

Amos Oz's "Nomad and Viper"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <https://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/amos-ozs-nomad-and-viper>.

Introduction

From his earliest stories to his last novel, Amos Oz (1939-2018) creatively and critically examined the problems of zealotry and hypocrisy in Israel. Strongly identified with Israel's now fading Labor movement and a fierce defender of the two-state solution, Oz (who served in the IDF during 1957–60, 1967, and 1973) was one of the first Israelis to warn against the morally-corrupting perils of occupying another people and was a founder of the Peace Now movement.

Amos Oz first published "Nomad and Viper" (*"Navadim va-tsefa"*) in his 1965 debut short story collection, which he revised and republished in 1976. While this story—which centers around a conflict between members of a kibbutz and a group of Bedouin nomads—appears quite critical of kibbutzniks, it should be noted that Oz lived on a kibbutz for decades, and was a steadfast supporter of the kibbutz system.

This resource kit includes materials that will help students engage with and understand the cultural and moral complexities in this story, which draws on biblical motifs and explores Arab-Jewish relations in the decades after the state of Israel was created.

Cover image: Jewish workers eating lunch in the fields of Migdal, Palestine, in 1912. Photograph by Ya'acov Ben-Dov.

Subjects

Fiction, Hebrew, Israel-Palestine, Social Commentary

Reading and Background

- The full story "Nomad and Viper" is available in English translation in Amos Oz's *Where the Jackals Howl*, translated by Nicholas de Lange and Philip Simpson.
- This [short literary biography and bibliography from the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature \(ITHL\)](#) provides a good introduction to the extraordinary range and international impact of Oz's work. *Amos Oz: The Conscience of Israel* (2005), an excellent BBC profile of Oz, covers crucial aspects of his life.
- Oz's lifelong ethical, political, and cultural concerns are memorably underscored in his final collection of essays, *Dear Zealots: Letters from A Divided Land*. His memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is widely considered to be one of the most important portraits of Israel, and is the biggest-selling literary work in Israeli history.
- For a useful introduction to the history of kibbutzim, see Anita Shapira, "The Kibbutz and the State" in *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2010). Director Ran Tal's acclaimed 2007 documentary film *Yaldey Hashemesh (Children of the Sun)* additionally offers a worthwhile introduction, and is available in Hebrew with English subtitles from [Israel-Catalog.com](#) and from Amazon. Consider as well Michael Fein's short video introduction, *The Kibbutz*.
- To hear Amos Oz speak on issues of peace and conflict, listen to this [2011 speech](#) at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, or to [this 2002 interview](#) with Elizabeth Farnsworth on *PBS Newshour*.
- For an excellent introduction to the festering relations between Bedouin people and the Jewish state, consider Matt Rees's "The Lost Tribes of Israel: The Jewish State Seeks to Bring the Bedouin in from the Desert."

Resources

1: Text excerpt, Edward Said's "Orientalism," 1978, and video excerpt, Sut Jhally's "Edward Said



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On Orientalism," 1998.

Edward Said coined the term "Orientalism" in his groundbreaking 1978 book *Orientalism*, which critiqued the West's stereotypical perceptions of the East. In colonialist discourse the native was often seen as a source of rapacious sexuality, exemplified, as Said notes in this passage, in Gustave Flaubert's writing about the Orient. Said and others have also explored how the Orientalist trope of white women being sexually violated by dark natives has been used to mandate and legitimize colonial forms of control and hegemony.

For more sustained exposure to Said's thought, students might read the entire first chapter of *Orientalism*, titled "The Scope of Orientalism."

Suggested Activity: Invite students to watch 4:14 - 7:51 (or the full forty minutes) of the film *Edward Said on Orientalism* and to read the excerpt from the book. To check for understanding, ask students to succinctly summarize Said's arguments in these passages. Once you are sure they understand, ask them to point to examples of Orientalism in books, films, or other media with which they are familiar.

Then ask them to consider Oz's "Nomad and Viper" in light of Orientalism. Have students scan the early paragraphs of the story to find the language used to describe the Bedouin from both the men's and Geula's perspectives. Ask them to make a list of the adjectives used to describe the Bedouin. Ask: what do you notice about these descriptions? Are they Orientalist? Racist? Do you think these descriptions are from Oz's perspective or his characters' or both? Why do you think that?

To look closer at the Orientalist narrative surrounding sexual propriety or "dangerous sex," ask them to reread Section V of "Nomad and Viper," paying close attention to the author's lyrical use of pastoral imagery and the hint of an Arab Adam and a Hebrew Eve. Ask students to consider what exactly transpires here, and how that impacts their impressions of the grim denouement that swiftly ensues.

Sources: Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Penguin Books, 1978), 188.

Edward Said on Orientalism, directed by Sut Jhally, YouTube video, 40:31, 1998, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g&t=380s.

2: Text excerpt from Ehud Ben-Ezer's "The Arab in Hebrew Fiction," 1999, and photograph by Ya'acov Ben-Dov, 1912.

When the early Eastern European Jewish pioneers arrived in Palestine, they often identified with, emulated, and romanticized the local Arabs, particularly the Bedouin, perceiving them as an authentic bridge to the days of Abraham. (Some even imagined that the Bedouin were the descendants of ancient Jews who had gradually become "Arabized" over the centuries.) In this excerpt, Israeli writer and scholar Ehud Ben-Ezer describes this paradoxical relationship.

The accompanying photograph, taken by Israeli photographer and filmmaker Ya'acov Ben-Dov, who immigrated to Palestine in 1907, provides a visual representation of this desire to emulate the local Arabs. It is an image of Jews in Migdal, Palestine, 1912, wearing keffiyehs, the traditional Arab headdress.

Suggested Activity: Invite students to look at the photograph first, and ask them—without giving them any context—what they think is going on in the image. Who are the people? Where are they? What is their story?

Then explain that the people in the photograph are Jewish immigrants from Europe in 1907 Palestine. Have students consider the excerpt from "The Arab in Fiction," and ask them: why would anyone want to emulate their "enemy"? Does this paradox resonate with anything you have seen or experienced in your own life or in the media? In what ways do this quote and image shed light on "Nomad and Viper," and the relationships between the kibbutzniks and the Bedouin in that story?

Sources: Ehud Ben-Ezer, ed., *Sleepwalkers and Other Stories: The Arab in Hebrew Fiction* (New York: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 4.

Ya'acov Ben-Dov. 1912, black and white photograph, "Second Aliyah workers eating lunch in the fields of Migdal." Available from: Wikimedia Commons,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Second_aliyah_Pioneers_in_Migdal_1912_in_kuffiyeh.jpg (accessed August 15, 2019).

3: Quotation from Amos Oz, “Haaretz,” 2010.

In the years before his death, Amos Oz visited Bedouin communities in the Negev desert to express solidarity with them. On one of these visits, in 2010, Oz described the situation he saw as a “ticking time bomb.”

Suggested Activity: Read the quote from Amos Oz, contextualizing for the students when and where he made these statements. Have students reflect on Oz’s portrayal of the Bedouin in “Nomad and Viper.” Ask: what was your impression of the language he used in the story? Do you think that the empathy he expressed in later years for the Bedouin people is present in “Nomad and Viper”? Identify passages from the story that support your conclusion. What do you make of his comments from 2010 when you put them in conversation with a story he wrote fifty years earlier?

Source: Jack Khoury and Maya Sela, “Amos Oz: Situation of Bedouin in Negev is ‘Ticking Time Bomb,’” *Haaretz*, August 18, 2010, <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5101538>.

4: Quotation from Amos Oz, “Los Angeles Times,” 1998.

Amos Oz was a fiction-writer and an advocate for peace and justice. This quotation reveals at least one way in which he saw overlap between those two roles.

Suggested Activity: Invite the students to read the quotation in pairs, and ask each pair to come up with a summary of its content. Ask one pair to read their summary. Then use other pairs’ summaries to help refine and clarify what it is that Oz is saying.

Once you have an agreed upon summary of Oz’s ideas, ask students: do you agree that words are important in terms of creating justice? Do you think that a fictional story can create justice? Injustice? Do you agree that using precise, rather than general, language is important for creating justice? Students should explain their answers.

Then have students return to their pairs, and have each pair describe an object in the classroom. First, one student should present the object *using general language* while the other listens. Then, have the students switch roles. The second student should now describe the object to the first student *using precise language*. What was different between these two approaches? How would this exercise feel different if we were describing a person?

Finally, ask students to return to “Nomad and Viper.” Is the language in this story precise in the way Oz argued decades later it should be? Find examples of both precise and general language in the story. Are there instances in the story where you think the language is “doing justice”? Injustice?

Source: “Employing Language in the Service of Peace,” interview by Lisa Meyer, *Los Angeles Times*, January 28, 1998, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1998-jan-28-ls-12760-story.html>.

5: Quotation from Amos Oz, “PBS News Hour,” 2002.

Amos Oz uses a literary analysis to explain his tempered hope for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Suggested Activity: In small discussion groups, have students explore what they think Oz is saying in this passage. What are the two forms of tragedy in the Western canon according to Oz? Provide brief familiar examples of each. Ask the students: does the ending in “Nomad and Viper” conform to one of these forms? Why or why not? Have them collaborate on an alternative conclusion to the story that conforms in particular to his notion of a quintessentially Shakespearean or Chekhovian ending. Ask students to start revising the story wherever they see fit, and invite them to approach the activity with creativity. Invite them to read aloud and/or perform the scenes that they write.

Source: “Coping with Conflict: Israeli Author Amos Oz,” interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, *PBS News Hour*, January 23, 2002, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/coping-with-conflict-israeli-author-am...>