propaganda is to democracy as violence is to totalitarianism’.

To use Foucault’s (1975, pp. 27-28) argument that power produces knowledge and power and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relation. In the backdrop of such views, arguments and remarks the present study proposes the use of literature for exploring and examining pedagogical possibilities of enhancing political understanding of students through literature.

Literature sometimes explores politics directly, and great political literature is sometimes born from social and political oppression. Literature is a weapon in the battle of politics. The quality of literature is central to both the aesthetics and the politics. A work of art of any period achieves this quality by expressing a high level of social awareness, revealing a sense of the true social conditions and feelings of a particular era (Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997). Literary works can be forms of political thought; they both reflect on the political regime of culture in which they are written (Zuckert, 1998). Writers of these works understand and respond to the fundamental principles of politics: equality, consent, liberty, and individual rights, and the relation between political life and the pursuit of happiness (Nichols, 2002). Literature helps us rally around an image of ourselves. We compose our lives into stories and share them with others who do the same through conversations, public speeches, newspaper reports or artistic expressions like music and dance, theatre, painting, and writing (Steiner, 2002). Not only can using literature in political courses provides another way to learn valuable political thoughts, but it also presents authentic material, persuades learners to develop personal involvement, and helps them to understand different cultures.

About the story

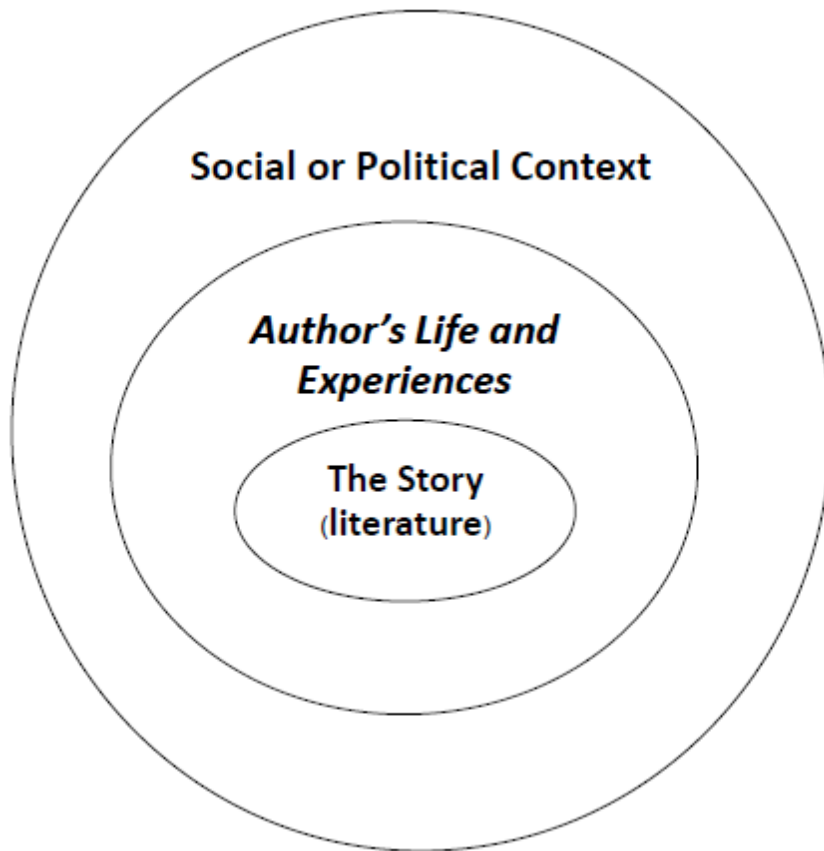
Shooting an Elephant (1936) is a short story that is also sometimes classified as an essay. The setting is a town in southern Burma during the colonial period. In the story Orwell portrays the absurdity of power and its wielders by directly addressing the readers from his first-hand experience of shooting an elephant during his service as a British police officer in Burma. During this period, Orwell grew to reject many aspects of the British Empire (the oppressors) but also disliked the local forces opposed to it (Larkin, 2011). *Shooting an Elephant* is one of the most controversial short stories in modern English literature. From this story, many have also accused Orwell of racism towards the Burmese. But it is fair to say that Orwell is critical of both the British and the local people. Most of all he condemns himself for having killed the elephant solely to avoid looking like a fool (Orwell, 1936). It is not just a story about shooting an elephant but also the tragedy, violence, and farce of imperialism. It is an example of Orwell's anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian stance. All through the story, Orwell clearly conveyed his political beliefs, but as it turns out he had to sacrifice his own beliefs for his own country's political conquest. Purely political, it displays an inferior social structure in which individuals are considered to be governable by the most powerful empire in the world. It portrays dilemma of the man who tries to be his free and true self in a system that asks him to be a ruler, a man whose decisions greatly affect daily life of the local people (Green & Walzer, 1969).

Teaching Model

This paper is an attempt to demonstrate as to how a relevant piece of literature could be used to study politics, how politics is embedded in language to use or achieve power over other(s), and also how the language carries colonial ideology and how do the people respond to it.

The teaching model for using *Shooting an Elephant* in Political Studies courses is based on the notion that social and/ or political context together with the author's life and experiences

outline literature, and, in return, literature reflects or mirrors the society. See the model below.



Conducting the class

Before the class, it would be helpful if students are assigned to read about the political history of Burma under British imperialism (1824 – 1948) and the biography of George Orwell (1903 – 1950) in order to create a context for the reading of the story and also to exploit prior knowledge of the readers. Then, they can read *Shooting an Elephant*. If necessary, there is also a simplified version of the story. An audio book and video clips are also available for students as supplementary via various websites.

Using *Shooting an Elephant* as a teaching material in a Political Studies course, the instructor can have class discussions on many political issues. For instance, the class can have a discussion on the political history of Burma (now Myanmar) from colonial time to independence. After that, there can be a talk on George Orwell's biography, especially the time he spent in Burma as a police officer. Then the class can engage in the content of the story. In other words, the class can be conducted following the "Teaching Model" suggested in this article.

The class can begin the political context of British rule in Burma which began when Britain conquered Burma in 1824. By 1886, after three Anglo- Burmese Wars, Britain incorporated Burma into British India. Burma was administered as a province of British India until 1937 when it became a separate, self-governing colony. To stimulate trade and facilitate changes, the British brought in Indians and Chinese, who quickly displaced the Burmese in urban areas. To this day Yangon and Mandalay have large ethnic Indian populations. Railroads and schools were built, as well as a large number of prisons, including the infamous Insein Prison, then as now used for political prisoners. Burmese resentment was strong and was vented in violent riots that paralyzed Yangon on occasion all the way until the 1930s. Burma became independent in 1948. (Luscombe, 2012)

After that, the class can move to George Orwell's life and experiences. Orwell was a British journalist and author, who wrote two of the most famous political novels of the 20th century '*Animal Farm*' and '*1984*'. He was born Eric Arthur Blair on 25 June 1903 in eastern India, as the son of a British colonial civil servant. He was educated in England. In 1923 he joined the British imperial Police Force in Burma. He resigned in 1927 and decided to become a writer. (Larkin, 2011). He wrote three stories based on his experiences in Burma. They are *A Hanging* (1931), *Burmese Days* (1934), and *Shooting an Elephant* (1936).

Finally the class can have a discussion on the story, *Shooting an Elephant* which is a political short story that draws on Orwell's first - hand experience as a British official in Burma. It is a story of a police officer who feels compelled to shoot a rogue elephant because he does not want to appear 'indecisive or cowardly' in front of the native Burmese. The backdrop of the story is imperialist-native tension; both sides feel hatred, distrust and resentment. The story places humanity, violence, politics, power, dominance, race, culture and reality on the same platform. It is about the shooting of an elephant which in reality becomes a matter of ego and pride for an alienated white British imperial police officer in Burma.

The instructor can use some parts of the story to expand on its political message. For instance, excerpt 1, page 1: Orwell's Anti-imperialism stance.

"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 bogged 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.”

Excerpt 2, page 3: Pressure from the Burmese

“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.”

Excerpt, page 3: His own freedom destroyed

“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.”

The class can then have a critical analysis session to answer questions about judgment such as “Was it necessary for the police officer (the main character) to use force in his decision making?”, “How was the police officer influenced by his working environment?” and “What, if anything, does this story teach us about political decision, even in a local scale?” Also, the essential elements of literature such as setting, characters, plot, conflict, climax, and resolution can also be topics of discussion.

More class discussion and study questions can consist of the following:

Individual Tasks:

- Who is the narrator and what is his position in the Burmese village?
- How are the British, regarded by the native population? Why?
- What is the narrator's attitude towards imperialism?
- Who “those yellow faces” are in excerpt 3 and why are they referred to like that?

- Examine and make a comment on how colonial ideology works on the consciousness of the people in excerpt 2?

Group Discussion or Presentation:

- What is the narrator's basic internal conflict, even before the incident with the elephant occurs?
- Why does the narrator not want to shoot the elephant?
- What is Orwell's attitude towards the native people?
- What is Orwell's attitude towards his own position in Burma?

Analytical Writing:

- In the story, the narrator states, "As soon as I saw the elephant I knew with perfect certainty that I ought not to shoot him." Why, then, does he decide to shoot the elephant?
- What is the purpose of this story?
- What might the elephant's slow death symbolize?
- What is the implied assumption in the first sentence?
 - "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."*

Finally, the concluding note for the class should cover the following points:

The story is not just a story about shooting an elephant but also the tragedy, violence and farce of imperialism. It is an example of Orwell's anti-imperialist and anti-authoritarian stance. The story is both political and symbolic of social structure in which individuals are considered to be governable and depersonalized units, and the dilemma of the man who tries to be his free and true self in a system that asks him to be a robot (to follow orders and carry out duties without questions), a man whose decisions greatly affect daily life of the local people. (Green & Walzer, 1969)

Summary and Outcome

Literature is a powerful medium and can enhance political studies courses. It represents the social, political, cultural and historical growth of society. Literature and society are intimately linked with each other. It provides a wealth of information about the cultures,

pathways, and values of different societies. While literature cannot replace lectures, textbooks, and case studies, it can effectively complement traditional teaching tools. Considering the scope of uncovering social aspects and political use of language in literature, literary texts should be used as a source material not only in the Political Studies classes but also in the language classes. The study suggests that crossing the disciplinary line between Political Studies and Literature increases student understanding of the topic and the extent to which they can engage in class discussion. . Literature can be pedagogically illuminative, and may be a political studies instructor's best friend. This study, then should be deemed useful and practical with students and instructors of Political Studies.

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