

A critical reaction to edward said's essay essay sample

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Said has propelled the post-colonial/Orientalism approach to literary criticism into interesting places for the modern reader. Complicating the political approach and critical meanings that we the (non-other) reader takes from the novel about colonial history. Language is the active issue of reading and representation (that all readers must engage with) when forming opinion on the text. The postcolonial political approach is, of course, easy to summarise. As understanding and approaches to the countries that do not happen to be members of the privileged 'west' and their peoples have changed. So too has our approach to 'our' history, the view to 'their' history. Colonial and cultural Imperialism being a well-recognised mistake of the western world's history, through revaluation of the human cost it has made on its victims.

As well as the now 'dubious' approach to the justifications the enlightened world made of itself. For example... John Locke's belief that the right to own land belonged to those who would 'work' it rather than those who are 'on' it was used as justification for the seizure of the 'new worlds' and out posts. The postcolonial critic now views political events and histories from other perspectives different to our own. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said writes: "What we need to do is to look at these matters as a network of independent histories" (Rice and Waugh. 348). Politicising the central issues of the text, studying the 'language' and justifications that it gives us, or the political situations that the character find themselves in.

Relative and 'other' histories and the disclosure, of their politically 'marginalized' position, now being the objective, the modus operandi of post colonial discourse. To understand the 'other' within our psyche and without, and to reinterpret a one politely 'one-sided' world view. To form a new

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outside perspective that can view history [histories] from not only the overview that western philosophy aspires, but to also view from the 'other' perspective. Said writes in his essay about the 1900 text; Lord Jim on the 'presentation of narrative': "In all cases the dominating factor is not narrative energy but a fatalistic desire to behold the self passively as an object told about, mused on, puzzled over, marvelled as fully, in utterance.

That is, having everywhere conceded that one can neither completely realize one's own nor fully grasp someone else's life experience." (LJ. 456) none of us can be fully realised enough to see a situation from all perspectives, or fully understand the colonial mind of our past, or the 'victims' alienated mind, we are effectively beyond the reach of communication by such motivating agents and forces. This was realised by Conrad as he presents many of the problems of narrative and communication and recognised by Said in his essay as he identifies key hesitations, problems in the text that is within the text. As the book is not only the story that Conrad tells us (a trusted author) who recounts the tale that the character tells... a somewhat less reputable narrator. Perhaps, we form judgements on his story on account of whether he is or 'is not' one of "us".

'He is one of us' the text keeps telling us, but we are forced to question the meaning of this phrase, the difficulties that the characters have in communicating their knowledge and experiences to each other. "Each sentence drives a sharper wedge between intention (wanting-to-speak) and communication. Finally wanting-to-speak, a specifically verbal intention, is forced to confront the insufficiency, and indeed the absence of words for that

intention.” (LJ. 456) Just as the difficulties that cultures have in communicating, (the chasms between words and word meanings) it as if we must not only take the unsettling truth of Wittgenstein (when he will not categorically deny the existence of a rhinoceros in this room at this time) and then multiply it to the power of different language and cultures. “ He is one of us.”

The assurance factor in the language game, the participation in a(my) cultural context that sees us of the same ilk (we both can agree on the name of the thing that is called a rhinoceros and such a thing is not in this room at this time, and so on for more nebulous concepts other than simple animal names). Said recognises that Conrad, in *Lord Jim*, explores the events that can pull a character out of their cultural context, into new and unsettling situations that make an ‘ alien’ of them.

This character that finds himself in the traumatic situation of a sinking ship, or washed ashore amongst people with a different language. The generation gap between himself and those that the character gives his testimonial to and the judgement that they bring from the perspective of imperialist domination that further alienates Jim. The patchy dialogue between Marlow and Jim is an incomplete testimonial that is never quite fulfilling, neither for Marlow or for us, if we are not sympathetic to or at least trying to understand the ‘ other’ perspective. Marlow, like us, does try to understand this ‘ patchy’ and in-sustainable ‘ oral report’ but garners it only much later.

The narrative, as postcolonial criticism never lets us forget, belongs to the victor and it is this narrative that we must now question. Can we ever step

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out of ourselves and view the (not our) past, as Said suggests; as 'independent histories'? This statement is not the problem, we can believe that there is such a thing as more than one moral position as we view an instance in history, but the exercise of removing moral judgement or holding many moral views is near impossible¹.

History is made up of morally and culturally guided events, even if morality is misguided or we detect lapses; we are forming a judgement from a moral position. Leaving the only course of action most beyond moral indignation is the avoidance of judgement and action all together. To simply judge is to take a moral position, but post-colonial criticism takes a different path. With its intentions close to that of the postmodernist theories it seeks to deconstruct and problematize our assurances (moral and cultural).

The doubt and trepidation with which we might now approach the 'Victors narrative' affects Marlow's understanding of the imperial world when he further reflects on Jim's account. By shifting perspectives, or moral views, we might move to a position not of assurance but of doubt, and therefore inaction (a pleasant place for some of the professional political thinkers of the world, but not for the 'doers'). Post colonialism shows many of its connections to the strategies post-structuralism and postmodernism, in this respect, as 'meaning', 'symbolic-structure', and other such assurances tumble in on themselves we are find that we are in the 'multi-centred' world that post-colonialism aspires to, and binds us to; morally neutral inaction that is vindicated by a redeeming measure of sympathy for all.

Reading

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Conrad, Joseph. Lord Jim. Norton Critical Edition. 1996 2nd Edition.

Rice, Philip, and Waugh, Patricia. (editors) Modern Literary Theory, A Reader. Arnold Books. 1996 3rd Edition.