

Edward Said

Has 'the West' viewed 'the Orient' through a distorted lens?

Key Concepts: Orientalism, Othering, Cultural Imperialism.
Key Work: *Orientalism* (1978), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), *Covering Islam* (1997)

"The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity (the ancient past) a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences."

Othering:

The process of making an artificial, "Us-vs-Them" division in the relations between any two groups. For Said, the West 'others' the Arab world and ignores the subtle variations of culture and experience across a vast geographic area. In general, sociological terms, Othering describes the **reductive** action of labelling a person as someone who belongs to a subordinate social category. The practice of Othering is the exclusion of persons who do not fit the norm of the social group, which is a version of the Self.

Orientalism: The 'West' views the 'Orient' through a lens that distorts the actual reality of those people and places. How the 'West' acquires this knowledge is not innocent or objective, but the end result of a process that reflects certain political interests. In other words, it is not 'neutral' or 'accidental', but is highly motivated and can serve as a way of understanding how western policies (war and trade) are, at least partially, justified the recent Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. But it could also be thought of as a generally **patronising** Western attitude towards the East...

Cultural Imperialism:

Even though the formal period of 'Imperialism' ended in the years after WW2, those colonial systems had a continued cultural influence on the (previously) colonized peoples. This influence remains in their contemporary civilizations, and is very influential in the international systems of power. The 'formal' empire of the 19th Century has been supplanted (replaced with) a type of cultural hegemony that continues to oppress the former colonial subjects. This is best seen through the domination of US film and TV, for example.

The Origins of Said's 'Orientalism'

In interviews, Said explained that there were two major motivations behind his decision to pursue this idea.

The **proximate cause** (short term) was the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli War in 1973. Many people dismissed the Arab nations as being too backward to fight effectively, but some Egyptian success forced people to question this assumption.

The **distal cause** (longer term) was the degree to which Said noted the disparity (difference) between how his say the Middle East represented in art, literature, and media, and his own experiences of living in the region.

Put this into context by examining the *Thinker's Background* below...

Said identified three 'interdependent' qualities of Orientalism:

1. The **academic** study of 'the Orient. This relates to anyone 'who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient' in any field of study regarding the Middle East.
2. "A style of thought based upon an **ontological** (the basic categories of being and their relations) and **epistemological** (how we actually know things) distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) and the Occident (the West)"
3. Orientalism can also be seen as the "**corporate institution** for dealing with the Orient... in short, as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient." In other words, Said argues that one of the main reasons that the 'West' wanted to study the 'Orient' in the first instance was so that it could conquer, suppress, and govern its colonies more efficiently!

It is not a one-way street, however. Said argued that "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, or experience... it is an integral part of European *material culture* and civilization." By this, we might understand that one reason for forming such a specific view of the 'Orient' is to help Europeans to define themselves by what they are **not**.

Said has also argued that Arab countries are also partly to blame for perpetuating (continuing) this view. The lack of a common 'information policy' among the 20 or so Arabic countries in the late of the 20th Century, that could offer an alternative picture contributed to the problem. He argues that the fact that most of these states are dictatorships, who depend on US government **patronage**, would make a serious critique of America difficult. i.e. Said argues that the Arabs help to keep themselves as subordinates in this process. Can you see how these views might have brought him in for intense criticism from both sides!

So, what has any of this got to do with **identity**? Are we to believe that all identity is '**monolithic**' and made up of only one thing? How then can a person be "pure Irish", or pure anything for that matter. Aren't we all, almost by definition, an amalgam of numerous different cultural elements, and doesn't the process of othering and forcing a 'binary' us and them only make finding our common humanity almost impossible???

The Repertory of Orientalist Images

So, what are the kinds of things that Said sees as problematic about how art and literature, particularly in how they represent the 'East'?

- The 'Sensual Woman' who is there to be used... (think of the allure of 'belly dancers and harems full of concubines)
- A Mysterious world, full of secrets and monsters... (think of this in children's stories, like the Adventures of Sinbad, the flying carpet of Aladdin, or the power of the omnipotent **genie** in the lamp!)
- The 'Marvels of the East' ...
- The Snake Charmer
- Google the paintings of the French painters Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824–1904) who are widely regarded as the leading luminaries of the Orientalist movement.

While Said doesn't deny that terrorism exists in the Middle East due to the violent political situation, but he argues that representing these vast areas as being inhabited by **Fanatics** and **Extremists** who inherently **Violent** takes away the humanity and diversity of the millions of ordinary people in those places who are living decent and humane lives.

British and French 'vs' American Orientalism

Said argues that the American versions of Orientalism is different from that which went before it. This is primarily due to the fact that Britain and France had a long **tradition of colonies** in the East, this gave them a more direct form of contact with the Orient. The US, on the other hand, has had **less-direct contact** with non-western cultures. This meant that their understanding of those areas was more based on abstractions. This picture was made more complicated by the highly politicised presence of the state of Israel (in May 1948). Because Israel was largely a 'western' state, that was continually threatened by other Arab countries, there was a "greater coincidence in US interests" [with Israel] than with other Arab states. Said argues that this makes it virtually impossible for an American to see the 'orient' as anything other than terrorists or violently irrational people.

What are the political implications of this idea? One need look no further than the US's continued support for Israel in spite of what appears to be widespread human rights abuses in the '**Occupied Territories**'. Contrast this with growing support for the Palestinian cause from other European countries (most of Ireland, for example, who draw similarities between Britain's occupation of Ireland). Consider the impact that the Trump administration's decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, despite numerous warnings that this was likely to cause extensive violence and resentment in the region.

What are the most common criticisms of Said's work? How do you feel about those criticisms? Are they justified?

- I. Can Saïd be '*hoist with his own petard*'? i.e. is he guilty of the very thing of which he charges others? – In not recognizing the diverse way in which 'Westerners' cover, represent, & interact with the Middle East, has he denied that there are instances where this has been done with greater subtlety? Does **he** treat the West as **monolithically** as he claims the west treats the Middle East?
- II. Has he just changed the meaning of a word and used it to slander other? If, for example, you don't take the same position as Said or his followers when it comes to the on the Arab-Israeli dispute, or if they judge you to be too 'conservative' will you get stuck with that label. As one critic noted "orientalism, for many people, is a word that substitutes for thought and enables people to dismiss certain scholars and their works... It may not have been what Edward Said meant at all, but the term has become a kind of **slogan**." Can Said be held responsible for this criticism?
- III. Some critics argue that Said was too **selective** in his choice of literary text upon which to judge the overall representations of the Arab world. His choices did not constitute a wide enough scope of investigation (i.e. his sample size of texts was too small to make such a sweeping claim. The danger here is that the arguments within *Orientalism* make firm the "**binary**-opposite representation, a fictional European stereotype that would counter-weight the Oriental stereotype."
- IV. Other critics note that Said and his academic cohort indulge in excessive **cultural relativism**, which intellectual excess traps them in a "web of **solipsism**" (extreme preoccupation with and indulgence of one's feelings, desires), which limits conversation exclusively to "cultural representations" and to denying the existence of any objective truth.
- V. Other critics argue that Said overstates the link between Orientalism and Empire, which he says "is over-stated and unbalanced". For example, they argued that Said failed to adequately distinguish between the genuine experiences of the Orient and the **cultural projections** of Westerners.
- VI. The most virulent criticism of Orientalism came from American classicist Bruce Thornton dismissed Orientalism as an "**incoherent amalgam of dubious postmodern theory, sentimental Third Worldism, glaring historical errors, and Western guilt**". It doesn't get much tougher than that!

Critiques of Media Representation:

The subtitle of Said's 1997 book "**Covering Islam**" reveals an interesting way to critique the media in a way that many of our key thinkers seem to ignore (or just bypass altogether). That subtitle is "*How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the Rest of the World.*" In other words, he goes out of his way to drive home to the reader that there are all kinds of forces at play in the media that shape (either consciously or sub-consciously) the ways in which we form our opinions of the world.

One really interesting case study he points to is the way in which the US media covered the immediate aftermath of the **Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995**. He points out that the media immediately assumed that it was an act of Islamic terrorism, when in fact it was carried out by Timothy McVeigh, a white American. He argues that the kinds of generalizations that were made about Islamic Terrorism after the World Trade Centre bombings of 1993 were not made of McVeigh. This Said described as "very irresponsible journalism", which led to the demonization of all Islamic people.

Media depictions of Islam with *black banners*, having large groups of *fist-waving* young men, and images of the *Ayatollah Khomeini* (Iran's religious leader), were examples. This tended to make people equate Islam with **terror, threat, and violence**. This was because the media was "controlled by interests that are commercial and political" which ignored the human side of the Islamic world.

We need to think very carefully here, about how the shifting nature of our media, even in the 15 years since Said's death might significantly exacerbate this tendency of the media to promote the commercial interests of the news media ahead of providing thoughtful and balanced investigative journalism that serves the common good of all people....

Can we add these media representations of Islam in the era of **Al Qaeda** and **ISIS** to the 19th century depictions that Said identifies in his book?

Does understanding 'Othering' have a use beyond just the relationship between the 'West and the Rest'?

Is this something that applies to the "Irish Experience", either in an historical context, or in light of a far more multicultural Ireland of the 21st Century?

Can you identify different representations of "Irishness" that have any parallel to the way Said discusses the Middle East?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Drawing from either the media, or your own experiences, consider whether modern Irish society **actively participates** in the 'othering' of its (now) a much more diverse population? Will this help us to consider issues around the integration of migrants, joining a broader 'EU Army'?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

How does Said's work help me to understand and write about the world around me?

Consider how you might respond to the following questions with Said's ideas in mind:

- How can the process of othering be compatible with the 'universality' of human rights?
- Does othering implicitly view the 'other' as lesser, as less human, as less worthy of our attention, as not entitled to the full range of human rights?
- Does understanding the ways in which we come to know what we know make you question any of the underlying assumptions that you hold, particularly those you have never consciously interrogated before?
- Does this happen in my family, my school, my local community, my country? What should I do about it?

Some Irish Cases to Consider...

Would gaining a deeper understanding of the process of 'othering' make you reconsider the outcome of the referendum on Birth-Right Citizenship in Ireland (the **27th Amendment** to the Constitution in 2004)? because isn't more categorically defining what it means to be 'Us', simply a way of more clearly identifying "Them"? A recent *Sunday Times* poll suggests that **71%** of Irish citizens would now support its reinstatement.

Similarly, would it make you want to think again about our system of '**Direct Provision**' for those seeking Asylum in Ireland? Would out treatment of these people change if we made a conscious decision to stop 'othering' those people? Look out for **Amnesty International's** plan to better integrate migrants into Irish communities!

When will I need to refer to Said in my exam?

In some ways, Said and Huntington can be seen as bridging the divide between two aspects of our course, 'Identity' and 'Globalization'. Said would fit comfortably into any essay that asks you to consider issues around global identity, but could also be seen as contributing valuable perspectives around the implicit impacts of a more globalized world. Similarly, would you be prepared to argue that shifts in ideas of 'Development' policies reflect the changing ways in which developing countries are view, in a manner not dissimilar to what Said identifies?

Said and You - (Framing your own opinions)

It's sometimes argued that modern society has become "Too P.C." - that Political Correctness has 'gone mad'. You need to think very carefully about whether or not the **tone and framing** of arguments remains respectful (and for that matter 'kind') when discussing issues that are likely to be very emotive. Ireland was a very insular place up until just the last generation (20-30 years). Does Ireland need to confront its own 'internalized biases and prejudices? Can Said help us to better articulate those things?

Thinker's Background

- Said was born in Palestine in 1935. His father was a Palestinian businessman who earned US citizenship because he fought in the US Army in WWI. His mother was Lebanese (grew up in Nazareth) under the Ottoman Empire. The Said family practiced the Jerusalemite variety of **Greek Orthodox Christianity**, though Edward was **agnostic**.
- Said lived what he called a “*pluri-cultural*” life. These is best explained through “*the strange and contradictory worlds in which I grew up.*”
- This is best seen in his education. In his autobiography he explains that he was “*...a Palestinian going to school in Egypt, with an English first name, an American passport, and no certain identity, at all. To make matters worse, Arabic, my native language, and English, my school language, were inextricably mixed.*” He was expelled from his Alexandria school and completed his education in a private ‘Prep’ school in Massachusetts. He studied at Princeton before completing his PhD at Harvard in 1964.
- Although Said taught “*Comparative Literature*”, he is probably best known as one of the founders of the academic field known as “**Post-Colonial Studies**”.
- Said was also famous for his pro-Palestine activism & criticism of the 2nd Iraq War and invasion of Afghanistan. As a ‘**Public Intellectual**’ Said was a controversial member of *the Palestinian National Council*, but noted that “*in all my works, I remained fundamentally critical of a gloating and uncritical nationalism.*” (How would this fit with Anderson?)
- Shortly before his death in 2003, Said addressed the University of California, Berkley, under the title “*Palestine and the Universality of Human Rights*”. This presents a complication to anyone who argues that Said **unilaterally** argues that Human Rights are purely a western imposition on the non-western world.

There are lots of words in bold here! i.e. Said has number of key terms. As you try and get to grips with them, can you **paraphrase** those definitions (say them in your own words) to help you remember them and use them again in the proper context. The more links you can find to your own experiences, the easier you'll find this process...

Personal Response

(A.) Start of by asking yourself: “Are there specific movies and/or TV shows that I have seen that specifically portray people from the ‘Middle East’ in a single, **monolithic** way?” Did that experience ‘dehumanize’ the cultures being depicted? Name the films and briefly outline the kinds of stereotyping you observed.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(B.) Distorted representation can work two ways! Can you think of any film that deliberately **satirized** or parodied the tendency of Hollywood to produce these easily identifiable **stereotypes**? Is this an effective way to ‘push back’ against the kinds of processes that Said argues exist?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Reading Tip: Because Said is a professor of ‘Comparative Literature’, much of his work seems to require a lot of background literary knowledge. It is possible, however, to get a lot out of reading a book like *Orientalism* without that deep knowledge (just try having a web browser open to pull up some of the paintings he refers to). It will make it harder to critique if you don’t know the history though!

Links to other aspects of the course

Ideas around identity and cultural exchanges turn up in multiple areas of the Politics & Society Course. How do Said’s ideas stack up against other key thinkers who consider cultural issues?

1. How does he link to the idea of Human Rights and whether or not they are a Western idea imposed on the East?
2. How does Said’s more nuanced view of the Arab & Islamic world (his desire to identify and engage with difference) link with Appiah’s idea of Cosmopolitanism (Universality + Difference)?
3. Said’s conflict with Huntington presents a really clear example of a classic head-to-head dispute. Can you discuss one without the other?
4. How does Said’s argument around the idea of ethnocentrism compete with Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s call to reject cultural relativism in his field of anthropology?

Favourite Moment: Said doesn’t just highlight a problem, he also offers a solution. He argues that “The great goal is to transfer itself from a uniliterary identity to an identity that includes the other without suppressing the difference.” Is this something that Appiah would endorse? **But ask yourself... is it reasonable to suggest that one book could solve an issue that complex?**