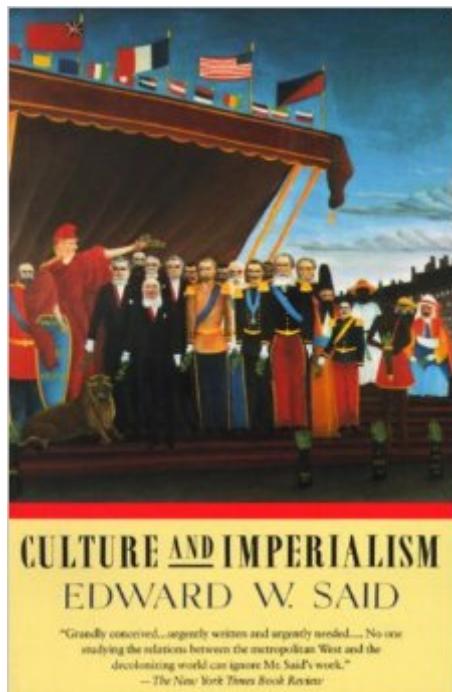


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Culture And Imperialism



Synopsis

A landmark work from the intellectually auspicious author of Orientalism that explores the long-overlooked connections between the Western imperial endeavor and the culture that both reflected and reinforced it. "Said is a brilliant . . . scholar, aesthete and political activist."--Washington Post Book World.

Book Information

Paperback: 380 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (May 31, 1994)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0679750541

ISBN-13: 978-0679750543

Product Dimensions: 5.1 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (44 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #20,945 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #5 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Colonialism & Post-Colonialism #33 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > History & Surveys #74 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Anthropology > Cultural

Customer Reviews

....So, what is this book about? Well, contrary to what some of the "reviews" below assume, it's not about contemporary Middle East politics, or media coverage thereof, or anything even remotely like that. It's about literature-- European literature to be specific. Essentially, Said proposes to look at what he calls "Imperialism" in European literature. (Although the title is "Culture and Imperialism" and while he does discuss one opera, he's not really concerned with culture or art, more broadly. He's really talking about literature here-- and especially novels. In truth, "Literature and Imperialism" would be a more accurate title. So, what is imperialism, as Said uses it here? It is, he explains, an ideology-- a set of assumptions-- that justifies, supports, and legitimates the conquest, control, and domination of lands that are inhabited by other people, who speak different languages and have other traditions. Imperialism, as an ideology, is thus distinct from "Colonialism", which is the actual, real, activity of conquering, controlling, and dominating other lands and people. Imperialism is, Said might say, the intellectual/cultural/ideological base that makes an otherwise morally dubious project of colonialism (conquering and ruling over others) seem acceptable, even justifiable. Essentially,

Said traces the role that imperialism (as defined above) plays in a host of European literary works, focussing on the past two centuries. After his theoretical/methodological introduction, each chapter is devoted to the discussion of a single literary work (or in some cases, multiple works by the same author), illuminating its imperialist qualities.

The name of Edward Said will forever be associated mostly with his famous masterpiece, "Orientalism" (Orientalism) in which he studied many historical and literary texts of the 18th and 19th century to criticize the imperialist background of the field of 'Oriental studies', as it was known at the time. Despite its fame however, "Orientalism" is a difficult read for most people, lacking a clear structure and containing long excursions on generally obscure travel books from the 1820s and so on. For the readers intrigued by the idea of "Orientalism" but who seek a more structured, accessible and explicitly political version of the same, "Culture and Imperialism" is the ideal book. It is perhaps for these reasons better than "Orientalism" at achieving its purpose, since Said's writing style is also generally better and more polemically strong in this book, and the literary studies are less obscure and more clearly linked to the topic. Though much of it still consists of 'lit crit', there is in this book a direct analysis of the imperialist contents and their historical background of such famous works as "Mansfield Park", Joseph Conrad, the "Aida" of Verdi and the oeuvre of Camus. Said brings all his erudition and subtlety of judgement to bear on these and similar products of culture, and the result is an engrossing, stimulating and effective polemic, while generally lacking in an actual outright polemical tone. Also of interest is that a significant part of the book is concerned with the counter-imperialist products of culture, from the poetry of Yeats to the evocative works of Fanon and Achebe.

Contrapuntal and contrapuntally are words that Edward Said uses to describe both the relationship between culture and imperialism, and the way that relationship may be apprehended. In essence: there are two thematic principals in culture, one dominant, and one subordinate (less visible), but crucially these two themes operate in an interdependent and highly dynamic manner. Specifically, Said is interested in examining the "interacting experience that links imperializers with the imperialized." (pg.194). In Culture and Imperialism, his crowning achievement published in 1993, Said examines this interacting experience through the prism of literature, his area of especial expertise. Said begins his huge and difficult task by discussing, in general terms, the way that in the West (the dominant imperializers since the sixteenth century) cultural representations of the non-European world are crude, reductionist and often racist. Said believes this tendency is not

accidental but systematic and part of an imperial impulse that needs to dominate. Voices of the non-European world in Western culture are not expected to be heard, and are deliberately, if not always consciously, suppressed. In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, the world of the Caribbean plantation is only peripherally referred to, though its existence and economic exploitation are essential to the well-being of the novel's main characters. When referred to, the plantation is subordinate and dominated--no non-European voices are heard. This illustrates one of Said's key arguments: "the experience of the stronger party overlaps and, strangely, depends on the weaker.

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