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The City and its Exemplars in L. Durrell's *Alexandria  
Quartet*

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## **TO MY PARENTS**

**...with gratitude for their support and encouragement**

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## 1. Introduction

Much has been written about Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Criticism is extremely divided when it comes to the tetralogy. This study is concerned with Alexandria, its spirit of place and the way it affects characters.

Additionally, it would *seem* that there is an obvious connection between the *Quartet* and Orientalism, yet how far Orientalist theory and Durrell's novels can be compared and/or linked meaningfully remains to be seen. Durrell's Alexandria gives such an exotic image, which according to some critics is untrue to the 'real' Alexandria. Alexandria is Durrell's springboard for his own partly imaginary city (which he insists is real) or "imaginative geography" (Derek Gregory 29), and the characters are part of that landscape. He changed the city to suit his needs, perhaps for aesthetic or romantic reasons. I want to know if what Durrell does to the city corresponds to images that other writers have given us and also whether the city he describes is, apart from the images he uses, more European than Middle Eastern. In addition to analyzing Durrell's portrayal of the city I want to find out if the images that Durrell provides of Alexandria and its characters can be associated with an Orientalist view point. Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, cites Flaubert, for example, who put forth an image of the Oriental woman, which exists to this day and could perhaps be compared to Durrell's portrayal of Justine, for example. Additionally, to the recurrent heterosexual theme in Orientalism, I will touch on the homosexual theme present in the *Quartet*, as this motif is also viewed as an Oriental cliché. Also, when considering Orientalism in the *Quartet*, one has to include the views presented by Leila Hosnani for example, who has her own vision of English stereotypes.

It would be interesting to find out whether Justine is a stereotypical Oriental woman and whether Alexandria as portrayed is a typical Oriental city. Clea will be analyzed as Justine's counterpart, and places *not* Alexandria will also be considered. I also want to know why Durrell portrays the city as he does, a city, although full of Europeans, that is still dark, mysterious, and Oriental. Durrell uses minor characters to depict Arab stereotypes and to add an Oriental

essence to the city. Richard Pine writes that “Major work remains to be undertaken in areas such as Durrell’s [...] interest in, and manipulation of, sexual psychology; his relationship [...] to orientalism.” (Pine 3) I would like to combine this because the *Quartet* is full of sexual references. I am not so much interested in the psychology of sex, but rather in why it plays such an important role in the novels, and whether this can be linked to something which is stereotypical of the Orient. I suspect that it is the Orient which seduces the characters and, were one to place them in another city, the effect would simply not be the same. Possibly Durrell chose Alexandria for exactly this purpose, because no other city would have been able to give his characters this kind of stage. Alexandria complies with—or at least Durrell can comply with—if not the exotic image of the Orient, at the very least *an* exotic image. Additionally, I am interested in finding out whether the images Durrell evokes, and the language he uses to evoke them, can be viewed as common clichés of Orientalism and whether, as some argue, linking the *Quartet* to Orientalism can only be done superficially. Perhaps one could argue that the clichés themselves are superficial. Furthermore, in this study I will argue that the *Quartet* falls into, illustrates and exaggerates the presentation of the Middle East as criticized by Edward Said. From his *Orientalism*, one gets the impression that, one, he believes that Westerners believe that they know the ‘Orient’ and that they have impressions equating the Orient with what it ‘really’ or ‘authentically’ is, and what they *think* it is, and two, that the Orient is equated with sex. My argument is that Lawrence Durrell’s *Quartet* fits into both niches. Durrell gives the impression that he knows Alexandria, which he does not; and additionally the large number of sexual references and situations in the *Quartet* coincide with the general ‘Orientalist’ idea of linking the Orient with sex.

Furthermore, since Westerners think that they know the Orient, I will discuss the problem of ‘authenticity’ in the *Quartet*. It will become clear that Durrell was very selective about what to include or exclude in his novel. James Buzard’s ‘authenticity’ theory will be useful in explaining Durrell’s choice.

## 2. Background and Criticism of the *Quartet*

Before analyzing Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, it is important to describe the 'real' Alexandria in the first part of the twentieth century, the time in which Durrell lived there. This is interesting because Durrell's opinion of Alexandria and his writing about the city vary greatly. Additionally, there has been much divided criticism about the *Alexandria Quartet*, which will be briefly outlined for the purpose of creating a solid basis for this analysis.

### 2.1. The 'Real' Alexandria

It is axiomatic that Alexandria as it existed during the time that Lawrence Durrell lived there, in World War Two, is not the same as the Alexandria of his novels. There are of, course similarities. For example, that Alexandria was a cosmopolitan city, which it was in reality, is also obvious in the novels. Yet it is interesting to read about such a powerful city when in reality the author disliked Alexandria and found it boring. This is not the Alexandria of the *Alexandria Quartet*. It is important to give a brief history of Alexandria before the Second World War and what its society was like at the time, since the novels contain some autobiographical details of Durrell. Therefore, we *can* then compare society and the city to Durrell's society and city in the *Quartet*.

Egypt has been a mystical land for a very long time. It was home to Queen Hatshepsut and Cleopatra, for example. "Few places have had as passionate a character. Few have shaped as many sensibilities; for, like a handful of other world-cities, Alexandria was the center of cultural, political, and religious life for many long centuries" (Pinchin 4). In the early twentieth century it was also a great cosmopolitan city. With all its history, too extensive for this study, it is no wonder that Alexandria, built by Alexander the Great, inspired the imagination of many writers. "But Alexandria, with its rich past, is at present out of the world's eye [...]. The contemporary city might have been easy to forget, except that the spirit of this particular place shaped the fiction of [...] twentieth-century writers and through them the imaginations of us all" (Pinchin 4).

Alexandria became a cosmopolitan city because so many foreigners emigrated there. The First World War was partly responsible for this increase in foreigners. Yet although there were a large number of foreigners, most of the population of Alexandria was, of course, Egyptian (see Mabro 247). In Durrell's novels however, not many Egyptians feature. "It is important [...] to free ourselves, as far as possible, from the powerful images implanted in the Western world by Lawrence Durrell and others" (Mabro 257). Durrell's Alexandria of the *Quartet* is different from the 'real' Alexandria. People who have never been to Alexandria and read Durrell's novels could easily assume that Durrell's imaginary city is what the city was really like, so it is important to draw some differences between the two.

Khaled Fahmy examines Alexandrian society from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. By the twentieth century Alexandria's population had grown to more than four million people (see Fahmy 263).

This cosmopolitan society has been the subject of many literary productions—novels and poems written by members of this polyglot, open and highly cosmopolitan society, in which they describe the rich and tolerant life they led there in its heyday between the wars, or bemoan its loss thereafter. Together, these literary works gave rise to an image that was considerably at variance with what society actually was; and recently this has prompted historians to attempt to reconstruct the social history of the city in a manner that is more truthful to the historical record. The result has been a picture that is more plausible and more nuanced than the 'literary Alexandria' of novels, poems and memoirs. (Fahmy 264)

Clearly, the 'literary Alexandria' is quite different from the 'real Alexandria.' This is true of Durrell's Alexandria as well. Fahmy makes it apparent in his essay *For Cavafy, with Love and Squalor* that Alexandria in the time of Durrell was not only beautiful and splendid, but was, like any other city, or maybe even more so, inhabited by poor people, for example. He hits the nail on the head when he writes that

[the] point [...] is that the stench, filth and dirt of modern Alexandria did not suddenly become visible after Nasser had delivered his famous speech nationalizing the Suez Canal Company [...]. No, the miserable picture that one often encounters in European accounts of Alexandria predates the rise of nationalism. The narrow, overcrowded, smelly



streets that Westerners bemoan, seeing in them the sorry state to which *their* Alexandria has been reduced, were also a feature of the glorious luminous city where French was supposedly spoken in cafés [...]. (271)

The city was obviously both beautiful and stinking, but one does not encounter the unpleasant parts of Alexandria in most literary accounts of the city. This is remarkable since the authors of the novels and poems could not possibly have been blind to Alexandria's realities. Additionally, literary accounts of the city tend to focus on cosmopolitan society rather than on 'real' Egyptians. "In cosmopolitan Alexandria, this 'Other' is invariably the 'local Arab' who is at best left out of the narrative altogether, or at worst depicted as dirty and smelly" (Fahmy 272). The Europeans that emigrated to Alexandria kept to themselves and did not mingle with the locals, which is why Alexandria was usually described as a European city, rather than a Middle Eastern city (see Fahmy 277). This is worthy of note. Alexandria was considered more European than Middle Eastern, yet somehow one still gets the feeling that it is an 'Oriental' city when reading the *Quartet*. It is therefore necessary to reflect on Alexandria as an Oriental city and Alexandria as a European city and on the images that make the city either or. Richard Pine writes that "Alexandria is the archetype, the epitome of ancient and modern disaster, qualified by its innate style and knowledge. It is London, Paris and Athens in one; it is the most European of cities. (And as such, it asks us questions about our attitude towards, and relationship with, the orient.)" (170).

Another aspect which is obvious in a not so obvious way is that Alexandria is situated by the Mediterranean Sea and therefore has a port. Large seaports are usually busy and full of sailors, and one common cliché about sailors is that when they come ashore they look for drink and women. As Fahmy says:

[...] Alexandria, it has to be remembered, was *essentially* a port city—a fact that seems to have escaped the attention of most of those scholars who have been fascinated by its cosmopolitan life. Alexandria was, in fact, one of the biggest and busiest ports in the Mediterranean; and [...] had its fair share not only of financiers, brokers and businessmen, but also of sailors seeking sex ashore, fugitive convicts attempting to evade the authorities, and pimps engaging in international white slavery [...]. (For Cavafy 279)

Sailors do not play a large part in Durrell's *Quartet*; sex on the other hand, does. Possibly the fact that Alexandria lies on the coast, has a port, and was frequented by sailors would make Alexandria a somewhat promiscuous city, and has something to do with Durrell's dwelling on sex in the four novels.

To sum up, Alexandria as it really was, and Alexandria as portrayed in most novels and poems are two different cities. The city that Durrell lived in and disliked does not correspond to his Alexandria in the *Quartet*, which is praised and admired. Fahmy writes "[...] that the openness and cosmopolitanism of Alexandria, much celebrated by novelists, poets and historians alike, is essentially predicated on ignoring and silencing the city's Arabic-speaking population [...]" (281). This is also true for the *Alexandria Quartet*. In the four novels we are predominantly in contact with the cosmopolitan society of the city, and only occasionally do we get a glimpse of the darker side of life in Alexandria; when reading about the children's brothel that Justine visits for example.

## 2.2. Lawrence Durrell

Lawrence Durrell was born in India, as were his parents. Although he was English by nationality, he was rarely in the country and did not consider England his home. He spent most of his time in countries near the Mediterranean and travelled extensively, which allowed him to write about the regions in which he had lived or visited. The Second World War forced Durrell, his then wife Nancy Myers and their daughter to Egypt, where Durrell worked for an Egyptian newspaper, the *Egyptian Gazette*. (see Pine 21-37) This was to be the beginning of a love-hate relationship between Durrell and Egypt, and especially Alexandria. Yet "[w]hat he saw as dross would [...] ultimately be turned into gold" (Bowker 152).

### 2.2.1. Durrell's 'Real' Alexandria

While he lived there, Durrell was not particularly taken by Alexandria, or at least some parts of the city. In one of his letters to Henry Miller, his good friend, he writes about Alexandria:

Then this smashed up broken down shabby Neapolitan town, with its Levantine mounds of houses peeling in the sun. A sea flat, dirty brown and waveless rubbing the port. Arabic, Coptic, Greek, Levant French; no music, no art, no real gaiety. A saturated middle European boredom laced with drink and Packards and beach-cabins. NO SUBJECT OF CONVERSATION EXCEPT MONEY. Even love is thought of in money terms. [...] No, if one could write a single line of anything that had a human smell to it here, one would be a genius. (Durrell and Miller, *Correspondence* 187-188)

Durrell, then, was not very impressed with the beauty of Alexandria. Quite the opposite; it all seemed rather bland and uninspiring. He thought that one would have to be a genius to write about human emotions, which were in his opinion hard to come by in Alexandria. Durrell wrote that “You could easily go mad here” (qtd. in MacNiven). “The contrast with the fictional Alexandria explains *après coup* Durrell’s eagerness to leave the real and uninspiring Alexandria in order to write his own version [...]” (Herbrechter 269). Durrell certainly managed to write about the city and human emotions in the *Quartet*.

In Alexandria Durrell came in contact with many different people. In the note at the beginning of *Justine* he writes that “The characters in this novel, the first of a series, are all inventions together with the personality of the narrator, and bear no resemblance to living persons. Only the city is real.” Nevertheless, there are similarities between the people he actually met in Alexandria and his characters in the *Quartet*.

Although his letter to Henry Miller gives the impression that Durrell was not at all impressed with the city, the women of Alexandria did make an impression on him. In another letter to Miller he writes:

But the women are splendid—like neglected gardens. Rich, silk-and-olive complexions, slanting black eyes and soft adze-cut lips, and heavenly figures like line-drawings by a sexual Matisse. I am up to my

ears in them—if I must be a little literal. [...] But one has never had anything lovelier and emptier than an Alexandrian girl. Their very emptiness is a caress. Imagine making love to a vacuum. (Durrell and Miller, *Correspondence* 181)

Durrell met many Alexandrian women during his stay in the city. “Alexandria placed plenty of temptation before Larry” (MacNiven 287). One of the ladies whom he met there was Eve Cohen. She was not the only one, though. He had many affairs and seems to have been a very sexual person. Not only does he write to Miller about how wonderful it would be to sleep with a vacuum, but the *Alexandria Quartet* is also full of sex. When Durrell returned to Alexandria years after the war, he wrote to a friend that “Much to [his] surprise very little has changed here and the Cavafian city still has all its luciferian charm—sizzling whit sex like a rasher of bacon [...]” (qtd. in Haag 7). A sizzling rasher of bacon is very hot, which Durrell must have thought Alexandria to be, judging from his four novels. “The women of Alexandria in all their stylish wickedness [...]” (*Justine* 230) have really done it not only for Durrell but also for Darley. Alexandria is more than once compared to a woman and more than once compared to Justine in particular, and the ambiguity that surrounds both is clear from the beginning. “No, Durrell’s city is like his women, passive and yet dangerously malevolent. She courts the Lord of Misrule and the many faces of Mephistopheles. She is a reality, a force to be feared” (Pinchin 167).

However, as much as he enjoyed the beautiful Alexandrian women and the sexual tension and atmosphere, he still did not enjoy much of the rest of Egypt. Clearly, Durrell’s relationship with the city was ambiguous, and again, this ambiguity is also apparent in the *Quartet*. Eve Cohen, whom Durrell also described to Miller, said that “Larry routinely made remarks against the Egyptians; he would come home in a rage, full of expletives about Egyptians” (qtd. in Haag 251). Clearly, Durrell had a poor relationship with the local Arabs. They do not feature much in the *Quartet* either, which is full of Alexandrian high society. However, it is not only Alexandria that Durrell does not enjoy fully. When posted in Cairo he also complained to a friend that he was “[...] so dead to the world in this copper-pan of a blazing town with its pullulating stinking inhabitants—Middle East is Far enough east for [him]” (Durrell, *Spirit of Place* 74).

Constantine Cavafy, a poet born in Alexandria in 1863 and who resided there most of his life before his death in 1933 (see Haag 64, 221), wrote about the city in his poems but also “wrote of hating the city [...]: the place could seem superficial and boring, its cultural environment limited [...]" (Haag 69). Both Cavafy and Durrell disliked Alexandria at one point in their lives. “It is not surprising that Durrell turned to Cavafy's poetry to enrich his *Quartet*; during his years in Alexandria, his state of mind in the atmosphere of the city was such that he must have felt an affinity with the Greek poet" (Katope 125-126). Nevertheless, Alexandria turned out to be “[...] the capital of Cavafy's imagination" (Haag 46). Cavafy left a lasting impression on Durrell and appears in the *Quartet* a number of times. Durrell admired Cavafy and while exploring Alexandria, “felt able to re-experience the city as [...] Cavafy had known it" (Haag 222). It seems that Durrell was not the only one who had an initial dislike for the city. However, Gordon Bowker notes that:

[...] Alexandria was another epiphanic experience for Durrell, and yet a strange one, because while he hated what he thought of as a broken-down version of Naples he also was in love with it. On the one hand, it was a small, parochial place—the remains of Alexander's city could be walked round in ten minutes—while at the end of the street stood the desert, a great dead hinterland, with the city clinging to the coast by its fingertips. On the other hand, there was the city of his imagination woven from the most exotic strands, especially the highly erotic, sensual atmosphere which Europeans found so seductive about Egypt, with its air of mysticism and intrigue. Alexandria in those days was hardly an Egyptian city, its population mostly Greek, Jewish and British. [...] The rich mixture of cultures and races, and the large numbers of beautiful women in the city, with its air of decadence, produced a heightened sense of sexual freedom even in wartime, when moral standards were in any case somewhat relaxed. (151)

Obviously, Durrell had an uncertain attitude towards the city. Moreover, much of the quotation coincides with what Durrell wrote in his letters to Miller.

As mentioned before, Durrell met many different people in Alexandria; characteristics of whom he must have used for his characters in the *Quartet*. The society which Durrell frequented in the city can also be found in his tetralogy. From his own experience of course, Durrell got some inspiration for his society in the *Quartet*. A friend, Gaston Zananiri, explains that he himself

“was a brilliant Alexandrian, of the posh society of Alexandria, the dancing, the balls, the evening parties. [They] had exhibitions and talkie-walkies, brilliant people; some of them quite superficial creatures. Society! Alexandria!” (qtd. in Haag 254). All of this can be found in the *Alexandria Quartet* making it hard to believe that all the characters of the *Quartet* were only Durrell’s inventions. He must have taken inspiration from somewhere and surely aspects of his characters coincide with personality traits of Durrell’s acquaintances. Haag writes that “[...] though it is true that Durrell took some [historical] liberties, it is also true that they were necessary if he was to conceal the fact that the characters and situations he describes were far from purely imaginary” (277). It can be assumed that the line between who and what is real in the *Alexandria Quartet* is blurry.

### 2.2.2. The Spirit of Place

Before comparing Durrell’s ‘real’ Alexandria with his imaginary and literary Alexandria, it is necessary to examine a most important aspect of the *Alexandria Quartet* and a vital part of any novel for Durrell himself. This is the spirit of place. It is obvious that the city of Alexandria plays a crucial role in the novels; some even see it as *the* main character. Here, opinions vary greatly. Opinions about Durrell’s characters vary too, but that will become evident in another chapter. For now the focus is on Durrell’s spirit of place. Durrell is not the only novelist who realized the importance of the spirit of place. D.H. Lawrence also observed that “[d]ifferent places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But spirit of place is a great reality” (qtd. in Pocock 338). Similarly, Durrell writes in *Spirit of Place*:

I think that not enough attention is paid to [the sense of place] as a purely literary criterion. What makes ‘big’ books is surely as much to do with their site as their characters and incidents. [...] When they are well and truly anchored in nature they usually become classics. [...] You could not transplant them without totally damaging their ambience and mood. [...] This has nothing I think to do with the manners and habits of the human beings who populate them; for they exist in nature, as a function of place. (Durrell, *SP* 163)

It is understandable that some critics see Alexandria as the main character of the *Quartet*, since Durrell makes it rather clear that people are part of a place, and not vice versa. Darley sees himself and the others “[...] not as men and women any longer [...] but beings unconsciously made part of place, buried to the waist among the ruins of a single city, steeped in its values [...]” (*Balthazar* 225). Although, if it were not for the inhabitants of a place, surely the place would not evoke the same atmosphere and Alexandria would not be Alexandria without its faded history, its cafés, brothels, cosmopolitan society and its beggars. Durrell believes that when one is in a country, experiencing its culture, it is the spirit of the place that makes the culture what and how it is (see *SP* 156). He believes that “We travel really to try and get to grips with this mysterious quality [...]” (*SP* 157) of the country in which we are travelling. Durrell continues by writing about Catholicism which differs from country to country yet somehow manages to fit the spirit of place, and that people are not the reason why this happens (see *SP* 160). They are only “reflections of their landscape” (*SP* 161). Eudora Welty seems to have shared Durrell’s ideas about place:

The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place. Location is the crossroads of circumstance, the proving ground of »What happened? Who’s there? Who’s coming?« - and that is the heart’s field... Besides furnishing a plausible abode for the novel’s world of feeling, place has a good deal to do with making the characters real, that is, themselves, and keeping them so... Place can be transparent, or translucent: not people... Place, then, has the most delicate control over character, too: by confining character, it defines it... so irretrievably and so happily are recognition, memory, history, valor, love, all the instincts of poetry and praise, worship and endeavour, bound up in place [...]. (qtd. in Hoffmann 27)

Again, place is an enormously important factor, if not *the* most important factor in novels; at least for some writers. Welty thinks that place can be “transparent, or translucent”. How far Alexandria is either or both is unclear, or rather, it seems that the city is an enigma for its characters and especially Darley. On another note, Durrell writes—and this could be the reason why he never felt quite at home in Alexandria or Egypt in general—that “[o]f course there are places where you feel that the inhabitants are not really attending to and interpreting their landscape; whole peoples or nations sometimes get mixed up

and start living at right angles to the land, so to speak, which gives the traveler a weird sense of alienation” (SP 161). However, it could also be that Durrell simply did not like Egypt as much as he liked other countries that he had visited, which could be why he did not include local Arabs in the *Quartet*, but almost exclusively Alexandria’s cosmopolitan society. Although, if as Durrell believes, place is all important, the city in the *Quartet* does live up to this theory since at least for the first two novels it is overwhelmingly present and could easily be viewed as a ‘main character.’ Durrell is not alone in his assumption; actually it seemed to be a fact for him that the place one uses as a setting for a story is essentially all important. “‘You write’, says a friendly critic [...], ‘as if the landscape were more important than the characters’” (SP 156). In answer to this critic, Durrell writes that: “If not exactly true, this is near enough to the mark, for I have evolved a private notion about the importance of landscape, and I willingly admit to seeing ‘characters’ almost as functions of a landscape” (SP 156). This is implied in the *Quartet*, particularly when we are given insight into Darley’s thoughts: “We are the children of our landscape; it dictates behaviour and even thought in the measure to which we are responsive to it” (J 41) and “[...] man is only an extension of the spirit of place” (J 175). In *Raum, Situation, erzählte Wirklichkeit*, Gerhard Hoffmann talks about “Die Kräfte des Ortes, die den Menschen zur Funktion des Raumes machen [...]” (24) and explains that “[...] Die Umgebung formt die Menschen und bestimmt Gegensätze zwischen ihnen [...]” (329). It is certain that the city Alexandria has powers, making the inhabitants its subjects.

Characters are functions of place, yet the place could not be the same without the people who inhabit it. D.C.D. Pocock believes that “[t]he relationship between place and people is a reciprocal one” (341). It is obvious that Durrell’s Alexandria without Justine, Nessim, Scobie and so on, would simply not be the same city.

People then are place, but place is also people. Places have long been recognized as possessing personality. Personalities however are as complex and as changeable as the percipient. And here there is an evident contrast between the percipient as visitor, who *observes*—and at the most superficial is sight-seeing—and those who are ‘at home’ and who thus *experience* place. (Pocock 342)



The statement that places have personality coincides with Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria. His Alexandria seems at times to possess an overwhelming personality capable of controlling the lives of its inhabitants. The percipient in this case would be Durrell as the narrator, or Darley as the 'main character.' If Durrell or Darley are observing, Alexandria is, in the opinion of some critics, only partially portrayed in a plausible way. Durrell did not feel at home in Alexandria. Pocock believes that "[...] people are too much part of place for it to be viewed without prejudice: when happy we admire, when miserable we may detest it. The difference between what in existential terms are called insiders and outsiders is commitment or attachment; without this bond, initial excitement can rapidly turn to boredom" (342). This rings true of Darley as well as Durrell. The statement fits perfectly with the Alexandria which is Darley's whole world while he is in love with Justine, yet when he falls out of love with Justine and in love with Clea, the city too becomes uninteresting to him.

### **2.2.3. An Imaginary Alexandria**

Edmund Keeley made the point that "the mystery of modern Alexandria seems not to be in what it actually is or was at any given moment but in its power to stimulate—as perhaps no other city in this century—the creation of poetic cities cast in its image" (qtd. in Fahmy, *For Cavafy* 271). Clearly Durrell found Alexandria stimulating. Otherwise he would never have been able to write four such extraordinary novels set in this city. Although Durrell frequently cursed his having to reside in Alexandria, and was frequently, as Eve Cohen mentioned, bothered by the Egyptians, he nevertheless found enough inspiration to write the *Alexandria Quartet*. It can be concluded that Alexandria did have the power to 'stimulate' not only Durrell, but Cavafy and E.M. Forster alike. And this, even though Forster could not really warm to Alexandria until he fell in love with an Egyptian whose departure left the city "a grim stony place with nothing to divert one into the tourist for an hour except Pompey's Pillar" (qtd. in Haag 54). The poet Robin Fedden said of Egypt during World War Two that "[n]ot the least curious thing about a country with so much 'past', is that the stranger finds no historical continuity.... What is missing is the middle distance: where there should be an eighteenth century, there is a Turkish hiatus. Saladin is

juxtaposed to cinemas [...]” (qtd. in Pinchin 24). Remarks such as these do not shed a particularly positive light on Alexandria; neither do many of Durrell’s comments in connection with the city. It seems that overall, “[...] most English tourists [found] Alexandria odd, but neither odd enough to be very interesting nor filled with a sense of antiquity easily seen. [...] Nor was the city [...] itself architecturally beautiful” (Pinchin 27).

Pinchin writes that “Durrell’s city is a mythic land, as is Forster’s and Cavafy’s. But Alexandria, her landscape and her peoples, the spirit of place, had, perhaps more than any other city of this century the power to excite mythic visions, [...]” (7) and that “Alexandria triggered the best in Durrell’s imagination” (6). Alexandria, with its centuries of history, inspires the imagination to run wild. Images range from Egyptian gods and goddesses who practiced incest, to the sexual tension present in the city. Durrell still felt the tension when he returned to Alexandria years after his stay there during the War (see Pinchin 11-15). It is not surprising that Durrell found enough material in this city to write about, even though he himself said that one would have to be a genius to do so. It is therefore very interesting that, considering Durrell’s ambiguous opinion of Alexandria, he managed to create a fascinating and mysterious city in the *Alexandria Quartet*, full of interesting characters. Bowker compares Durrell’s city with two other cities stating that “[h]is Alexandria was a major imaginative monument like Proust’s Paris or Joyce’s Dublin” (287-288). Possibly Durrell thought that although “[Alexandria was] hardly beautiful, [it] seemed to have a strange and pleasant spirit: European—especially Greek and French—and Oriental” (Pinchin 28). If he did not find the city pleasant, he surely found it strange. There are Oriental aspects in the *Quartet* which will be examined and compared with common clichés of the Orient. Edward Said’s *Orientalism* will be of great help in undertaking this task.

Balthazar asks Darley: “You have been painting the city, touch by touch, upon a curved surface—was your object poetry or fact?” (B 19). One might have asked Durrell the same. Durrell paints a mesmerizing and fascinating city full of seduction, which Durrell found aplenty in his ‘real’ Alexandria. Further proof that the city in the *Quartet* and the ‘real’ Alexandria are different is that many

Egyptians do not recognize the city that Durrell portrays in the novels, claiming that it is not truthful to the real Alexandria. Artemis Cooper remarked that “almost every Egyptian begins by saying rather defensively that Durrell got Alexandria all wrong in the *Quartet*. This is merely a way of saying that it is not full of sexual perverts and child brothels” (qtd. in Rodenbeck 145). Without doubt there were reasons for the way Durrell portrayed the city and its inhabitants. Without doubt, Durrell’s portrayal of the city can be ascribed to his subjective opinions about and views of the city. Like most novelists’, Durrell’s perception was selective, and critics who disagree with his portrayal of Alexandria and its inhabitants do so because Durrell failed to select the part of Alexandria that they wanted, obviously forgetting or ignoring that Alexandria was, whatever else it might have been, *also* a cosmopolitan city. Hoffmann writes: “Da der Mensch überhaupt nichts direkt >objektiv< wahrnimmt, sondern immer auf etwas hin gerichtet ist und dieses Gerichtetsein mit repräsentiert, sind alle Akte der Wahrnehmung primäre Vorgänge der Sinngebung und fallen unter den im weiteren Sinne gebrauchten Begriff des Symbolischen” (267). Furthermore, he alludes to the fact “[...] daß der Mensch überhaupt nur >fictional<, also durch Darstellung und Repräsentation die Welt erfassen kann [...]” (272). This is to say that people simply cannot perceive anything in an objective way. All acts of perception are part of interpretation and therefore rise to symbolism. He also says that people can only comprehend the world fictionally through depiction and representation. Therefore one can conclude that, although Durrell claimed that the city is real, it is not, and that critics who criticize this fact, did not pay attention to statements like the above quotations. On the other hand, there are writers, such as the Egyptian Edwar al-Kharrat, who also claims to depict Alexandria truthfully, but unlike Durrell, excludes the high society of the city.

[Al-Kharrat’s] knowledge of [Alexandria] is intimate, for he was born and bred in Alexandria, and her people, he asserts, are his people, for he has participated in their weal and woe, their loves and hates, and their daily struggle for existence.

This is, not doubt, all true, but what Al-Kharrat seems to ignore (or forget) is that, as with other writers, it is only one particular segment of Alexandria that he knows intimately (and describes so well). He skillfully delineates the atmosphere of the native quarters of Alexandria, [...]

where Muslims and Copts live a shared existence cheek by jowl, their lives in so many ways similar, yet subtly different in their expression. [...] He refers sarcastically to the 'upper crust' that Durrell knew and wrote about, and to which a Coptic landed proprietor like Durrell's Nessim Hosnani would naturally belong. But Durrell, Al-Kharraf maintains, never knew the 'real' Alexandria, which he superciliously called the 'Arab city'. Still, it is a fact that there was and still is an 'upper crust'. It is no less 'real' than the native (*baladi*) or 'Arab' part of the city, and it cannot easily be dismissed. The images of Alexandria that Durrell and Al-Kharraf present are each, in their own terms, true. In the first half of the twentieth century Alexandria was a colonial mixture of East and West, and rarely did the twain meet, and never on equal footing. (Kararah 309-310)

One can thus be sure that selective perception most definitely played a part in Durrell's presentation of Alexandria. Perhaps he also chose to present Alexandria to us in this way for aesthetic, literary or rhetorical reasons. Alexandria was the springboard for his imaginative story, and he chose to transform it perhaps with a hidden agenda to appeal to his readers, making the novels more exciting.

Strangely enough, although Durrell writes in the note to Justine that the city is real and the characters are purely imagined, he also "[...] admitted to having created an unreal Alexandria, adding, 'They're full of lies, my books'" (Bowker 408). Of course, there is nothing wrong with creating an imagined city, or a partially imagined city; however in that case Durrell should probably not have insisted that the city is *real*. The next section will ask whether the people whom Durrell met in Alexandria served as models for his characters in the *Quartet*, adding to our knowledge of the imagined 'reality' of the novel.

#### **2.2.4. Durrell's Characters**

The *Quartet* concerns itself with Alexandria's cosmopolitan society. Another concern, which is very prominent in the *Quartet*, is sex. Considering Durrell's contradictory remarks about the city and its inhabitants, it is interesting to draw some comparisons between people Durrell actually met and the characters in his novels. I will briefly focus on one of the women that Durrell met in Alexandria, since women play a vital role in the *Quartet*.

We know from his letters to Henry Miller that Durrell was very fond of the Alexandrian women in general, their hollowness and their sweetness at the same time. Eve Cohen was one of Durrell's wives. She was a beautiful young Alexandrian woman who fascinated Durrell from the beginning. There are many similarities between Eve and Justine, yet how much of Eve or Durrell's other women can be found in his female characters of the *Quartet* can only be guessed. Take, for example, Eve's love for a man named Ruggero, "the man with whom she truly fell in love" (Haag 237). Eve never told Durrell about Ruggero. Justine also claims that her true love is her husband, Nessim, although she has an affair with Darley and he thinks that she is in love with him. Her true love turns out to be Pursewarden.

Then there are Eve's looks and her "vine-leaf pattern [...] dress [which] was recalled by Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*" (Haag 241). Durrell describes Eve by claiming that "the flavour is straight Shakespeare's Cleopatra; an ass from Algiers, lashes from Malta, nails and toes from Smyrna, hips from Beirut, eyes from Athens, and nose from Andros, and a mouth that shrieks or purrs like the witching women of Homs or Samarkand. And breasts from Fiume" (qtd. in MacNiven 282). As should be obvious by now, Durrell was very sexual, and this sexuality would weave itself into the *Quartet*. Durrell's description of Alexandrian women is direct and should be quoted for the most part completely.

However, it's an office full of beautiful girls, and Alexandria is, after Hollywood, fuller of beautiful women than any place else. Incomparably more beautiful than Athens or Paris; the mixture Coptic, Jewish, Syrian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Spanish gives you slant dark eyes, olive freckled skin, hawk lips and noses, and a temperament like a bomb. Sexual provender of quality, but the atmosphere is damp, hysterical, sandy with the wind off the desert fanning everything to mania. [...]

It's funny the way you get woman after woman; [...] each more superficial than the last Gaby, Simone, Arlette, Dawn, Penelope. But their sex here is interesting; it's madly violent but not WEAK or romantic or obscure, like Anglo-Saxon women, who are always searching for a tintype of their daddies. It is not preconceived but taken heavily and in a kind of war—not limp northern friendship—but fierce and glaring, vulture and eagle work with beak and claws. (Durrell and Miller, *Correspondence* 191-192)

He compares the Alexandrian women with English women, indicating how intriguing Durrell found the ladies in Alexandria. He was enthusiastic about the Alexandrian women, and their temperament and non-romantic side can be found in the *Quartet*. Durrell writes that the atmosphere is sandy, hollow and hysterical. Justine is also hysterical at one point in the *Quartet*. It will have become clear by now that there are definite parallels between Durrell's statements about Alexandria and his novels, and that whatever Durrell might have said at one point, parts of his 'real' life in Alexandria can be recovered in the *Quartet*. To Henry Miller he wrote that "[*The Alexandria Quartet* is] a sort of prose poem [...] to one of the great capitals of the heart, the Capital of Memory, and it carries a series of sharp cartoons of the women of Alexandria, certainly the loveliest and most world-weary women in the world" (qtd. in Haag 1). Durrell clearly thought that Alexandria was a great city, even if he was not constantly impressed. He found it worthy of writing a "prose poem" to Alexandria. Yet even the above quotation shows ambiguity, since although the women are the "loveliest", they are also the "most world-weary."

### 2.2.5. Criticism of the *Quartet*

Criticism of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* has been divided. "In the light of the criticism which deals with his work, Lawrence Durrell seems to be an enigma: the critics have difficulty putting him in the right box" (Sajavaara 12). Most critics either praise the *Quartet* highly, or criticize it in a very negative way. Durrell himself did not make it easier for the critics since some of his statements about his work contradicted each other. As mentioned earlier, many Egyptian readers are unhappy with the portrayal of Alexandria because they know that it does not coincide with the 'real' Alexandria. Others think that the characters are uninteresting and flat. "On the whole, the critical judgment rather gives the impression of "damning with faint praise"" (Herbrechter 24). And then there is Durrell himself:

Now the difficulty of all criticism, of all interpretation, whether of a work of art or of a system of scientific ideas, is the subjective element. Human beings suffer from binocular vision: if you look at the stars through a pair of binoculars you can only see a small part of the sky at once. The act of thinking about something creates a field around the object observed,

and in order to think about that object you must neglect the whole from which the object has been separated. It is easy to see what a grave limitation this is, particularly for a critic. Everything is part of some greater whole. [...] The materials we use for thinking are so unstable that it is unlikely we shall ever reach a final definition, a final judgment upon them. Yet we are forced to use them. There is no final truth to be found—there is only provisional truth within a given context. (Durrell, *Key* 2-3)

Clearly, for Durrell, there is no one truth about *anything* since everything (apart from science) is invariably subjective, not objective including neutral criticism.

### 2.2.5.1. Critics: Pro

Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria is frequently in the spotlight since Durrell gave it such an important role in at least the first two novels. After Darley's return to Alexandria the city had changed. He is no longer in love with Justine and his feelings for Justine seem to be in direct correlation with his feelings about Alexandria. But what about Alexandria itself? Joseph S. Rippier, like many others, believes that the city controls the *Quartet* and manipulates its inhabitants (see Rippier 12). "Never are the characters allowed to forget where they are, and all are more or less compelled to participate in life which the city forces on them" (Rippier 12). For Rippier, Alexandria is *the* dominant force in the lives of the characters, which is precisely how the city is presented on numerous occasions, especially in *Justine*. Guido Kums praises the "[...] admirable evocation of place and atmosphere [...]" (50) that Durrell was able to generate in the *Alexandria Quartet*. Lee T. Lemon writes that "[s]ignificantly few critics doubt Durrell's ability to excite the reader, his achievements as a stylist, his talent for evoking exotic scenery, or his mastery at creating characters at once larger—if not better—than life but yet sympathetically involved in it" (327). Pinchin writes that "[...] Durrell will risk our cries of excess to take us on a magical journey [...] to his Alexandria, city of extremes, of smashed legs *and* palaces. This isn't the Alexandria Durrell wrote letters about [...]" (166). It is true that the *Quartet* is excessive in more ways than one: most characters in the *Quartet* have sexual relationships and several lose eyes or hands. Even if this is true of the *Quartet*, it is also true that it does take the reader on a "magical journey." As Rodenbeck has said: "If the verisimilitude of

Durrell's version of Alexandria in the *Quartet* has never had defenders, it has nevertheless had many well-meaning champions [...]” (145).

#### 2.2.5.2. Critics: Con

There is substantial negative criticism of the *Quartet*. Although Kums praises Durrell's ability to evoke the atmosphere of Alexandria, he also writes that “[...] Durrell only narrowly escapes making place a downright determinist influence in the **Quartet**” (50). More criticism was generated by the fact Durrell that did not portray the city and its inhabitants properly. “Mahmoud Manzaloui argued forcefully that the *Quartet* was marred by unredeemable racism and pretentiousness” (Seigneurie 87). Manzaloui is one of the critics who are unhappy with Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria and of the Egyptians. It is strange that simply leaving out characters, primarily Arabs, should make the *Quartet* a racist work, or that getting some facts wrong should make the work pretentious. Azza Kararah writes that “[t]hough many modern Western writers have portrayed various facets of Alexandria, none has adequately reflected the native element of the city. Most Egyptians will find it difficult to recognize [...] in Lawrence Durrell's *Quartet*—the Alexandria they know” (307). John Rodenbeck lashes out at Durrell's *Quartet*, writing that:

Creating differences among his characters in their speech, manners, and appearances was by no means Durrell's strong point: they are not always distinguishable from one another even by their gender and within the sexes often seem virtually interchangeable. Certainly, with one or two deliberately caricature-like exceptions—Scobie, for example—they all speak alike (147).

Rodenbeck goes on to write that “Durrell's vision of Alexandria is not only racist, but preposterous [...]” (148) and finally dismisses the *Quartet* as:

a fiesta of utopian sex—[Durrell's] stated aim was to conduct “an investigation of modern love”—in which characters couple and recouple, cluster and disperse, like clouds of microbes seen between glass plates in a microscope—an endless Carnival ball. The chief function of the physical and historical city itself in the *Quartet* is little more than to serve as an appropriately decadent venue for erotic pursuits. His Alexandria is a Levantine theme park casually hung with miscellaneous gobbets of



dubious local color snatched almost entirely from various literary sources. (149)

Certainly the view of the *Quartet* given here is anything but positive. The characters are undistinguishable; the city is reduced to a spot for sex orgies. It is certainly true that many of Durrell's characters have slept with each other at one point or another. Justine, the most promiscuous of Durrell's characters, had sex with five other characters. Understandably, some think of this as promiscuous behavior, but since Durrell claimed he invented these characters, it seems odd that so many critics are obsessed with it. "If the *Quartet* is high-class pornography, as Durrell joked, it is also a textbook of seduction" (Bowker 248). At any rate it is high-class, and surely seduction has a more positive connotation than promiscuity or immorality.

Another critic, D.J.Enright, writes that "Alexandria *is* a rather melodramatic city, and not merely by British-provincial standards. Its extremes of wealth and poverty are staggering. [...] Why, then, did Durrell feel obliged to paint the lily and throw in an extra stench on the putrescence?" (30). Further he states that "[Durrell's] 'views of Alexandria' are so sharply focussed as almost to persuade us that *anything* he tells us is true even if it contradicts something else. It is also a discredit to his 'characters', who lack precisely character" (31). Enright states that Durrell *almost* manages to make his readers believe in his city and its inhabitants. Obviously Enright does not think that Durrell's *Quartet* is wholly plausible. For Enright, Scobie is more interesting than Justine. He is "[...] a sun-cured Falstaff in a technicolour Dream of Dark Nymphomaniacs" (32). He continues to write that "[...] one tires of [the characters] before long, well before the end of a tetralogy—their natural length is *Justine*, which remains for me the *raison d'être* of the quartet" (34) and that they are "[...] a group of over-bred neurotics and sexual dilettantes" (35). One must imagine that Enright writes all this about Durrell's *Quartet* although he thinks highly of him (see Enright 36). Enright dwells negatively, for the most part, on the sexual aspects of the *Quartet*. Nevertheless he does find some of Durrell's descriptions of the city genuine and writes that "Alexandria, as one sees it at such [authentic] moments, deserves better than the Alexandrians with whom Durrell peoples it" (36). In conclusion, Enright notes that "[t]he reasons for the quartet's

resounding success, on various levels, are not hard to find. It creates through the senses a place, a city, even if in the long run it dulls those same senses” (39).

In the light of this criticism, it will be apparent just how divided opinions about the *Alexandria Quartet* are. Although these are not the only words which describe the *Quartet*, it is true that in the *Quartet*

[...] there are [...] passages that are more like *The Arabian Nights*. There is something in Durrell of the tale-teller of an Eastern bazaar. The incredible, the extravagant, surprise, shock, coincidence, indecency; Durrell is as much interested in exploiting such ancient devices of the tale-teller's art as in depicting actuality. [...] His Alexandria [...] is an actuality, one can trace it on a map; but more importantly it is a phantasmagoria, a symbol. It is a screen on to which Durrell projects the vicissitudes of his psyche. (Fraser, *A Study* 41)

The *Quartet* is exotic and mysterious, which some critics like and others dislike. Durrell's opinion that landscape is vital is ignored by some critics, who dwell instead on their conviction that his characters are uninteresting. Pine writes that “[the] flatness of [Durrell's] characters is extenuated [...] by the fact that they represent eastern concepts rather than western events [...]” (11). These eastern concepts are of importance to this study.

Durrell is able to evoke an “extravagant” city, even if it is at times immoral. This immorality, which was present when Durrell lived in the city, is also a part of his imaginary Alexandria and surely a part of the real city. Just as the criticism concerning the *Quartet* is divided, so the *Quartet* is ambiguous in many ways. This can be traced to the fact that for Durrell, the city Alexandria, including its inhabitants, was an ambiguous city, one which he did not like all the time but which was nevertheless an inspiration for him.

### 3. Orientalism, Authenticity and Imaginative Geographies

In the following chapter, a number of theories will be considered in order to analyze the concept of place in the *Alexandria Quartet*. Some key points relevant to this study, contained in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, will be presented in order to find out whether Orientalism and Durrell can be linked in other than a purely superficial way. Said "[has] alluded to the connections between Orientalism as a body of ideas, beliefs, clichés [...]" (205), and the *Quartet* contains a number of Orientalist clichés such as the 'Orientalist' city of Alexandria being portrayed as a female, and the overwhelming sexual tension in the city. However, Said's *Orientalism* is so complicated that it might not be possible to use it only superficially. James Buzard's ideas will be helpful since, although he wrote about how Europe was portrayed in the nineteenth century, some of his ideas can be applied to the *Quartet*. Similarly, Derek Gregory wrote about the nineteenth century, but his interest in Egypt will make him useful. Buzard and Gregory were especially interested in the way that countries were depicted, and, hopefully, an analysis of their ideas will lead to a constructive investigation of the concept of the spirit of place in the *Quartet*.

#### 3.1. Orientalism

It is essential to begin with a definition of Said's Orientalism so that we may get a clearer idea of what he meant by the term and how it can be applied to this study. For Said:

*Orientalism* is the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice. But in addition I have been using the word to designate that collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line. (Said 73)

The term is used for how the West deals with and considers the East or the 'Orient.' Especially significant is the "collection of dreams, images" which comes to mind in combination with the term 'Orient'. "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic

beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (Said 1). Durrell’s Alexandria is the “city of memory” and guides its inhabitants through a number of experiences, which, although often painful, permits them to grow. The city is exotic and the landscape powerful, and surely whilst Darley is in love there is also romance in the air. Said holds the position that the Orient is a thing which Westerners *believe* they know, but is actually their own creation, or perhaps they think that they know it precisely since it is their invention. They write about the Orient and think that they are familiar with the culture, but their knowledge is limited and, according to Said, not a reflection of reality. Nevertheless, Said does declare that “One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them be told, would simply blow away” (Said 6).

Pocock seems to agree, noting that it is difficult to view a culture other than one’s own without some form of prejudice, and this apparently also is true of the Orient. “As a judge of the Orient, the modern Orientalist does not, as he believes and even says, stand apart from it objectively. [...] His Orient is not the Orient as it is, but the Orient as it has been Orientalized” (Said 104). This is not to say that Durrell was a professional Orientalist. However, it is clear that he did not view Alexandria and its inhabitants objectively, and it is also clear that Darley sees events and people completely subjectively, at least until Balthazar explains how things ‘really’ were. The truth however, is hard to come by in the *Quartet*. “To be a European in the Orient *always* involves being a consciousness set apart from, and unequal with, its surroundings” (Said 157). This is definitely the feeling put across by Durrell in his letters to Miller for example, but the feeling that Darley is never quite part of Alexandria or Egypt is also conveyed in the *Quartet*.

Interestingly, for Said “[a]ll the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in, its geography. Thus on the one hand the geographical Orient nourished its inhabitants, guaranteed their characteristics, and defined their specificity [...]” (216).

Perhaps it would have been impossible for Durrell to use a different setting for his quartet. London or Paris, although also great cities of the world would not have given the same exotic atmosphere presented in the *Alexandria Quartet*. Alexandria is firmly rooted in the 'Orient' and gives the novels their 'Oriental' features, even though Alexandria was often viewed as a European city. Nevertheless, although Durrell writes mainly about the cosmopolitan society in the city, there are some dark, mysterious events in the *Quartet*, and as already mentioned there is plenty of sex.

Said uses Gustave Flaubert as a prime example of nineteenth-century Orientalism. Flaubert, of course, wrote almost a century before Durrell, yet similarities can be found between the two, at least when it comes to the topic of sex in Egypt. Said writes that the Orient first of all, "[...] *could be* [...] *made* Oriental", and that "[...] Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman [...]" (6). Take Durrell's Justine, for example. Though Alexandrian, she is not Arab. Nor is she European. Rather she is more like the type of the 'oriental woman'. Furthermore Said, who is discontented with the way Orientalists eroticized the Middle East, postulates:

Woven through all of Flaubert's Oriental experiences, exciting or disappointing, is an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex. In making this association Flaubert was neither the first nor the most exaggerated instance of a remarkably persistent motif in Western attitudes to the Orient. And indeed, the motif itself is singularly unvaried, although Flaubert's genius may have done more than anyone else's could have to give it artistic dignity. Why the Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies, is something on which one could speculate [...]. (Said 188)

Just as the sexual motif is "persistent" in the approach of Westerners to the Middle East, Durrell pervades the *Alexandria Quartet* with sex. One could just as well substitute Durrell's name for Flaubert's. Although Durrell does not, for example, write about harems, or princes, he still associates certain aspects with the Orient. Justine is compared to Cleopatra, for instance.

The Oriental woman is an occasion and an opportunity for Flaubert's musings; he is entranced by her self-sufficiency, by her emotional

carelessness, and also by what, lying next to him, she allows him to think. [She is less] a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity [...]. (Said 187)

Justine is a woman whom Darley cannot get through to, but through whom he ultimately develops and grows into the artist that he wants to be; she is his opportunity and occasion. Her femininity impresses Darley, but actually it turns out that even Clea, who at one point was also in love with Justine, finds her shallow.

But analyzing Durrell's *Quartet* as an Orientalist text raises other problems. Walter Creed suggested that an "unintelligent reader" (qtd. in Gifford, *Colonial Knowing* 103) "[...] could easily cast Durrell or at least his text as an Orientalist and as operating within that conceptual apparatus" (Gifford, *CK* 103). This would imply that one cannot, as an intelligent reader and even less so as an intelligent scholar interpret the *Quartet* as an Orientalist text, nor Durrell as an Orientalist. James Gifford writes:

As such, only a narrow reading that overlooks the core of the work may be properly considered Orientalist, and even then only in its reader-imminent elements. This is certainly the case with Durrell's *Quartet*. [...] it is not my intent to claim that such mis-readings or superficial readings are without influence or power [...] and I find myself sympathetic to such recognitions of fictionality and the subversiveness of Durrell's exposure of the Orientalist tradition.

In these respects, despite the accuracy and importance of their political debate, Said-inspired Orientalist readings of Durrell's fictions are neither plausible in all but the most superficial readings nor realistic in their consideration of the author's aesthetic vision. This is despite apparent Orientalist content in the superficiality of images and constructed depictions in Durrell's works. [...] In that Durrell's text prompts readers' attention to the construction of knowledge and its slipperiness, it seems bizarre to find readers who draw on the novels' images and its characters' statements for knowledge. [...] Postcolonial theory, as posited by Said in *Orientalism*, relies entirely on the contention by a reader or writer that a work in some manner represents a truth or reality, and that readers may use such a work to scry knowledge and thereby power, but in Durrell's fictions knowledge is an even more unstable lie than Truth. (Gifford, *Colonial Knowing* 108-110)

It may seem impossible, then, to attempt an Orientalist analysis of Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. Even the imagery, which clearly could be compared to

general depictions of the Orient, cannot be linked to *Orientalism* without losing its plausibility. However, if the *Quartet* cannot be considered an Orientalist work, what is it then? Surely the images depicted in the work and in other Orientalist works must have come from somewhere, and must somehow, even if they are now clichés, have at one point been connected to the Near or the Middle East. But if one is trying to find a single truth in the *Quartet*, then one is out of place, since there are obviously many truths. Whether these 'truths' after they have been revealed as such to Darley are really true one will never know. The *Alexandria Quartet* is *fiction*. It is Durrell's invention, it is *made up*, and this must be clear to everyone. Said wrote that the Orient was "almost a European invention." If the Orient itself is an invention, the *Quartet* is an invention with autobiographical details. Yet the two cannot be linked on a higher level apparently. If one cannot use Orientalist clichés when analyzing a text which is *set* in the 'Orient', what is the use of their existence? Is it not possible to compare, say, Flaubert's Oriental woman to Durrell's women without being dismissed as an 'unintelligent reader'? If the women in the *Quartet* are not European women, it remains uncertain what kind of women they are if they cannot be labeled 'Oriental'. The images of Alexandria depicted by Durrell have to go under some heading. However Alexandria as a stereotypical 'oriental' city does not seem to be considered appropriate or accurate, unless one is willing to be regarded as "unintelligent." Hopefully it will have become clear by now that, although Durrell and *Orientalism* seem to fit together on the surface, some critics disagree and have rather convincing arguments why this is so. A reading of the *Quartet* using *Orientalism* will have to take place in the light of such criticism and with the knowledge that, superficially, one *is* able to discover Oriental images in Durrell's *Quartet*.

Said's *Orientalism* is no easy read. Fortunately, two other critics, Derek Gregory and Daniel Martin Varisco, can serve as sources of clarification.

### 3.1.1. The *Said and the Unsaid*

Daniel Martin Varisco has written an extensive study with the eloquent title *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*. To begin with: “No one reading [Said’s] *Orientalism* can fail to appreciate that much of the previous writing and lecturing about Muslims, Arabs, and stylized “Orientals” reveals more about those doing the writing than about real people in a geographical space east of Europe” (Varisco XII). This resonates with what Durrell said about subjectivity, since, as with the *Quartet*, the critics clearly focus for the most part on Durrell himself, and try to figure out what *he* meant by writing what and how he did, and if the result does not suit them, criticize him for it. Since most writing is subjective, it is also plausible that one will not gain true knowledge about the ‘real people’ in the East. Varisco attacks Said’s *Orientalism*, regarding it as a controversial and “polemic” text, writing that “[it] is one thing to stick a knife in the heart of Orientalist bias, but quite another to twist it around and bloody the whole establishment in a fit of intellectualized rage” (6). The phrase *intellectual rage* refers to Said himself, since he obviously did not approach the subject neutrally. Varisco acknowledges that “[a] common misperception in most general readings of *Orientalism* is the assumption that the nemesis for Said is the old-fashioned academic Orientalist who interprets the reality of Orientals through fancifully biased images derived from texts” (8). This is a fruitful approach because it allows at least some leeway for interpretation of the images in Durrell’s *Quartet*, which, of course, we know not to be a reflection of the ‘authentic’ culture of Egypt but of the city through Durrell’s and or Darley’s eyes. If the Orientalists who interpret the images of texts are not the enemy, one can at least analyze images without fearing that one is launching something unthinkable in the intellectual world. Additionally, through Varisco’s study it becomes clear that, while many have done so, one need not take Said and his *Orientalism* as the absolute authority on Orientalism.

According to Raymond Schwab, the Orient viewed by Romantics was “an entire Orient of sofas and erotic satiric masques that only too often encouraged literary history to frolic in shabby exoticism” (qtd. in Varisco 67). This Orient was invented long ago and has been persistent ever since. It allows much room for the imagination and seems to stimulate the imagination of writers as



no other place did or does. Take the *Arabian Nights* for example, which “[...] spawned a cottage industry of prose and poetry that lured Westerners to visit the fabled Orient and lulled generations of children to the dream world of Aladdin” (Varisco 85). These tales appeared in translation in the early nineteenth century, and one should not be surprised that readers were impressed and interested to know if what they read actually existed. One must also not wonder that the Orient, with its power to stimulate the imagination, did just that: stimulate the imagination. Although romanticism was generally not what we would today consider “romantic”, one has to admit that oriental sofas and “shabby exoticism” cannot really be considered “romantic” either since they conjure up a rather shabby image.

#### **3.1.1.1. The *Femme Orientale***

Varisco provides an interesting example of what he calls “reverse Orientalism” in which “[...] all Westerners looked alike and all their daughters were up for grabs, literally” (154). This is taken from *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Saleh, a novel written back at Orientalism (see Varisco 154). If Westerners saw the East as a place to find sex, it worked in reverse, too, which is interesting when one considers how much criticism the portrayal and exploitation of women of the Orient has caused. Varisco asks “[if] the Orient is so intertwined in sexual fantasy with the feminine, why are real women left out?” (158). My interest here is not in the presentation of ‘real’ women generally, or in Durrell’s novels specifically, but simply in the representation of women as sexual beings, not even as oppressed sexual objects—in Durrell’s fiction and not real life—since it is Justine, for example, who dallies with Darley and not the other way around. And although we are never given insight into Justine’s mind, she is still the one with whom half the characters are or were in love and who, though dismissed as shallow, has for at least the first two novels an immense power over Darley and others. One cannot really say that Justine is an example of the poor exploited female.

Said dwells on Flaubert and his portrayal of the oriental woman. As Varisco rightly states, however, “[...] segregation and sexual exploitation of women had

evolved in the real Orient prior to the intrusion of perverse travelers and Orientalist scholars. Western writers often embellished the harem for fantasy's sake, but they certainly did not invent it out of nothing" (160). The typical cliché of associating the Orient with sex was not coined one day, but had already existed in the Orient. Travelers and writers may well have exaggerated for literature's sake, yet they did not invent a sexualized Orient. Durrell filled the pages of the *Quartet* with sex, even going so far as calling Alexandria itself a whore. However the difference is that in the *Quartet* one does not feel that the main women are exploited and segregated. Yes, there is a scene in which Darley witnesses a sexual act between a man, whom he does not recognize properly at first, and a prostitute; but brothels exist everywhere in the world, and this is nothing especially oriental. Furthermore, "Said does not follow through on the extent to which Flaubert uses the Orient as a foil for speaking to the discontents of his own repressive bourgeois society" (Varisco 160). Durrell was also inclined to write about "[...] the ways in which the East can free the Englishman from a damning rigidity and complacency" (Pinchin 179). Neither Flaubert nor Durrell was entirely content with their 'home' countries (although England was not really home for Durrell) and it is possible that their writings were a sign of rebellion against precisely these societies. Varisco also claims that "[r]eal sex in the European male domain was as obtainable for the well-off as anything imagined in an Oriental mode" (162). In the *Quartet*, on the other hand, Pursewarden says that "'England cries out for brothels' [...]" (B 112). This is not the point, though, since Durrell never claimed there was no sex to be had in England. He simply made the point that Alexandrian girls in comparison to English girls were wonderful both physically and in their attitude towards sex, and this would correspond to Said's statement that what men travelling to the Orient looked for "[...] was a different type of sexuality, perhaps more libertine and less guilt-ridden [...]" (190). What is vital here is the "different type of sexuality" which was unobtainable in Europe, perhaps. This must have contributed to the coverage of sex in the *Quartet*; since it is understandable that one would rather have sex with an exciting exotic woman than a boring English girl. Additionally, Alexandria was a sea-port, which tends to be associated with promiscuity; there were masquerades and much alcohol, and this kind of

lifestyle, whether 'real' or in the novels, is bound to lead to a lot of sex, especially when a city is full of pretty girls.

### 3.1.1.2. "Sexual Desires of all Kinds"

Varisco criticizes Said because, although he is very adamant about linking sex with the Orient, he fails to include homosexuality, which was and is present in the Middle East and is also included in Durrell's *Quartet*. About *Orientalism* Varisco somewhat ironically states:

For a book that is visually introduced by a quintessentially homoerotic portrait of a naked white boy holding up a snake, one would expect some coverage of the homosexual fantasies that can be found in Orientalist discourse. It is not just that the Orient is represented as an odalisque begging to be penetrated by the colonial gazer in pith helmet; the Orient could also be a place of unloosed sexual desires of all kinds. (Varisco 167)

Indeed there are "sexual desires of all kinds" present in the *Quartet*. Balthazar, for example, is a homosexual. Scobie likes to cross-dress as a woman, and Pursewarden has sex with his sister; not to mention the Egyptian homosexuals presented by Durrell as part of the street life of the city. Similarly to Durrell's frequent presentation of brothels, there are also presentations of homosexual Orientals, not part of the Alexandrian elite. The Orient attracted not only heterosexual writers but also many homosexual writers, Forster being one of them (see Boone 90).

Many heterosexually identified men have traveled to the Arabic Orient in pursuit of erotic fulfillment as well, but even these adventurers have had to confront the specter of male-male sex that lurks in their fantasies of a decadent and lawless East; such encounters put into crisis assumptions about male sexual desire, masculinity, and heterosexuality that are specific to Western culture. (Boone 90)

The Orient was therefore not only associated with hetero- but also with homo-sexuality, and in his study Boone tries to "present a series of collisions between traditionally assumed Western sexual categories (the homosexual, the pederast) and equally stereotypical colonialist tropes (the beautiful brown boy, the hypervirile Arab, the wealthy Nazarene) [...]" (91). One such stereotypical

Oriental scene can be found in Frederic Prokosch's *The Asiatics*. Published in 1936, this novel is closer in time to the *Quartet* than anything written by Flaubert. Ahmed offers himself as a servant—willing to do *everything*—to the narrator (see *Asiatics* 136). When refused, he asks: “I am not pretty enough for you? Is that it? Do you wish someone younger and prettier? [...]”(137).

Additionally, “the dazzling spectacle of [...] Alexandrian street life is transformed into an emblem of the psyche's overflowing polymorphous desires. As such, this spectacle becomes a convenient screen on which to project fantasies of illicit, unbridled eroticism” (Boone 93). Undeniably, Durrell uses Alexandria as his “screen”.

### **3.1.2. Gregory's *Imaginative Geographies of Egypt***

Derek Gregory's essay is concerned with the “imaginative geographies of Egypt” from the middle of the nineteenth century to the 1950s. The twentieth century is precisely the time that Durrell lived in Egypt, and also the time in which the *Quartet* is set. Gregory is especially interested in Said, who regarded “[...] Orientalism as a discourse that worked through a representation of space in which the Orient was constructed as a theatrical stage on which the Occident projected its own fantasies and desires” (Gregory 29). Hence Durrell's Alexandria is a stage for Durrell's characters to play on and develop. Or, rather, the city itself is the puppet master and Durrell's characters are the puppets. The following is only one of many statements made by the characters, in this case by Justine: “We are not strong or evil enough to exercise choice. All this is part of an experiment arranged by something else, the city perhaps [...]” (*J* 27).

Gregory, like Said, uses Gustav Flaubert as an example of a travel writer visiting the Orient. The focus is on Flaubert in order to draw on his “[...] eroticization and sexualization of the Orient as female Other, different from and desired by a masculine European subject [...]” (Gregory 44), in comparison with what Durrell does in the *Quartet*. At least Durrell also manages to eroticize and sexualize not only Alexandria, but also its subjects. The next quotation from Gregory, although made in reference to Flaubert, can be brought in

connection with Durrell, since he has been called a Romantic and a Realist on different occasions. While it is not clear what Durrell thought of Egypt prior to his arrival, it is reasonable to assume that he disliked many elements of the country. Clearly, though, he entertained many images that served as his inspiration. Flaubert recognized that upon his arrival in Egypt, “[...] his idealized, exoticized Orient did not disappear; he was still enough of a Romantic to recognize (and even be entranced by) its shimmering images. And he was already enough of a realist to see that these imaginative geographies were terribly vulnerable” (Gregory 50). Durrell was certainly captivated by Alexandria, or at the least he was able to find enough inspiration to write four novels about the city and its inhabitants. An interesting detail that seems not to have been much in the foreground of all the criticism is that, as Gregory rightly mentions: “Most Europeans had little choice but to read the landscape because they could not speak the language” (50). This has to be taken in the sense that most people could only look at the country and the people and derive their images from what they saw, rather than speaking and listening since they for the most part could not speak Arabic (see Gregory 50-51) and could therefore not converse with the locals. As was already mentioned by Durrell himself, not only does everyone see things subjectively, but in the Orient this subjectivity is further complicated by the inability of most writers to communicate with the people of the country, therefore writing about what they see and taking this to be the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ culture, or at least pretending to take this as the true culture. Kararah mentions:

The Western authors were mostly outsiders, and few of them bothered to learn the language of the country. And why should they, when they could get along so easily without it? In the Alexandria of the first half of the twentieth century, one could easily manage to deal with servants and dependants with only a smattering of Arabic; in the shops of Rue Cherif or Rue Fouad, French was the *lingua franca*, understood by all. (307)

### **3.2. James Buzard’s Reflections**

Although James Buzard is primarily concerned with the ways in which Europe was viewed by travelers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; his ideas, in particular the ‘authenticity effect’ he describes, are interesting when

applied to Durrell's portrayal of Alexandria. Buzard helps us better to understand why Durrell portrayed the city as he did, since claiming that his reasons were partially Orientalist will not suffice.

We know that while Durrell lived in Egypt, he surrounded himself with other foreigners—Europeans and Americans—and with Alexandria's cosmopolitan elite. In the *Quartet*, Darley does the same, and has hardly any contact with the 'real' locals, the Arabs. This is interesting since one often travels to another country to come into contact with that culture, the authentic regional culture. The fact that foreigners did not have much contact with the locals is not a new phenomenon. The British, but not only the British, in general tended to stick together when in a foreign country and would frequent the same social places, cafes, for example (see Buzard, *Beaten Track* 88). Buzard further writes that "As amenities and institutions increasingly made it unnecessary or difficult to imagine, some means of overcoming that separation, some contact with what was authentically foreign in the foreign place—its true culture, its *genius loci*—would emerge as the desideratum of genuine travel" (*BT* 90). This is interesting, because although Buzard refers to Europe, Durrell was an adamant believer in the 'genius loci', also known as the spirit of place; yet he somehow managed not to include much authentic Alexandrian culture in the *Quartet*. Authentic Alexandrian culture in turn is difficult to define since the cosmopolitan society in the 'real' Alexandria and in the *Quartet* is surely as much a part of the authentic culture as local Arabs are. Yet Durrell did not find it necessary to include much of that part of the culture in the *Quartet*. Although his Alexandrians are Alexandrians, they seem more European than Arab, and the fact that Durrell mostly omitted genuine Arab characters caused some distress amongst some critics. Forster wrote in his study of Alexandria:

At the worst [the Europeans in Egypt] include some unmitigated scoundrels [and] at the best they contain men of character and culture whom it is a privilege to have known; but in all cases they are aliens in Egypt and have come to exploit it; they despise Oriental ways, they are agnostics or Christians who have no sympathy for Islam, and they feel for the natives a fear that too often proceeds from a bad conscience. (qtd. in Buzard, *BT* 325-326)

It is probably impossible to feel truly at home in a culture other than one's own. What is interesting, however, is that Durrell did not see himself as truly British either, since he had been born and had grown up in India and felt that this was his home. Of course, the impression that one gets from his letters and comments that were made about him is that Durrell simply did not feel an affinity for Egyptians. Forster's comment that Europeans look down upon or even loathe Egyptians corresponds to Eve Cohen's comment that Durrell cursed the locals whenever possible. Nevertheless Alexandria was able to inspire him. He was certainly taken by the women in Alexandria, who, he said, filled the city with "luciferian charm". The phrase can be taken only positively, coming from an author so preoccupied with sex as to fill a whole quartet with it.

Interestingly enough, Durrell had obtained a copy of Forster's *Alexandria: A History and a Guide*, which he used to investigate the city. Durrell stated once that "[m]agically [...] nothing had changed that [he] could discern [...]" and that "[he had] glimpsed the phantom city which underlay the quotidian one" (qtd. in Haag 222). The phantom city can only refer to what once was present in the city, but was no more at the time that Forster and then Durrell were there.

Forster [...] makes ruin and emptiness the most salient features of the Alexandrian cityscape, labouring to reconstruct for his readers' imaginations all the vanished monuments of the city before them- Lighthouse, Ptolemaic Palaces, Library, Temple of Serapis, and so forth. All were impermanent, in spite of their creator's dreams; many were the victims of Alexandria's recurrent cycles of destruction" (Buzard, *BT* 328).

These places did not exist as they had once. Through Forster's recreation, then, Durrell was able to imagine these ancient sites and this is what ultimately triggered his imagination. As Keeley maintained, the power of Alexandria was in its ability to kindle the imagination and not the effect of the actual city itself.

### 3.2.1. The Authenticity Effect

How authentic could the Alexandria of the *Quartet* be? Buzard suggests an answer by quoting from a nineteenth-century publication, *Fraser's Magazine*:

[...] the majority of travellers who have no specific object in view merely skim the surface, and bring back what are popularly called impressions, which mean, not an account of the things they saw and observed, but of the manner in which they were themselves affected by them. Such impressions may be occasionally true by accident, but the chances are, that in nine hundred and ninety-nine instances in a thousand they will be false, partial, or distorted. ...To observe the habits of people, and thoroughly investigate their social life and institutions, it is necessary to live long enough amongst them, not merely to become familiar with their modes of thinking, but to emancipate ourselves from our own. (qtd. in Buzard, *BT* 173)

This is to say that most sojourners seldom break through to the authentic culture of the respective country or city. Compare Darley in the *Quartet*. He records incidents and feelings completely subjectively, at least at the beginning, as they affected *him*. As we know, what he thought was true often turns out to be untrue and vice versa. A situation seen by the sojourner will be viewed in a completely different way by a local. *Impressions* is the appropriate word to use, and can be applied to Durrell's *Quartet*. His were a series of impressions which, taken together, never amounted to an authentic account. Although Durrell did live in Alexandria and was not a travel writer per se but rather a "residence-writer" (Durrell, *SP* 156), he frequently complained about the Arabs without ever having been in their shoes. It would have been hard for him to know anything 'authentic' about them, since he never lived amongst them. Nor did he speak Arabic, although he admitted that knowing the language of the country one is in is helpful (see *SP* 156). Buzard writes that "[...] the authors themselves were often no less dissatisfied that scenes and events of their tours failed to deliver the kinds of stimuli required to evoke their most distinctive impressions [...]" and that the authors were filled with "[...] frustrated anticipations [...]" (*BT* 173). Durrell was obviously at times very dissatisfied with Egypt and its inhabitants, and, as noted, thought that one would have to be a genius to find something to write about in Alexandria.



### 3.2.1.1. Motifs of the Authenticity Effect

Buzard specifically mentions four motifs in travel literature which contribute significantly to the authenticity effect. He concentrates on “*stillness*, *non-utility*, *saturation*, and *picturesqueness*” (BT 177). Although a brief survey of all four motifs will be given, the primary focus will be on the picturesque.

*Stillness* is rather self-explanatory. Absolute silence comes to mind. Stillness refers to not only a moment's silence, but also a general quiet that seems to be simply waiting for the traveler to come (see BT 179). “That is one reason why ruins can be especially evocative” (BT 179). Alexandria, according to Forster, is full of ruins which he thought were its most distinguished features, and as Durrell used Forster's guidebook, this may have stimulated his imagination.

*Non-utility* is linked to *stillness*. One consequence of non-utility is a feeling of the surreal and fantastic (see BT 182) and “[...] some settings were felt to be so extremely different from modern quotidian usages that they seemed ‘visionary’ or even ‘unreal’, ‘only dreams’” (BT 182). The third motif, *saturation*, is again intertwined with the first two motifs. “The setting best rewarding travellers is so densely ‘saturated’ in historical and emotional significance that each step of the ground seems to evoke the most powerful feelings [...]” (BT 185).

The most important motif however is *picturesqueness*. Picturesqueness is:

a concept which by the 1820s had outgrown the landscape studies of its eighteenth-century origins, broadening its applications to include cities and their inhabitants and extending its range of metaphors as well, [...] noting [the city's] ‘shapes’ and ‘angles’, ‘texture’ and ‘colour’ [attempting] to grasp the quality which, by contrast with London, makes Paris what it is [...]. (BT 187)

Buzard uses a description by Hazlitt, who compares Paris with London. This ‘quality’, which makes one city different from the next, is the important factor. Seemingly, Durrell also exploits this quality in the *Quartet* consciously or subconsciously. However, it is clear that Alexandria *is* different from any other city in the world and that it *is* portrayed as picturesque, at least until Darley

loses interest in the city after he falls out of love with Justine. The ability of a writer to make a place picturesque:

[...] required some distinct slant of vision and some measure of strategic omission. Everyday features of the visited place (populations included) either fell cleanly away from the visitor's view or arranged themselves as part of the spectacle. Places were represented as (primarily pictorial) artefacts of cultural worth by virtue of their wholeness and harmony, qualities which the traveler could demonstratively appreciate. (*BT* 188)

Again, one has to remember that Durrell was not merely a visitor—although he never considered himself at home in Egypt—but a sojourner with a certain mental picture of Alexandria. Certainly, he omitted specific features and people, which produced a rather one-sided view of Alexandrian society and the city itself. This, then, resonates with Buzard's notions about European travelers in foreign countries. "The mundane unpicturesque, irrelevant or intrusive to picturesqueness, was what travellers sought to elide from the pictures they savoured, though their success in this endeavour was [...] partial at best" (*BT* 190). Durrell omitted most "mundane" images, although he does include violence and the loss of body parts in the *Quartet*, and includes a children's brothel in the Arab quarters of the town, giving the *Quartet* more than an ambivalent touch. One cannot help but wonder, though, whether the violence in the *Quartet* cannot be attributed to the exotic oriental image of Alexandria, or whether this is, as Buzard puts it "unpicturesque." Additionally, Durrell does not include complaints against the local Egyptian population in the *Quartet*, although, as we have noted, he complained about them on more than one occasion. It is difficult to discern on what basis Durrell chose what to include or exclude in his novel.

Buzard further states that the picturesque "[...] precludes proper judgement because it reduces everything to the equivalent status of *images* [...]" and that there was "[...] the critic's or satirist's suspicion that picturesqueness had the effect of turning a *real* Continent into mere pictures" (*BT* 191-192). Critics opposing Durrell's image of Alexandria might agree. If Durrell had depicted only the locals, the critics might have been more content because this would have suited their need for portraying the—in *their* opinion—"true" culture and city of Alexandria. However, Durrell "[...] bear[s] only a superficial relation to

[Alexandria]; the [...] panorama continues heedless of [...] praise or presence” (BT 199). What Durrell wrote about the city is of no importance to the ‘true’ life of the city, which continues nevertheless. Through his depiction of Alexandria he was able to conjure up an image of the city which many readers have continued to believe to this day, to the annoyance of some critics.

The picturesque is concerned with images, which there are aplenty in the *Quartet*. The other three motifs were worth mentioning; they do not feature prominently in the novel but the city does evoke extreme feelings in Darley as well as seeming at times “unreal.” The ambiguity of the city brings on the next point, which is the fact that Alexandria was not only a ‘princess’, but *also* a ‘whore’, and this does not seem to be anything picturesque. However, “[...] we have arrived at the point of delicate balance in the aesthetics of the human picturesque: picturesqueness may *require* some integument of dinginess and destitution,” (BT 204) and this would be explanatory of the fact that throughout the novels there are, say, brothels and cut off limbs.

It has to be admitted that these are merely some of the ways to interpret Durrell’s Alexandria. No one of them is solely applicable or plausible, since, as we know, the term ‘truth’ is relative. To analyze Durrell’s images, one might also want to understand Orientalism, as complex and controversial as it is. Hopefully it will have become clear by now that one can read texts through Orientalism. Clearly, too, one common Oriental cliché is the sexualized Orient, which features in the *Quartet* as it did in Flaubert. One should keep in mind here, though, that Flaubert was in Egypt almost a century before Durrell, and that harems were probably not that detectable or alternatively not much in existence anymore when Durrell lived there; which nevertheless does not mean that sex was hard to find in Alexandria; which again is made obvious in the *Quartet*, but also through Durrell’s comments and letters. This in turn fits into the niche in Said’s *Orientalism* about the West equating the Orient with sex. Pine’s argument is persuasive:

Whether or not Durrell fits the negative view of ‘orientalism’ as put forward by Edward Said is a moot point: we have very substantial and concentrated evidence of the fact that Durrell did not see the east

through traditional, western spectacles, yet the ability [...] to identify with 'Us' (i.e. the British) suggests that he had not entirely abandoned that viewpoint if and when identification with one side or the other was required; ultimately, Durrell had the slightly patronizing attitude of the true colonial, which he admitted to being. (423)

Apart from sex, one of the main topics of discussion for Orientalism is the knowledge that the West thinks it has about the Orient, although this knowledge was mainly made up by them. Durrell fits in here well since he, although admitting that there is nothing which is not subjective, this subjectivity does not prevent one from thinking that one knows something about a respective topic. Durrell depicted Alexandria as he saw it, or, rather, how he was inclined to see it. Buzard's concept of the 'authenticity effect' is very useful here, since it describes that people can never truly grasp another culture other than their own; and the oriental or Arabic culture makes this especially hard through the language barrier it presents. The character of Pursewarden functions as a commentator for Durrell. "Pursewarden is seen as novelist, sensualist, long-sighted diplomat, self-sufficient ironist, aesthetic philosopher, vulgarian, man of culture—the list is as long as the personages of the novel [...]" (Lennon 24). Through him, the readers and the other characters receive information to which they would not have access to otherwise. Durrell's view of reality becomes clear through Pursewarden's comment that "We live [...] lives based upon selected fictions. Our view of reality is conditioned by our position in space and time—not by our personalities as we like to think. Thus every interpretation of reality is based upon a unique position. Two paces east or west and the whole picture is changed" (B 14-15).

In addition it is clear that Durrell's *Quartet* is a work of fiction, and should therefore not be confused with the 'real' world. In the light of the existing Durrell criticism, Orientalism, the knowledge that it would have been almost impossible for Durrell to depict the 'real' Alexandria or at least *all* its cultural aspects, I will nevertheless embark on an attempt to show typical clichés of Orientalism; which additionally tie into the problem of authenticity; with the awareness that it is only a superficial reading of typical images used. The images which at times are picturesque have a reason for having been depicted so, and other than for aesthetic or literary or rhetorical reasons, there is not

much use for them, since they do not depict the 'truth' most critics seem to want to find. *The Alexandria Quartet* shows Durrell's use of selective perception and deviation from reality.

#### **4. Representations of Alexandria in the *Quartet***

It is self-evident that Alexandria plays an extremely important part in the *Quartet*. As mentioned frequently, many critics have given the city the status of a character. Alexandria is represented as a metaphorical character with the power to control its inhabitants. Second, there are a number of images associated with Alexandria throughout the novels. Durrell uses these images to present the city to his readers but also to the characters in the novels. Frequently the city is associated with the feminine, which in turn can be associated with the oriental cliché of Orient as female. Occasionally the city is presented through different types of animals. This imagery will be examined in this section. Additionally, it will be asked: are these images stereotypical Oriental clichés, or do they show us an Alexandria that is a European and cosmopolitan city, or is a combination of both suggested. It seems plausible to assume that the city fits both examples. However, since there has been much said of Orientalism, this will be considered in more depth. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether Durrell's city also contains images typical of Europe. It is conceivable that certain aspects could be found in Alexandria as an oriental city, as well as in the city as a European city. Here the allusion is to brothels, for example, which existed in Europe just as they did in Egypt. These, however are not really 'images' in the basic sense of the word, one may call them 'aspects' of place, and they will be considered in a sub-chapter.

##### **4.1. Alexandria as a 'Character'**

"The central 'event' of the *Quartet* is not a political or social occasion so much as a 'characteristic', Alexandria as a 'personality' or state of mind' (Pine 193), and it has become axiomatic that the power the city has over its inhabitants gives it at times almost a personality, leading some critics to believe that the

city itself is a character, if not the main character. Of course the city cannot ever become a 'real' character, since after all it is still a place, a city, and not a human. Again, one has to keep in mind that the characters themselves are not real but fictional, possessing possible traits of real people who featured in Durrell's life. Wiklef Hoops states: "Alexandria erscheint so von Anfang an primär nicht als geographischer Ort, sondern als mythische Macht, der der Mensch hilflos ausgeliefert ist [...]" (47).

G.S. Fraser talks about "[...] the city's soul" (*A Study* 130) and writes that "Alexandria, the true heroine of [the *Quartet*], manifests itself in many selves, in many roles, but is in the end the single source: more real, more potent than her various manifestations. She hurts, she can kill, but she also resurrects" (*Lawrence Durrell* 39). Similarly, Lionel Trilling said that Alexandria "is itself the protagonist of the action, a being far more complex and interesting than any of its inhabitants, having its own way and its own right, its own life and its own secret will to which the life and will of the individual are subordinate" (qtd. in Friedman, 76). Of course Alexandria is only a character in the sense of a metaphor. Pine suggests that Alexandria's "[...] exhaustion is misleading—it harbours an insouciance [...] but it also lays claim to a wisdom, a cunning and a discrimination in its pleasures and disasters which equips it as both a sexual and an intellectual mistress [...]" (170). Corinne Alexandre-Garner writes: "The male abandons himself to the town as to a woman" (*Enigma* 165). Carl Bode believes Alexandria to be most important for the novel:

As to the setting: it is much more than a setting; that is the most striking thing about it. It is the main character itself. In its richly described changes, in its brilliant mingling of the magnificent and the mean, in its assault on every sense, it is to me the most memorable element in the *Quartet*. Durrell has rightly called the *Quartet* a Big City Poem. (535)

One could find more examples of such comments by critics who give the city an enormously powerful position and talk as if it were a character able of doing things which only humans can do. A city cannot really be wise, or be a sexual mistress, yet from the very first page of *Justine* the reader is given the feeling that the city is somehow alive: "[...] the city [...] used us as its flora—precipitated in us conflicts which were hers and which we mistook for our own:

beloved Alexandria” (J 13). The city triggered or provoked problems for the characters, which apparently belonged to the city herself; yet this is impossible in the ‘real’ sense since a city cannot have actual conflicts. It is therefore only plausible that the atmosphere of the city, or the feelings it evoked in the characters, can be held responsible for their conflicts. As Justine believes, the inhabitants of the city “had been trapped in the projection of a will too powerful and too deliberate to be human—the gravitational field which Alexandria threw down about those it had chosen as its exemplars....” (J 18-19). On the one hand the city’s power is too controlling and influential to be considered human and “[the] city will undermine your will” (J 230). At the same time the city is able to “throw down” a field of gravity, which clearly has a drawing power over the people it ‘chose’. Each of these verbs can describe a human activity, yet in the *Quartet*, these powers are given to the city, making it seem as though it is metaphorically a character that lives. Likewise, Alexandria at one point “[...] was smiling with a heartbreaking indifference, a *cocotte* refreshed by the darkness” (J 239). The city, equated to a courtesan, has the ability to smile with a pitying lack of interest for its citizens. Readers could easily visualize a courtesan. The city is so powerful that just the name of the city “[...] is like a death—a death of the self uttered in every repetition of the word *Alexandria*, *Alexandria*” (J 63). Similarly, the city has its own rules by which the citizens of Alexandria abide. Take the incident in which Melissa, Darley’s lover at one point, tells Nessim, Justine’s husband, that his wife is having an affair. Later, “Melissa was afraid [...] for she knew that offence given to the great could, by the terms of the city, be punished swiftly and dreadfully” (J 199). It is almost as if Alexandria is some sort of deity which, not only has the power to *evoke* fear, but also has the power to “[...] not permit [...]” (B 48) things and actually punish its inhabitants if they defy her rules. And if one is to believe this as Melissa does, her death could be viewed as the city’s retribution. The city allows or prevents incidents or feelings to happen. Alexandria is the authority and “[t]he grim mandate which the city exercised over its familiars, crippling sentiment, steeping everything in the vats of its own exhausted passions” (C 23) is more often draining for the inhabitants than anything else. For Mountolive on the other hand: “Even the morbid lassitude and self-indulgence of the city was delightful to one, who secure in income, could afford to live

outside it" (*M* 147). As a diplomat, he does not permanently reside in Alexandria, and therefore is not permanently under the pressure of the city.

Additionally, "The city was always perverse, but it took its pleasures with style at an old-fashioned tempo, even in rented beds: never up against a wall or a tree or a truck! And now at times the town seems to be like some great public urinal" (*C* 105). This is to say that Alexandria and its inhabitants are perverse. It is noticeable how the city is predominantly referred to with uncomplimentary and negative terms. The power that Alexandria has over its characters is often for ill; the characters are trapped in the city's grasp, which is too powerful for them to escape. The city is hence given a personality, choosing "[...] the scenario [that] had already been devised somewhere, the actors chosen, the timing rehearsed down to the last detail in the mind of that invisible author—which perhaps would prove to be only the city itself: the Alexandria of the human estate" (*C* 223). Pursewarden says: "If you think yourself as a sleeping city for example...what? You can sit quiet and hear the processes going on, going about their business; volition, desire, will, cognition, passion, conation" (*J* 139).

It is evident that Alexandria is presented as 'alive'. "It is the city of Alexandria that has the power to choose its exemplars, it is a living organism and its people are being "lived" by the city in which they reside. The landscape 'lives' and the characters within it are reflections of its life" (Hashem 79). The city plays with, teases and hurts its inhabitants more than it gives them happiness; yet Darley asks himself: "[...] how can we but love the places which have made us suffer?" (*C* 279). Like so often in life, one can easily be attracted to the people, and according to Darley also the places which hurt one because they still bear a certain magnetism and desirability; and as we know from Durrell and now also from Darley, one can love and hate something at the same time. Clea tells Darley that "[t]he whore is man's true darling, as I once told you, and we are born to love those who most wound us" (*B* 236). Although she refers to Justine, this statement could easily be applied to Alexandria.



#### 4.1.1. Alexandria as Femme Fatale/Orientale?

But Alexandria is not just a metaphorical character. It is usually presented as a female character, which coincides with the idea that the Orient was often portrayed as feminized. “[...] This was Alexandria, the unconsciously poetical mother-city exemplified in the names and faces which make up her history” (*B* 45). Alexandria is *the* city and she is female, and additionally it is “a city of incest” (*J* 97). In one of Cavafy’s poems ‘The God Abandons Antony’, included in *Justine* (see *J* 252), “[...] Alexandria appears as a feminized city, a place that has always eluded the conqueror’s/lover’s grasp, that somehow ‘departs’ from those it has seemed to harbour and exalt” (*BT* 329). Durrell was not the only writer who turned Alexandria into a female. As noted earlier (see section 2.2.3), Edwar al-Kharat thinks of Alexandria as female too. He

[...] claims quite openly to be the one and only writer in Arabic who has passionately loved the city of Alexandria and depicted her as a physical reality and a lifelong dream. For Al-Kharat the city is the eternal woman with her ‘infinite variety’; and, as he himself says, Alexandria is not a mere background for a novel: she is an active force and the main protagonist. (Kararah 309)

The ambiguity which the city represents becomes clear. Darley refers to the city as “Alexandria, princess and whore. The royal city and the *anus mundi*” (*C* 63) and asks himself: “How will I ever deliver myself from this whore among cities [?]” (*B* 23). The city is seen as an ambiguous female, as a seductress. As Durrell said, Alexandria was “sizzling with sex” and as per Said’s *Orientalism*, the Orient is definitely linked with sex. Called a whore, the city has a strong grip on its characters, almost permanently leading them into temptation. For that matter, one can easily call Alexandria, considering her portrayal as a woman, a femme fatale. A femme fatale seduces, manipulates, attracts; is fateful, ominous and inescapable. Alexandria has the power to do all these things. The males in the *Quartet* are confronted with “[...] the female spirit of Alexandria, as princess, whore, lover, mother, wife, diarist, conspirator” (Pine 222). The city is all-encompassing, she is everything and as Darley will realize, can overpower him all at once. Furthermore, “[...] Alexandria was the great winepress of love; those who emerged from it were the sick men, the

solitaries, the prophets—I mean all who have been deeply wounded in their sex” (*J* 14). Again, the city is able to hurt, and in a terrible, lasting way.

“A [...] sin of gender omission by Said is the reduction of the fantasized *femme orientale* to the preeminent symbol of oppression” (Varisco 158). If this is the case, Alexandria cannot be considered a *femme orientale*, since the city cannot be oppressed; since *she* oppresses her exemplars and not vice versa. They do not have any power over her, until they leave her. Darley is caught in this perverse city until he moves to a lonely island, reconsiders all that has happened, returns once more to Alexandria and is finally able to overcome the city and Justine, who figures as the city’s extension. However, if one associates the *femme orientale* with sex, which has been done, leaving aside notions of oppression, then Alexandria could be subsumed under this term. Alexandria has been called a whore frequently. On the one hand this term refers to a woman who *has* to sleep with men to earn her living, and this is considered degrading, dirty and would fit the principle of the exploited *femme orientale*. But another sense of the word *whore*, describes a woman who sleeps with many men for whatever reason, including her own enjoyment. This sense of the word would be fitting to Alexandria. Overall, ‘femme fatale’ suits Alexandria better, since a femme fatale can also be associated with sex.

#### 4.1.2. Animal Imagery of Alexandria

Alexandria is often portrayed as an animal. Most of these images are negative, contributing to the overriding uncomplimentary depictions of Alexandria. In the novel of the same name, Balthazar returns the corrected version of Darley’s *Justine* manuscript to him. Darley, previously believing Justine loved him, finds out that she loved, if anyone, Pursewarden. Unsurprisingly, his thoughts about the city hereafter change: “The politics of love, the intrigues of desire, good and evil, virtue and caprice, love and murder, moved obscurely in the dark corner’s of Alexandria’s streets and squares, brothels and drawing-rooms—moved like a great congress of eels in the slime of plot and counter-plot” (*B* 22). Alexandria is complicated, occasionally repulsive. Eels are predators, a term which would suit Alexandria, since it chooses and uses its exemplars haphazardly.

Similarly, the city is “[...] the hundred little spheres which religion or lore creates and which cohere softly together like cells to form the great sprawling jellyfish which is Alexandria to-day” (*B* 151). Here the words “sprawling jellyfish” give the feeling that the city is huge and extensive and one has to be aware of its sting. Even worse is this image of the city: “[u]nheeding it coils about the sleeping lives like some great anaconda digesting a meal. Among those shining coils the pitiable human world went its way, unaware and unbelieving, repeating to infinity its gestures of despair, repentance, and love” (*C* 64). In *Clea*, Darley feels “[...] the ambience of the city on [him] once more, its etiolated beauties spreading their tentacles out to grasp at [his] sleeve” (*C* 64). Accordingly, Darley “felt more [Alexandrian] summers coming, summers with fresh despairs, fresh onslaughts of the ‘bayonets of time’. [His] life would rot away afresh [...]” (*C* 64). Darley has managed to escape the coils of the city once, yet can still feel its “etiolated beauties” trying to lure him back and get hold of him once more. Although the “[...] city [was] now trying softly to spread the sticky prismatic wings of a new-born dragon-fly on the night” (*C* 91), it does not manage to engage Darley’s attention like it was once able to. Before his return to the city, he imagines it “basking like some old reptile in the bronze Pharaonic light of the great lake” (*C* 14), seemingly waiting for his return. Return he must “in order to be able to leave it forever, to shed it” (*C* 14).

The city is never associated with kindly animals. The images are either reptiles or creatures one finds in the ocean, and they are invariably “spreading” or “sprawling” or “coiling”. All are creatures which one would normally avoid. However, they all make the city into a living entity which takes hold on its inhabitants, much like the feminized city does. And they contribute to the exoticism of Alexandria.

#### **4.1.3. The City: Oriental vs. European**

Alexandria is often depicted as a stereotypical ‘Oriental’ city. “The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other”

(Said 1). As quoted in the *Quartet*, Alexandria is the “mother-city”, corresponding to the European ideas of the Orient as something ancient. For Said there is “[...] a complex array of “Oriental” ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use – the list can be extended more or less indefinitely” (4). This “complex array” is often visible in Durrell’s Alexandria. To give one example: “Alexandria is a town of sects and gospels” (J 98). The Orient is exotic, with or without Orientalism. One never heard of Europe as being exotic. Romantic yes, but not exotic.

Stefan Herbrechter writes that:

Durrell’s Alexandria is a very curious place, which is split into two parts, the largely cosmopolitan and European quarter of the big hotels (the Cecil), the grand boulevards, the Corniche and the villas; and on the other hand the “Arab Quarters” with their dark and dirty little streets and their exotic, uncanny and dangerous attractions (266).

There is the society frequented by Darley, which includes Mountolive, a British diplomat; Pursewarden, a British writer; Nessim a rich and Western-educated Coptic business man; Justine, his wife; Clea the artist, all of whom are part of the Alexandrian cosmopolitan society. Some are British, some are Alexandrian, but none is a ‘local.’ It is thus difficult to discern whether Alexandria is Oriental or European. Perhaps it is both. This fact falls into the ambiguity which pervades almost all aspects of the *Quartet*, from its characters to the city and its various depictions. “The *Quartet* sets up an opposition between cosmopolitan Alexandria and Arab Egypt. In this process the Arab element within Alexandria is either idealized or silenced. Accordingly, Mahmoud Manzaloui detects many ‘crude pseudo-orientalisms’ [...]” (Herbrechter 267). In *Mountolive*, the character of the same name contemplates the city:

The Alexandrians themselves were strangers and exiles to the Egypt which existed below the glittering surface of their dreams, ringed by the hot deserts and fanned by the bleakness of a faith which renounced worldly pleasure: the Egypt of rags and sores, beauty and desperation. Alexandria was still Europe—the capital of Asiatic Europe, if such a thing could exist. [...] The ambience, the social manner, everything was

different [to Cairo], was cast in a European mould where somehow the camels and palm-trees and cloaked natives existed only as brilliantly coloured frieze, a backcloth to a life divided in its origins. (147)

Mountolive compares Alexandria with Cairo, which in his opinion is the 'real' Egypt, and admits that the 'real' locals only exist as a "coloured frieze", existing in the scenery of European Alexandria but not really being a part of the city. Herbrechter correctly states:

There is no doubt about Durrell's Alexandria being a representation of a European stronghold, which stresses the character of the Alexandrian cosmopolitan elite as alienated from the "Arabic" Egypt [...] The colonial characters like Darley and Mountolive never pierce beyond the European surface of Alexandria, which reflects their own Englishness in a sufficiently different but attractively "similar" exoticism and cosmopolitanism. The Arab element within Alexandria is reduced to an exotic, threatening and stereotypical "backcloth" which at once enhances the Europeanness of Alexandrian identity and reduces and confines this Other to the desert, Cairo [...]. (268-269)

Again, the topic of sex suggests itself. Europeans were not generally portrayed as a racy, sexy folk, but the *Quartet's* characters, including the Europeans, think about, or have, sex throughout the novel. Pursewarden says of English women: "[...] all our women are nurses at heart. In order to secure the lifelong devotion of an Anglo-Saxon woman one has only to get one's legs cut off above the waist. [...] Anglo-Saxons may not be interested in love like other Europeans but they can get just as ill" (B 245). Seignurie argues that one of the "[...] topoi that reinforce imperial power relates to the general notion of vigor. Simply put, sex and violence are balanced against cultural development—a very old racist saw but one that still cuts. The *Quartet* trots this one out even more ostentatiously than the others" (96). Contrary to the impression that Europeans are not so vigorous sexually, the characters of the *Quartet* are preoccupied with "a ravenous sexuality" (J 45). The scene in which Darley, Justine, and Nessim visit a children's brothel "was ferociously original" (J 44) which almost certainly refers to it being Oriental.

Much has been said about what Alexandria *is*, yet not about what it *is not*. There are places in the *Quartet*, such as Cairo and the Egyptian countryside, which are not like, and distinct from Alexandria. Cairo, although it does not

appear often in the *Quartet*, can be seen as a more 'Oriental' city in comparison to Alexandria, which is also Europeanized and cosmopolitan. Cairo is also *the* capital city of Egypt and Alexandria the second capital (see *M* 142). As Pursewarden travels from Cairo to Alexandria:

[he] gibbered into the city after a drink or two under a new moon which felt as if it were drawing half its brilliance from the open sea. Everything smelt good again. The iron band that Cairo puts round one's head (the consciousness of being completely surrounded by burning desert?) dissolved, relaxed—gave place to the expectation of an open sea, an open road leading one's mind back to Europe [...]. (*M* 114)

Similarly, Alexandria, in Mountolive's opinion, "could never be like Cairo where his whole life had an Egyptian cast, where he spoke ample Arabic; here French, Italian and Greek dominated the scene" (*M* 147). Additionally, Cairo is the political capital of Egypt, where Mountolive spends most of his time and where Memlik performs his corrupt duties. Alexandria in contrast is, for Mountolive who is not a permanent resident, more a place of relaxation. "Cairo had by this time become unbearably hot" (*M* 142), whereas "[the] cool sea-winds [in Alexandria] kept the temperature low, the air was fresh and invigorating" (*M* 143). Darley describes "the heart of Cairo, during a traffic jam, in the breathless heat of a midsummer night [...]" and "that palpitant moist heat, dense from the rising damps of the river and aching with the stink of rotten fruit, jasmine and sweating black bodies [...]" (*J* 80). So Cairo is contrasted to Alexandria, as is the rest of the Egyptian countryside:

And so at last, following the curves of the green embankments you come upon an old house built sideways upon an intersection of violet canals, its cracked and faded shutters tightly fastened, its rooms hung with dervish trophies, hide shields, bloodstained spears and magnificent carpets. The gardens desolate and untended. Only little figures on the wall move their celluloid wings—scarecrows which guard against the Evil Eye. The silence of complete desuetude. But then the whole countryside of Egypt shares this melancholy feeling of having been abandoned, allowed to run to seed, to bake and crack and moulder under the blazen sun. (*C* 46-47)

#### 4.1.3.1. Buzard's Concepts Applied

These images from *Clea* are reminiscent of Buzard's concept of picturesqueness. As noted earlier (see section 3.2.1.1), the picturesque relies on selected impressions. It is the attempt to capture a city's shapes, angles, colors, and textures in order to set it apart from other cities. In other words, the 'quality' which makes it different is in the foreground. The picturesque, as the word implies, is concerned with images. Some critics imply that the picturesque resulted in "turning a *real* Continent into mere pictures". In order to achieve 'authenticity', which can never be wholly achieved in the first place, one may have to include "dinginess and destitution". Authenticity cannot be fully attained because all views are subjective to the person viewing them. Therefore Durrell's *Quartet* carries his impressions only. Some of the images Durrell used to depict the city have already been described, but which other aspects make the city real?

Darley remembers the "[c]lang of the trams shuddering in their metal veins as they pierce the iodine-coloured *meidan* of Mazarita" (*J* 15), the description of which D.J. Enright finds "overpoweringly evocative" and "in the way that art is, *authentic*" (36). The following scene is described by Pursewarden, whom Nessim has invited to a festival in the desert. Pursewarden looks forward to the trip, and in his letter to Mountolive writes: "It was really a great experience which made me realize that I had hardly seen Egypt—the true Egypt underlying the fly-tormented airless towns, the drawing-rooms of commerce, the bankers' sea-splashed villas, the Bourse, the Yacht Club, the Mosque [...]" (*M* 118). Similarly, a later scene described by Pursewarden, can only be described by using the word exotic, or maybe as Enright puts it: "glamorised".

In one booth a lovely prostitute sang heart-breakingly, chipped quartertones and plangent head-notes as she turned in her sheath of spiral sequins. She had her price on the door. It was not excessive [...]. In another corner a story-teller was moaning out the sing-song romance of El Zahur. Drinkers of sherbet, of cinnamon, were spread at ease on the seats of makeshift cafés in these beflagged and lighted thoroughfares. From within the walls of the monastery came the sound of priests chanting. From without the unmistakable clatter of men playing at single-stick with the roar of the crowd acclaiming every stylish manoeuvre. Tombs full of *flowers*, water-melons shedding a buttery

light, trays of meat perfuming the air—sausages and cutlets and entrails buzzing on spits. (*M* 120).

The story-teller reminds one of *Arabian Nights*, as do the sequins that the prostitute is wearing. Again, there is a stark contrast, so typical of Durrell, between the prostitute and the priests in the monastery. Durrell has an incredible ability to evoke exotic images and it all seems rather magical. Surely, these images did not come from nowhere; Durrell must have come into contact with similar scenes. His gift for language, however, makes the scenes in the *Quartet* all the more striking. The next scene, still during Pursewarden's visit to the desert festival, is most definitely Oriental, to the point of evoking a cliché.

It was the end of a dance and they were turning one of their number into a human chandelier, covered in burning candles, the hot wax dripping all over him. His eyes were vague and tranced. Last of all comes an old boy and drives a huge dagger through both cheeks. On each end of the dagger he hoists a candlestick with a branch of lighted candles in each. Transfixed thus the boy rises slowly to his toes and revolves in a dance like a tree on fire. (*M* 121)

Where else but the Orient does one find boys who are able to stick daggers through their cheeks? Likewise, when Mountolive ventures into the Arab Quarter of the city he finds another 'typical' Oriental scene. These are perhaps the scenes which fluster the critics so, are considered racist and perhaps as negative stereotypical representations of the 'Orient'.

Hereabouts it would be a hundred to one that he would ever be recognized—for few Europeans ever came into this part of the city. [...] This world of Moslem time stretched back to Othello and beyond [...] Here too in the ghastly breath of the naphtha flares the old eunuchs sat [...] Here too the diviners, cartomancers—or those who would deftly fill your palm with ink and for half a piastre scry the secrets of your inmost life. Here the pedlars carried magic loads of variegated and dissimilar objects of *vertu* from the thistle-soft carpets of Shiraz and Baluchistan to the playing cards of the Marseilles tarot; [...] and each, of course, carried in his private wallet—like a mediaeval pardoner—the fruit of the world's great pornographies in the form of handkerchiefs and post-cards on which were depicted, in every one of its pitiful variations, the one act we human beings most dream of and fear. Mysterious, underground, the ever-flowing river of sex [...]. (*M* 287)



Europeans do not frequent this part of town: the division between the cosmopolitan Alexandria elite and the Arab population is clear. Words such as “magic”, “mysterious”, “scry” remind us of the Orient as cliché; they provide an exotic image of Alexandria. And of course, once again there is reference to sex in combination with the Arab Quarter.

Durrell adds features to the *Quartet* which are truly ‘real’ in the sense that they do exist in the ‘real’ Alexandria. This contributes to the authenticity effect, and readers who have never been to the city find it easy to believe Durrell, not only because he adds names of real places, but because of his gift to write in a very convincing way. “From memory I could clearly make out its features, Ras El Tin Palace, the Nebi Daniel Mosque and so forth” (*B* 16). These places exist in the real world, as does “[...] the vestibule of the Cecil Hotel, among the dusty palms [...]” (*J* 20). Using Pursewarden as a mouthpiece, Durrell also pretends to know about Egyptian demographics:

In Egypt to-day, for example, six per cent of the people own over three-quarters of the land, thus leaving under a feddan a head for the rest to live on. [...] Then the population is doubling itself every second generation—or is it third? [...] Meanwhile there is the steady growth of a vocal and literate middle-class whose sons are trained at Oxford among our comfy liberalisms—and who find no jobs waiting for them when they come back here. (*M* 104)

In addition to the ‘typical’ picturesque aspects, those which evoke images of beauty and exoticism, for example, there are other aspects which border on the grotesque, the inclusion of which Durrell apparently found necessary for the ‘authenticity effect.’ As we know, Buzard states that such aspects are sometimes needed to reach the desired effect. Pursewarden, once again during his desert excursion, comes across

[...] a grotesque scene which I would gladly have avoided if I had been able. The camels of Narouz were being cut up for the feast. Poor things, they knelt there peacefully with their forelegs folded under them like cats while a horde of men attacked them with axes in the moonlight. My blood ran cold, yet I could not tear myself away from this extraordinary spectacle. The animals made no move to avoid the blows, uttered no cries as they were dismembered. The axes bit into them, as if their great bodies were made of cork, sinking deep under every thrust. Whole members were being hacked off as painlessly, it seemed, as

when a tree is pruned. The children were dancing about in the moonlight picking up the fragments and running off with them into the lighted town, great gobbets of bloody meat. (*M* 122)

This “spectacle”, though truly gross, is, as Pursewarden thinks, strangely fascinating. It seems more like a scene from a Gothic novel. Striking again is the opposition between the awful slaughter of innocent animals and the dancing children, who pick up the pieces with an implicitness that is disturbing. Another scene which could be considered Gothic, for that matter, is the murder of Toto de Brunel at the carnival ball by Narouz. At the ball everyone is masked, and Toto, wearing Justine’s ring which she has given him, leads Narouz to believe that it is she who is making a pass at him:

Toto de Brunel was discovered, still warm in his velvet domino, with his paws raised like two neat little cutlets, in the attitude of a dog which had rolled over to have its belly scratched. [...] The hatpin from Pombal’s picture hat had been driven sideways into his head with terrific force, pinning him like a moth into his velvet headpiece. Athena had been making love to Jacques while she was literally lying upon his body—a fact which would under normal circumstances have delighted [Toto] thoroughly. (*B* 211)

Not only was Toto murdered because of a silly mistake on Narouz’s part, but he was murdered with a hatpin. And to top it off, of course, people were having sex on the corpse. However, the mystery of who was the murderer, which is not known at the time of Toto’s death, does cause excitement amongst the Alexandrian elite.

Durrell includes in the *Quartet* scenes and people who will add to the exoticism of the novel. However, one never gains insight into the Arab mind. The reader is showered with exotic images, be they bewitchingly exotic, dirty, or downright grotesque. If one takes Buzard’s concept of picturesqueness to be plausible, it is obvious that Durrell included images which he thought would add to the readability and fascination of the *Quartet*. Whether he really witnessed scenes such as these is questionable, but it is clear that they make the *Quartet* what it is, namely a remarkable tetralogy. Some critics dislike Durrell’s portrayal of Alexandria and its inhabitants because, whether close to the truth or not, many of the scenes do not shed a positive light on the Arab population. Most scenes

containing Arabs either relate to prostitution or poverty; clearly showing only one side, namely the dark, intriguing and exciting side. These scenes would be exciting to Europeans, as they can be considered 'Oriental'. Scenes like these can be found in abundance in the *Quartet*. As Enright correctly states, Durrell manages to evoke seemingly 'authentic' images of Alexandria, even if some, looked at closely, are slightly unbelievable. However, the *Quartet* does not *have* to be true to the actual city of Alexandria. Durrell as the author was able to select images and deviate from reality, which, if truth be told, does not *really* require justification. The *Quartet* as a literary text follows other rules than some of the enlightened audience would like to have.

## 5. Alexandria and its Exemplars

This section deals with the power that the city executes over its exemplars luring them into one sexual affair and love relationship after the other. Furthermore the section will deal with, for the most part, female characters and explore the question whether any (Oriental) stereotypes can be found amongst them. In addition a section will deal with 'authentic' Arabs; although they do not feature significantly in the *Quartet*, they are worthy of note since they can presumably be associated with Oriental clichés. Strangely enough, both the city and its "true child", Justine, who both had an incredible grasp on the characters and on Darley especially, become uninteresting to him as time passes. Lee T. Lemon writes that "Darley's Alexandria is not so much a fact as a flux; the scene, or situation, changes as he changes" (332). Alexandria, "[...] with its harsh, circumscribed contours and its wicked, pleasure-loving and unromantic inhabitants" (*M* 155) manages, nevertheless, to keep Darley constrained in its grasp for some time. Both have a hold on Darley until he leaves the city and upon his return falls in love with Clea. The island and Clea are the remedy for Darley to distance himself from Alexandria and Justine.

### 5.1. Narrative and Temporal Situation in the *Quartet*

In order to understand the *Quartet*, one has to be aware of the narration used by Durrell and the temporal distance he creates between the novels. Durrell makes his intentions clear in the author's note to *Balthazar*:

*The first three parts [of the Quartet], are to be deployed spatially (hence the use of the word 'sibling' not 'sequel') and are not linked in a serial form. They interlap, interweave, in a purely spatial relation. Time is stayed. The fourth part alone will represent time and be a true sequel.*

*The subject-object relation is so important to relativity that I have tried to turn the novel through both subjective and objective modes. The third part, MOUNTOLIVE, is a straight naturalistic novel in which the narrator of JUSTINE and BALTHAZAR becomes an object, i.e. a character.*

Once one has read the first three novels, it is clear that what Darley thought was true turned out to be untrue, altering his vision of the city and its inhabitants completely. In *Justine*, Darley gives an entirely subjective view of characters and events. Only in *Balthazar*, through the corrected manuscript, does he realize that he was wrong about many things.

In *Justine*, Darley, "the first-person narrator, is in self-exile on an island writing the book we are reading, a Proustian attempt to recapture his Alexandrian past. He returns daily, he tells us, to Alexandria [through his memories and] makes no distinction between his island present and his Alexandrian past [...]" (Wedin 175-176). At the beginning of the second novel Darley asks: "Why must I return to [Alexandria] night after night, writing here by the fire of carob-wood while the Aegean wind clutches at this island house [...]? Have I not said enough about Alexandria?" (B 13-14). Once we reach *Balthazar*, it becomes apparent that Darley must deal with a different truth. With *Balthazar* and beyond, the reader can follow Darley's development as a person and an artist. In the third novel, *Mountolive*, Durrell uses an authorial narrator, and returns in *Clea*, to first person narration by Darley.

Next to the narrative structure of the *Quartet*, the temporal structure needs explanation. In *Justine* and *Balthazar*, Darley is already on the island, having left Alexandria for the first time, following Justine's departure. Here he

contemplates past events and tries to reconstruct his first stay in the city. In *Clea*, he returns to the city and falls in love with the character of the same name, before deserting Alexandria forever. To sum up, Darley lives in Alexandria twice, yet as will become apparent, the distance he gains through the time between those visits, affects not only his development, but his views and emotions greatly. Darley moves more and more from subjectivity in *Justine* to objectivity.

## 5.2. Sex and the City

Alexandria appears as a princess and a whore. She seduces her inhabitants, and is responsible for the sexual tension that exists within her and her exemplars. “The sexual provender which lies to hand is staggering in its variety and profusion” (*J* 14). Darley experienced various forms and profuse sex in Alexandria. Joseph A. Boone wrote in his *Homoerotics of Orientalism*:

Perhaps nowhere else are the sexual politics of colonial narrative so explicitly thematized as in those voyages to the Near East recorded or imagined by Western men [...]. With various shades of prurience and sophistication, similar sentiments echo throughout the writings of novelists, poets, journalists, travel writers [...]. For such men, the geopolitical realities of the Arabic Orient become a psychic screen on which to project fantasies of illicit sexuality and unbridled excess [...]. (89)

Durrell’s ‘voyage’ lasted several years, and in the *Quartet* there are certainly “various shades of prurience and sophistication”. These assorted sexual acts range from the rape of Justine by Da Capo, to Narouz having sex with a whore and Darley observing them as they “[...] lay there like the victims of some terrible accident, clumsily engaged [...]” (*B* 167), to Darley making love to Justine on the beach. Their consequences range from heart-break to syphilis. There is something in the *Quartet* for everyone’s taste, yet romance is mostly lacking, and what Darley considered romantic, turned out—like everything else that he believed at one point—to be a fluke.

Durrell undeniably used Alexandria as a playhouse of sexual experience and clever anecdote. Scobie says: “But then, sex is so powerful in this heat—a

spoonful goes a long way as we used to say about rum in the Merchant Navy. You lie and dream about it like ice-cream, sex, not rum" (B 36). Clearly, Scobie, who likes to dress in women's clothing, associates the sexual atmosphere with the weather in Alexandria. Similarly, the way one loves is attributed to Alexandria and compared to other places:

"Ah!" said Justine once, "that there should be something free, something Polynesian about the licence in which we live." Or even Mediterranean, she might have added, for the connotation of every kiss would be different in Italy or Spain; here our bodies were chafed by the harsh desiccated winds blowing up out of the deserts of Africa and for love we were forced to substitute a wiser but crueller mental tenderness which emphasized loneliness rather than expurgated it. (J 39)

Pursewarden, who has had an incestuous relationship with his sister, has much to say about sexuality and love. He believes that sex is the "[...] key to a metaphysical search which is our *raison d'être* [...]" (C 139). Sex is the reason for being, and the *Quartet* makes this rather believable, as sex plays such a large role and everyone has had an affair with almost everyone else. As Pursewarden puts it: "*I am simply trying not to copy your habit of building a Taj Mahal around anything as simple as a good f—k*" (B 114). He also happens to be the only one of Justine's desired love objects who is not interested in her. Most other characters, especially Darley, *do* build a Taj Mahal, or rather, many, since their affairs are numerous. Pursewarden philosophizes: "For culture means sex, the root-knowledge [...]. The sexual and the creative energy go hand in hand. They convert into one another [...]. They embrace the whole of the human motive. [...] 'Copulation is the lyric of the mob!' Aye, and also the university of the soul [...]" (C 141). For Pursewarden, the city can be equated to sex. He also gives Darley advice on how to become a good novelist: "The answer, old man, is sex and plenty of it.' [...] 'Lashings of sex [...]" and goes on to say that "sex is dying. In another century we shall lie with our tongues in each other's mouths, silent and passionless as sea-fruit" (J 116-117).

Additionally, Pursewarden is acutely aware of the stereotypical image the West holds of the Orient. In a letter to Mountolive he asks: "Are we still beset by the doleful dream of the Arabian Nights, fathered on us by three generations of sexually disoriented Victorians whose subconscious reacted whole-heartedly to

the thought of more than one legal wife? Or the romantic Bedouin-fever of the Bells and Lawrences?" (*M* 103-104).

Two other minor characters who chase after the girls of Alexandria are Pombal, the Frenchman, and Capodistria, Justine's rapist. Pombal's

[...] light play of sex which hovers over his thought and actions has, however, an air of disinterestedness which makes it qualitatively different from, say, the actions and thoughts of Capodistria [...]. Capodistria has the purely involuntary knack of turning everything into a woman; under his eyes chairs become painfully conscious of their bare legs. He impregnates things. At the table I have seen a water-melon become conscious under his gaze so that it felt the seeds inside it stirring with life! Women feel like birds confronted by a viper when they gaze into that narrow flat face with its tongue always moving across thin lips. (*J* 38-39)

Sex is simply everywhere in Alexandria, and it is only appropriate that the city has been called "a sexual and an intellectual mistress". All of her exemplars think about sex most of the time. Some contemplate meaningfully on love, especially Darley; yet 'real' love is not to be found in the *Quartet* until the end, when Darley and Clea are in love. Yet is even this 'real' love? They make love during an air-raid and Darley notes at one point:

Even the war had come to terms with the city, had indeed stimulated its trade with its bands of aimless soldiers walking about with that grim air of unflinching desperation with which Anglo-Saxons embark upon their pleasures; their own demagnetised women were all in uniform now which gave them a ravenous air—as if they could drink the blood of the innocents while it was still warm. The brothels had overflowed and gloriously engulfed a whole quarter of the town around the old square. If anything the war had brought an air of tipsy carnival rather than anything else [...]. (*C* 65)

Alexandria is so powerful that even such a horrible—and, one would have thought, more powerful thing—such as war accepts the conditions of the city. Instead of concentrating on the war the soldiers amuse themselves in brothels, and even the "demagnetised" English women turn into predators. This is all due to Alexandria, a city so ruthless that it does not even halt before a war. Alexandria is presented as a place of sexual chaos (see Hoops 107). In his

study, Hoops presents a diagram showing all the relationships between the characters.

Auffallend ist die große Anzahl erotischer Beziehungen insgesamt und die Tatsache, daß die meisten Figuren in mindestens zwei erotische Beziehungen verstrickt sind. Viele Figuren, zwischen denen keine direkte Liebesbeziehung besteht, sind zumindest über einen gemeinsamen Liebespartner indirekt miteinander verbunden. (Hoops 91)

Justine for example, has sexual relationships with Darley, Nessim, Pursewarden, Capodistria, and Clea. The web of sexual relations encompasses most major and minor characters and shows the importance that sexual relationships play in the *Quartet* even if “[...] loving is only a sort of skin-language, sex a terminology merely” (J 197). Sex and in some cases love, are the driving forces of the *Quartet*.

In the two novels, the *Quartet* and *The Asiatics*, some scenes are almost identical. Clea asks Darley: “Is it fastidious to want to keep your head, to avoid this curious sexual rush of blood to the head which comes with war, exciting the women beyond endurance? I would not have thought the smell of death could be so exciting to them!” (C 104). In the exact tone Antoine tells the narrator: “[...] I remember clearly how the pretty young whores looked eager and happy, delighted with the disorder and lack of control everywhere, with the advent of new, lusty blood [...] They loved the thought of fine young men killing each other” (*Asiatics*, 25). Similarly, the narrator is asked whether he has ever visited a Syrian brothel (see *Asiatics*, 7) and notes that “the smell of [...] sweat and sex was ever-present [...]” (56). How persistent is the motif of sex and the Orient in literature about the Orient.

### 5.2.1. Love in the City

“[The] word ‘love’ is rarely if ever used, unless it is at the same time re-defined or used ironically. Nevertheless, Darley loves Justine with the selective, idealizing passion which goes under the name of ‘romantic love’. For him, she becomes a mythical figure [...]” (Isernhagen 139). Justine and her city are once again compared and depicted as mythical. Pine writes that “[p]lace



becomes not simple [sic] a metaphor, but *the* metaphor, within which that conjugation and declension of the verbal noun, the gerundive ‘love’, take place” (207). Love results from the many sexual relationships between the characters. It is relevant to discuss the topic since it takes place in the sphere of Alexandria, under the influence of the city.

Ultimately, Justine is the reason for Darley’s initial relationship with the city. In *Justine*, Darley describes their first meeting, and here already we are given a glimpse of Justine’s personality: “She came into the shop with swift and resolute suddenness and said, with the air of authority that Lesbians, or women with money, assume with the obviously indigent [...]” (J 31). Justine wants to introduce Darley to her husband, Nessim, and “dropped [Darley] at his feet and stood back, wagging her tail” (J 32). Through this meeting, Darley is “first [able] to move with any freedom in the great cobweb of Alexandrian society [...]” (J 50). Darley begins to associate the city with Justine, when he thinks of “[...] Nouzha (the rose-garden, some remembered kisses) or bus stops with haunted names like Saba Pacha, Mazloun, Zizinia, Bacos, Schutz, Gianiclis. A city becomes a world when one loves one of its inhabitants” (J 63).

Similarly, Darley realizes early on in *Justine* that Justine is “in touch with the life of the town at so many points [...]” (42), and already he “recognized her now as a child of the city, which decrees that its women shall be the voluptuaries not of pleasure but of pain, doomed to hunt for what they least dare to find!” (J 47). Additionally, at this early stage in their relationship, Justine is already affecting changes in Darley. He has an affair with both Justine and Melissa at this point and “[i]n some paradoxical way it was Justine who was now permitting [him] to see Melissa as she really was—and to recognize [his] love for her” (J 49). Yet the influence of Alexandria is only able to cast its spell over Darley while he is in love with Justine. Once he falls out of love with her, the city loses her grasp on him. Although Darley makes a similar statement upon his return to the city in *Clea* that “[w]hen you are in love with one of its inhabitants a city can become a world” (C 228-229), this time in reference to Clea, Alexandria nevertheless has changed for him and is not as all-powerful as before. Darley asserts that, once he has left the city for the island the first time, there is “[...]”

Alexandria, maintaining its tenuous grasp on one's affections through memories which are already refunding themselves slowly into forgetfulness; memory of friends, of incidents past" (J 245). The city's power fades with the fading of his memories. Upon his return he notes that the city was still the same but at the same time it was not (see C 27) and Darley's "sympathy had discovered a new element inside itself—detachment" (C 33).

Parallel to Alexandria's demise is Darley's loss of interest in Justine. Formerly, when Justine left the city it was for Darley "as if the whole city had crashed about [his] ears [...]" (J 220) and similarly, for Nessim, with Justine's "going the city took on an unnerving strangeness" (J 226). Similarly, Pine writes: "[...] when one has mapped a city thus with one's lover, her absence makes those points of tangence tragically painful, each encounter with her absence a reproach to conscience, a barbed ironic memory" (211). Yet, when Darley returns to the city, he notices "a flavour of disgust for [Justine's] personality and its attributes. The scent! Its cloying richness half sickened me" (C 56). The woman he had once been so obsessed with now was nothing to him. He is detached from her and from the city, although which came first is unknowable. Ultimately, the loss of one love and the gain of another is the reason why Darley sees Alexandria with different, perhaps with clearer eyes. He is not stifled by the city anymore, nor by his relationship with Justine. The spirit of Alexandria has changed because of Darley's perception and knowledge of and about it. "Alexandria is not simply not a place: it ceases to be significance [sic] as a state of mind because the 'lovers' have stepped outside the charmed and charming circle of the city into their own island kingdom" (Pine 238). This is true. The city ceases to captivate them.

### **5.2.2. Durrell's Carnival**

By now it has become evident that Durrell uses Alexandria as a place in which his characters live their complicated lives and the more one reads the *Quartet*, the more apparent scenes in which the city is portrayed as a playground, or a never-ending carnival. Not only does Durrell include Carnivals in the *Quartet*, but the whole novel is a carnival, and the characters are merely actors in it.

Alexandria seems to be a circus, where the major characters all have their acts, and the Egyptians play the supporting roles, giving the *Quartet* its mystical, bustling note.

During Carnival, “the maddest aberrations of the city [...] come boldly forward under the protection of the invisible lords of Misrule who preside at this season” (B 188). Everyone comes out at Carnival; doing whatever they please, since they remain unknown behind their masks. The city’s Carnival gives them an excuse to live out their fantasies and desires. The way the Alexandrians and Europeans dress at Carnival “gives them all a gloomy fanatical uniformity of outline which startles the white-robed Egyptians and fills them with alarm [...]” (B 188). Carnival is one more aspect which makes the Orient thrilling to the European.

But what stamps the carnival with its spirit of pure mischief is the velvet domino—conferring upon its wearers the disguise which each man in his secret heart desires above all. To become anonymous in an anonymous crowd, revealing neither sex nor relationship nor even facial expression [...]. And concealed beneath the carnival habit (like a criminal desire in the heart, a temptation impossible to resist, an impulse which seems preordained) lie the germs of something: of a freedom which man has seldom dared to imagine for himself. One feels free in this disguise to do whatever one like without prohibition. All the best murders in the city, all the most tragic cases of mistaken identity, are the fruit of the yearly carnival [...]. Yes, who can help but love carnival when in it all debts are paid, all crimes expiated or committed, all illicit desires sated—without guilt or premeditation, without the penalties which conscience or society exact? (B 190-191)

This yearly festival is not enjoyed by the Arab population of the city. They have their own festivals, where all types of interesting inhabitants come out to play. These festivities, however, are only witnessed by Darley and his friends, whereas the carnival itself is a privilege of being part of the elite Alexandrian society. The festival of El Scob, in honor of the deceased Scobie, is such a spectacle. Everyone and everything that the city has to offer comes out during the *Mulid of El Scob* (see C 257).

First came the grotesque acrobats and tumblers with masks and painted faces [...]. They were followed by a line of carts full of candidates for circumcision dressed in brilliant silks and embroidered caps, and

surrounded by their sponsors, the ladies of the harem. [...] Magnificently robed sheiks [...]. A cluster of bright braziers outlined the stern bearded faces of a cluster of dignitaries [...]. They were led by the black-capped Rifaia—the scorpion-eaters of legendary powers. Their short barking cries indicated that the religious ecstasy was already on them. (C 268)

### 5.3. Alexandria's Exemplars

Any discussion of the characters in the *Quartet* must include Justine, who is an extension of Alexandria and, for some critics, its counterpart. Furthermore, calculating the degree to which she is an example of an Oriental stereotype is of interest. Clea is worthy of note, since she is so different from Justine. Clea can be brought into connection with the Island that Darley lives on before returning to Alexandria. Leila Hosnani is also interesting, primarily because she is an example of what Varisco has called "reverse Orientalism". Similarly, Balthazar and Scobie are examples of "sexual desires of all kinds". Narouz and the Egyptians in general, are interesting because they stand as the 'locals' in contrast to the typically 'British' characters, and populate the 'Orient' versus the 'Occident'.

#### 5.3.1. Justine

Justine is the main female character, the incarnation and reflection of Alexandria. This is what makes her so enigmatic and captivating at the same time. "Justine is the dark focus of the book, and all other characters seem to be defined in relation to her. She is projected not only as a real presence, but also as a prismatic psyche and as a godlike force [...]" (Bowker 227). For Darley, she was for a long time, "a mistress so full of wit and incantation that one wondered how one had ever managed to love before and be content in the quality of the loving" (J 166). However, Justine cannot be fully grasped or deciphered by Darley, much like Alexandria. Nevertheless, he engages in a "subtile Integrierung Justines in den Alexandria-Mythos" (Hoops 63). She is the object of desire for most of the male characters, although Pursewarden seems to be the only one she truly wants. He ridicules her but makes her laugh, which no one else has done and so wins her affection. Darley, on the other hand, is completely besotted with Justine, particularly in the novel that carries her name.

He “felt once more the strange equivocal power of the city—its flat alluvial landscape and exhausted airs—and knew her for a true child of Alexandria; which is neither Greek, Syrian nor Egyptian, but a hybrid: a joint” (*J* 27). Justine is the “true child of Alexandria” and is akin to her city. There are striking similarities between the two. Alexandria used its exemplars, just like Justine used her lovers. Darley wonders “whether [he] ever really moved her—or existed simply as a laboratory in which she could work” (*J* 71). Justine nevertheless realizes what she is doing. She tells Darley: “It would be silly to spread so much harm as I have done and not to realize that it is my role” (*J* 87).

Justine, like her city, has a bewitching and powerful grasp over many. “The compliance she extorted from us all was the astonishing thing about her” (*J* 77) says Darley, and he asks why she would be interested in him, “[...] she with the whole bargain-basement of male Alexandria in her grasp?” (*B* 47). Like Alexandria, Justine is often compared with predatory animals. Darley describes “[...] Justine’s lovely head—the deep bevel of that Arabian nose and those translucent eyes, enlarged by belladonna. She gazed about her like a half-trained panther” (*J* 29). Arnauti writes in his *Moeurs*: “To such women how fatal an error it is to give oneself; there is simply a small chewing noise, as when a cat reaches the backbone of the mouse” (*J* 144). Her husband Nessim says about her: “I think this Jewish fox has eaten my life” (*J* 159). Darley thinks:

[...] yet how touching, how pliantly feminine this most masculine and resourceful of women could be. She could not help but remind me of that race of terrific queens which left behind them the ammoniac smell of their incestuous loves to hover like a cloud over the Alexandrian subconscious. The giant man-eating cats like Arsinoe were her true siblings. (*J* 20)

Clearly, Justine is a man-eater. She breaks their hearts one after the other and yet they still lie at her feet, because, as Clea puts it: “After all Justine cannot be justified or excused. She simply and magnificently *is*; we have to put up with her, like original sin” (*J* 77). Justine not only seduces men, but women too. Clea spends many months in love with Justine, finally managing to get over her. Yet although she hurts the people who love her, this does not stop them

from doing so. Clea, whose “judgements were seldom if ever charitable [...]” (*J* 77), as Darley puts it, says:

The true whore is man’s real darling—like Justine; she alone has the capacity to wound men. But of course our friend is only a shallow twentieth-century reproduction of the great Hetairae of the past, the type to which she belongs without knowing it, Lais, Charis and the rest.... Justine’s role has been taken from her and on her shoulders society has placed the burden of guilt to add to her troubles. It is a pity. For she is truly Alexandrian. (*J* 77)

Justine is also a princess with whom everyone (except the gay characters or Pursewarden) falls in love; at the same time she is a whore who chews up her men and spits them out again. This, although incredibly painful, is ultimately good for Darley. Nessim notes: “Certainly she was bad in many ways, but they were all small ways. Nor can I say that she harmed nobody. But those she harmed most she made fruitful. She expelled people from their old selves. It was bound to hurt, and many mistook the nature of the pain she inflicted” (*J* 33). Although she inflicted pain on Darley, she certainly made him “fruitful” since he was finally able to become the novelist he had wanted to be. “Freed from the past—Alexandria, Melissa, Justine—Darley is open to the present. The potential is there, the scope for coming into being. The physical self emerges before the spiritual self. On the island he becomes a good swimmer. He no longer stoops. He no longer wears glasses [...]” (Beard 103). In *Clea*, Darley is disgusted by Justine’s perfume which “suggest[s] an overwhelming presence, an unpleasant ‘larger than life’ statement of her now lost role” (Beard 100). Similarly, Alexandria loses that crucial role. Others develop and grow; the city and Justine do not. Darley writes to Clea: “Were it not to see you again I doubt if I could return again to Alexandria. I feel it fade inside me, in my thoughts, like some valedictory mirage—like the sad history of some great queen whose fortunes have foundered among the ruins of armies and the sands of time!” (*C* 276). And just as Justine is not her former, beautiful and enchanting self, turning Darley’s head, so he is finally and soberly able to see the ‘real’ Alexandria: “a shabby little seaport built upon a sand-reef, a moribund and spiritless backwater” (*C* 103) which now seemed to him “less poignant and less terrifying” (*C* 103). Interestingly enough, when Clea meets Justine (after

she has left the city) at the Palestinian-Syrian border, she reports about Justine's appearance to Darley:

She has gone a good deal fatter in the face and has chopped off her hair carelessly at the back so that it sticks out in rats' tails. I gather that for the most part she wears it done up in a cloth. No trace remains of the old elegance or *chic*. Her features seem to have broadened, become more classically Jewish, lip and nose inclining more towards each other. [...] Watching her now and remembering the touching and tormenting person she had once been for us all I found it hard to comprehend the change into this tubby little peasant with the hard paws. (*J* 241-242)

Pursewarden hit the mark way before Darley or Clea would come to realize the 'truth' about Justine and her city: "Justine and her city are alike in that they both have a strong flavour without having any real character" (*J* 139). Pursewarden is the only man resistant to her charms (as well as the only man in the *Quartet* to have slept with his sister) but who is, nevertheless, one of Durrell's important mouthpieces. He declares: "I regard her as a tiresome old sexual turnstile through which presumably we must all pass—a somewhat vulpine Alexandrian Venus." (*B* 115) He asks that she "stop behaving like a pious old sin-cushion into which we all have to stick the rusty pins of our admiration" (*B* 118). He is the only man, according to Balthazar, whom Justine loved. Everyone wants Justine, she wants Pursewarden; he in turn does not love her. To repeat, for Pursewarden Justine and Alexandria have no real flavor. He asks her: "You have the impertinence to foist yourself on us as a problem—perhaps because you have nothing else to offer?" (*B* 117). He sees her as a problem, not a love-object and is therefore able to figure her out before the others. She does not blind him because he loves his sister, not Justine. Although he has an affair with her simultaneously with Darley, "[Pursewarden's] kisses were [...] in no way meant for [Justine]" (*B* 117). He "cursed himself roundly for this lapse, a self-indulgence which had brought him what most bored him—an intimate relationship [with Justine in this case]" (*B* 118). Through his remarks, the reader "lose[s] interest in Justine as an object of unique sexual curiosity and replace[s] her with the one-dimensional mental image provided by Pursewarden" (Pine 185). Pursewarden knew, before Darley did, that she is just a 'stage' one must go through, like Alexandria, in order to reach the

ultimate goal. Once the goal is reached, she becomes uninteresting. She is like a rite of passage to self-knowledge that one has to pass.

War Alexandria in Justine Symbol für den Menschen beherrschende undefinierbare Mächte, so ist die Stadt in Balthazar lediglich Real-Symbol für eine komplexe, erkenntnis-theoretisch kontingente Wirklichkeit. [...] Gleichgeblieben ist dagegen die Bestimmung von Alexandria als einer Stadt des Chaos und als spannungsreicher Schnittpunkt von Okzident und Orient. Nur noch gelegentlich finden sich Anklänge an das alte Alexandria-Bild von Justine. Mit Darleys Verzicht auf die willkürliche Betätigung seiner künstlerischen Imagination und seiner Konzentration auf die faktische Wirklichkeit hat Alexandria seine dominierende Stellung als metaphysischer 'unifying factor' verloren. Alexandria ist in Balthazar zu einem realen und ausschließlich säkularen Schauplatz mit zum Teil realsymbolischer Funktion geworden, wobei die Stadt trotzdem wenig von ihrer faszinierenden Rätselhaftigkeit verloren hat. (Hoops 73-74)

From these copious examples one can draw the conclusion that Justine is promiscuous and that she and Alexandria (as a female character) have a lot in common. Both are "princess and whore"; both lose their power. Justine is surely not a suppressed female as Orientalists so often portrayed Arab women to be. Then again, Justine is a Jewish Alexandrian and part of the upper class, and not part of the typical Oriental harem so often portrayed in men's fantasies. She does behave like a "whore", and she *is* Arabian. However, she is most definitely a femme fatale. If "[w]omen are sexual robbers [...]" (J 197), Justine is just that. She uses others for her own good. Alexandria is "[...] a city where a woman was, as provender, regarded as something like a plateful of mutton; a city where women cry out to be abused" (B 132). The impression one gets is that Alexandrian women somehow *want* to be abused. Pursewarden abuses Justine emotionally, rejecting her advances, yet she craves his love nevertheless. Although Justine is not an oppressed woman, Nessim nevertheless sees something in her that others do not. Justine says to Nessim: "[...] 'How did you know that I only exist for those who believe in me?' He stared at her, thrilled and a little terrified, recognizing in her the perfect submissiveness of the oriental spirit—the absolute feminine submissiveness which is one of the strongest forces in the world" (M 202). Similarly, Darley says about Melissa—his lover before Justine—that "[in] her there was a pliancy, a resilience which was Oriental—a passion to serve" (J 52). Oriental



women are portrayed as submissive, yet at the same time this gives them power. This then, suggests a correspondence to an Oriental cliché, and at the same time is a complete contradiction. Justine is portrayed as both an Oriental woman and a femme fatale. For Darley:

[Justine] was simply a victim of that Oriental desire to please [...]. She gave everything, knowing the value of nothing, a true *parvenue* of the soul. [...] Her body really meant nothing to her. It was a dupe. Her modesty was supreme. This sort of giving is really shocking because it is as simple as an Arab, without precociousness, unrefined as a drinking habit among peasants. (*B* 56)

Seemingly, Justine is portrayed as a victim, although she is the one causing grief to many of the characters. “She knew she was a woman at last and belonged to men—and this gave her misery a fugitive relief” (*B* 55). Just like Alexandria, Justine’s character is an enigma.

### 5.3.2. Clea and the Island

Clea becomes important to Darley after he has overcome Justine. Clea can be viewed as the antidote to Justine. Similarly, the island on which Darley lives before returning to the city can be seen as the antidote to Alexandria. Therefore, one can suggest an association between Clea and the island, in contrast to Justine and her city. Pine mentions: “On the island one is king, even a god; in the city, a buffoon looking for a *raison d’être*” (205). The island allows him to reflect upon past events. He is not in a state of permanent stress as he was whilst in love with Justine and living in Alexandria.

Kums correctly argues that “[...] it is true that the general ‘colour’ of **Justine** is dark (purple, mauve) and of **Clea** light (white, yellow, blue), just like the physical appearance of Justine as opposed to Clea” (94). Darley remembers “the somber brow-dark gaze of Justine” (*J* 17), “dark on marble-ivory white: glossy black hair: deep surprising eyes in which one’s glances sink because they are nervous, curious, turned to sexual curiosity” (*J* 65) and the “magnificence of her dark skin” (*J* 84). Darley “had at times the impression of a woman whose every kiss was a blow struck on the side of death” (*J* 73). As

mentioned before, Justine is like “original sin.” Clea is her opposite, not only in appearance but in her being. Darley describes her as “Clea, the gentle, lovable, unknowable Clea [...]” (J 127). Furthermore he says that:

Everything about her person is honey-gold and warm in tone; the fair, crisply-trimmed hair which she wears rather long at the back, knotting it simply at the downy nape of her neck. This focuses the candid face of a minor muse with its smiling grey-green eyes. [...] I should say something like this: that she had been poured, while still warm, into the body of a young grace: that is to say, into a body born without instincts or desires. (J 128)

Justine is the *femme fatale*, whereas Clea seems more like an angel. Darley is able to talk to her and “rely upon the strength which she had quarried out of self-knowledge and reflection” (J 130). Like Darley, Clea spends a long time in love with Justine. She tells Darley:

As for love itself—*cher ami*—I told you already that love interested me only very briefly—and men more briefly still; the few, indeed the one, experience which marked me was an experience with a woman. I am still living in the happiness of that perfectly *achieved* relationship: any physical substitute would seem today horribly vulgar and hollow. But do not imagine me as suffering from any fashionable form of broken heart. (J 129)

After Justine’s departure from Alexandria at the end of the first novel, Clea “was calm [...] with a sort of resignation which had a moving eloquence about it” (J 228). Darley then also leaves Alexandria. He says: “I have escaped to this island with a few books and the child—Melissa’s child. I do not know why I use the word “escape”. The villagers say jokingly that only a sick man would choose such a remote place to rebuild. Well, then, I have come here to heal myself, if you like to put it that way....”(J 13). Alexandria’s grasp made the city seem like a prison to Darley. The island, on the other hand, is a place of peace. “Somewhere along the road [he] had recovered [his] peace of mind. This handful of blue days before saying farewell—[he] treasured them, luxuriating in their simplicity [...]” (C 13). Darley is later summoned back to Alexandria by Nessim, to “the city which [he] now knew [he] hated” (C 14). He *has* to return in order to free himself once and for all from the force that is Alexandria.

When he finds Clea, it was “[a]s though somewhere a window had been smashed, and the fresh air allowed to pour into a long-sealed room” and he finds her “more beautiful than [he] could remember her to have been, slimmer, and with a subtle range of new gestures and expressions suggesting a new and troubling maturity” (C 77). Kums writes that “Darley’s new affair with Clea is far from the tormented passion for Justine [...]” (87). He remembers the night that they had slept in the same bed together and contemplates that he “had not known then how to find the key to [Clea’s] door. Now of its own accord it was slowly opening. Whereas the other door which had once given me access to Justine had now locked irrevocably” (C 95). Clea gives Darley a feeling of freedom, which Justine did not (see C 99). “With Clea also the new relationship offered no problems, perhaps because deliberately we avoided defining it too sharply, and allowed it to follow the curves of its own nature, to fulfil its own design” (C 160).

Although Alexandria is now caught in the war, it again becomes a world for Darley: “A whole new geography of Alexandria was born through Clea, reviving old meanings, renewing ambiances half forgotten, laying down like a rich wash of colour a new history, a new biography to replace the old one” (C 229).

After Clea’s accident, in which she loses a hand, they separate and Darley once again returns to the island, where his “life is hard, but good” (C 274). Clea writes to Darley, telling him that

[t]here is nothing, it seems, that [her new hand] cannot do impressively better than I can. [...] I have been totally absorbed in this new hand-language and the interior metamorphosis it has brought about. All the roads have opened before me, everything seems now possible for the first time. (C 279)

Clea had to go through a phase of depression and the loss of a body part before finally being able to overcome the city and become the artist she wanted to be. Darley, similarly, needed to leave Alexandria permanently before he was finally able to overcome it and therefore also his writer’s block. He says, ending the *Quartet*:

Yes, one day I found myself writing down with trembling fingers the four words (four letters! four faces!) with which every story-teller since the world began has staked his slender claim to the attention of his fellow-men. Words which presage simply the old story of an artist coming of age. I wrote: "Once upon a time..."

And I felt as if the whole universe had given me a nudge! (C 282)

In contrast to the beginning of the *Quartet*, the island is no longer a place of introspection. Instead it is a place of anticipated fulfillment, and Darley's desire to escape Alexandria is finally realized (see Hoops 192).

### 5.3.3. Leila's 'Reverse Orientalism' and Mountolive's Orientalism

Leila Hosnani, Nessim's mother, is in love with the British diplomat Mountolive, from whom the third volume of the *Quartet* takes its title. 'Reverse Orientalism' is, in simple terms, the way 'Orientals' saw the 'West'. Instead of Westerners projecting their fantasies onto the East, the Orient projects its fantasies on the West. The difference between the Orient and the Occident is made clear in the relationship between Leila and Mountolive. Leila loves him because he is an Englishman and he loves her because she is Egyptian (see Gifford, *Introduction* xvi). Mountolive realizes "that what she saw in him was something like a prototype of a nation which existed now only in her imagination. She was kissing and cherishing a painted image of England" (M 29). Similarly, "[...]the young Mountolive noted and pondered upon the strange ways of the people among whom he had come to live, [...] in a kind of ecstasy to find a sort of poetic correspondence between the reality and the dream-picture of the East which he had constructed from his reading" (M 32-33). She fantasizes about the West and he about the East; this is what has brought them together. "Mountolive's Orientalist construct of Egypt and of his lover Leila Hosnani becomes overt—his brutal, sensual, thrilling Orient is immediately juxtaposed to Leila's Occidental construct of a sexualized and conquering Other" (Gifford, *Introduction* xv).

Leila is educated and knowledgeable, but is nevertheless not emancipated. After an illness has disfigured her, she takes to the veil and “permitted no mirrors in the *harim* since the illness had deprived her of her self-esteem” (B 79). Leila uses the veil to hide behind; in her case, it is rather convenient to be a Muslim. She is a typical Egyptian lady, married to an older man not of her own choosing, falling in line with Egyptian customs.

Mountolive of course found her a beautiful enigma when he might, had he been more experienced, have recognized in her naturalness a perfect simplicity of spirit and in her extravagant nature a temperament which had been denied its true unfolding, had fallen back with good grace among compromises. This marriage, for example, to a man so much older than herself had been one of arrangement—this was still Egypt. The fortunes of her family had been matched against the fortunes of the Hosnanis—it resembled, as all such unions do, a merger between two great companies. Whether she was happy or unhappy she herself had never thought to consider. She was hungry, that was all, hungry for the world of books and meetings which lay forever outside this old house and the heavy charges of the land which supported their fortunes. She was obedient and pliant, loyal as a finely-bred animal. [...] Leila found everything becoming shadowy and insubstantial. She must conform. [...] her life must belong to Egypt. (M 23-24)

Similarly, in Prokosch's *The Asiatics*, we find a young repressed female trapped in a life not chosen by her. Thus, for example, the novel features a prince with a very young wife. The narrator reports: “He led me to the youngest one, a mere slip of a girl and very lovely. [...] She gazed at me like a statue. She looked very much like a doll, a delicate porcelain doll without any life of her own” (127).

The difference between the ‘Orient’ as passionate and England as indifferent and passionless is made clear in Leila's and Mountolive's relationship. Mountolive does not know how to act once he has fallen in love: “What on earth was an Englishman to make of these strange patterns of thought, these confused and contending loyalties? [...] Was this why she had elected to love Mountolive's England through him rather than Mountolive himself?” (M 30). Similarly, Leila “was amused by the effect of her passion on him—those kisses which fell burning like spittle upon a hot iron. Through her eyes he began to see Egypt once more [...]” (M 31). Mountolive “had been formally educated in

England, educated not to wish to feel” and “had heard and read of passion” (*M* 18). These self-explanatory statements about England’s society and its “fine breeding” (*M* 87) stand in sharp contrast to what Mountolive and others experience in Alexandria. Additionally, in contrast to Egypt and the sexualized ‘Orient’, stands London, which Pursewarden labels as the “Home of the eccentric and the sexually disabled. London!” (*M* 85).

At the end of *Mountolive*, the former lovers meet after years of separation. Reminiscent of Darley’s feelings about Justine when they meet again, Mountolive is disgusted and shocked by Leila’s appearance. Indeed, “*He did not recognize her at all!* [...] this pitiable grotesque—a fattish Egyptian lady with all the marks of eccentricity and age written upon her appearance. [He] saw himself confronting something like an animal cartoon figure—an elephant, say” (*M* 281), and “to his intense humiliation, [she] began to moan and rock like an Arab [...]” and hence “[...] Mountolive was trembling with anger and surprise and disgust” (*M* 283). This uncomplimentary presentation of Leila is interesting because another common cliché of Orientalism is the “Arab” woman found in Prokosch’s *The Asiatics*. Here, for example, is the Maharaja’s wife, who is “rather heavy and appeared to be somewhat older [...]” (186). Here, too, are

[t]he old women [...] at the waterside [...] looking like a group of tough and garrulous birds. [...] Their breasts hung down like flat leather patches and their hair blew like straw in the sharp November wind. They were hideous, they were mindless, they didn’t have anything left out of life, anything at all. (49)

Upon his return to the city, Darley likewise, during a visit to Nessim’s and Justine’s home, describes Justine when he “find[s] her standing beside [his] bed naked, with her hands joined in supplication like an Arab mendicant, like some beggar-woman of the streets” (*C* 61).

For Mountolive, Leila “had *been* Egypt, his own private Egypt of the mind; and now this old image had been husked, stripped bare” and “[s]uddenly the whole of Alexandria, the whole of Egypt, had become distasteful, burdensome, wearisome to his spirit” (*M* 284).

#### 5.3.4. Balthazar and Scobie

As briefly mentioned in the chapter “Sexual Desires of all Kinds”, Balthazar is a homosexual, and Scobie an eccentric Brit who dresses as a woman when he comes under “*An Influence*” (B 40).

Balthazar is Darley’s “key” to the city. He tells Darley: “Thank God I have been spared an undue interest in love. [...] Lying with one’s own kind, enjoying an experience, one can still keep free the part of one’s mind which dwells on Plato, or gardening, or the differential calculus” (J 98). Balthazar seems predominantly rational. He is not interested in love, but rather sleeps with men, since they do not take his mind off other important aspects of life. However, it seems that towards the end, he too has come under the influence of Alexandria. Upon Darley’s return to the city, he visits the sick Balthazar, who tells him that he had fallen in love with a much younger, beautiful Greek. Balthazar admits that he could not control his behavior; he was *that* much in love (see C 68). He says that “this was the sort of murderous passion of which one has read, and for which our city is famous!” and that he “became a hopeless drunkard” and “as weak as a woman” (C 68). Balthazar has become so love-sick that he tries to cut off his hands, and is thus confined to bed when Darley returns. It seems that the city does not allow anyone to be happy; there must always be some sort of drama ending in a tragedy.

From Balthazar we move to a peculiar minor character. Scobie is a pipe-smoking, brandy-drinking wrinkly old “pirate” (C 33), with a smile “like that of the Cheshire Cat” (J 120-122). One would never have thought, from his appearance, that Scobie likes to wear women’s clothing, but he informs Darley rather shamefacedly: “I slip on female duds and my Dolly Varden” (B 41). He does it because to him “it’s always the old thrill...” (B 41). Darley thought that it might be dangerous to walk around the Arab Quarter dressed as a woman, but Scobie tell him: “Of course, if there was ever any trouble, I’d say I was in disguise. I am a policeman when you come to think of it. After all, even Lawrence of Arabia wore a nightshirt, didn’t he?” (B 42). Policemen, after all, are a great authority in Egypt. Ironically enough, Scobie, the only one who was able to move in the Arab Quarter “with the ease of a man who has come into

his own estate, slowly, sumptuously, like an Arab" (*B* 32), is finally murdered for wearing women's clothing. Not by Arabs though, but by sailors of the H.M.S *Milton* (see *B* 171). "He had been battered to death in ugly enough fashion. A lot of broken crockery inside that old skin" (*B* 172). His death was a very dramatic one; involving violence so typical of the *Quartet*. Additionally, the fact that he was killed by British sailors hints at the attitude towards 'abnormal' sexual preferences still harbored by Europeans at the time. After his death, Scobie is given the status of a Saint, since he was generally liked by the Arab population and whilst still alive campaigned against the circumcision of Arab girls.

### 5.3.5. Narouz and 'Authentic' Egyptians

Terms attributed to Orientals were "intrigue, cunning and unkindness to animals [...]" (Said 38) and "inveterate liars" (Said 39), and additionally, the "Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike [...]" (Said 40). In short, the Oriental stands in complete opposition to the English (see Said 39). Furthermore, qualities such as "oversexed", "essentially sadistic", and "camel driver" (Said 286-287) are used in reference to Arabs, although these phrases are used in association with roles given to Arabs in films in more modern times. And of course, the unrelenting notion of sex in association with Arabs is also present in the Occident's concept of the Orient.

Take the case of Narouz, Nessim's hare-lipped brother and his opposite. Whilst Nessim is a wealthy businessman, married to a beautiful woman and living in the city, Narouz controls their farm in the Egyptian countryside. Narouz stands for the Orient whilst his brother, educated in Europe, represents the West. "People were inclined to attribute [Nessim's] manners to a foreign education, but in fact Germany and England had done little but confuse him and unfit him for the life of the city" (*J* 28). Nessim does not really 'fit' into Alexandria. Although he "spent [his money] in Arabian fashion" (*J* 28), meaning that he spent it left and right, he "was at odds with the city" (*J* 29). Mountolive's description of Narouz, in contrast, gives the reader the image that he is not part



of cosmopolitan Alexandrian society like the rest of the characters, but rather, a peasant.

The ends of his baggy Turkish trousers with an old-fashioned drawstring, were stuffed into crumpled old jackboots of soft leather. He ducked, excitedly, awkwardly, into his brother's arms and out again, like a boxer from a clinch. [...] His dark hair grew down low and curly, like a heifer's, on to his brow. [...] The whole sum of his movements was ungainly—arms and legs somewhat curved and hairy as a spider—but they gave off a sensation of overwhelming strength held rigidly under control. (*B* 68)

Narouz, similarly, is at odds with Alexandria in the way that people who spend their time in the countryside feel awkward when visiting the 'big city'. He comes to Alexandria only during Carnival, and then only for a glimpse at his secret love, Clea. He imagines that he hears her voice (coming from a prostitute):

[...] he followed her like an addict, standing inside the darkened room with eyes closed, his hands upon her great quivering breasts [...]. Then he sought her mouth feverishly, as if he would suck the very image of Clea from her breath [...]. He loosened his clothing and pressed this great doll of flesh slowly down upon the dirty bed, coaxing from her body with his powerful hands the imagined responses he might have coaxed perhaps from another and better-loved form. (*B* 166-167)

Consistent with the cliché of Boone's "hypervirile Arab" (see section 3.1.1.2) this scene adds additional negativity to the cliché since it takes place in a dirty "torture-chamber" (*B* 166) and also shows how desperate Narouz is in need of sexual release. In the same way, the following statement does nothing to disprove the cliché: "Nothing could finally tire that powerful body—not even the orgasm he had experienced in long savage battle" (*B* 90-91).

As is noticeable from Mountolive's description of Narouz, he does not quite know how to act, which only adds to his naive image. "He chuckled again, and then added, nodding his head with an absurdly childish expression. '[Leila] is angry with *you*, now. For once it is with *you*, not with *me*. You have made her cry, Nessim.'" (*M* 226). Apart from the suitability of this statement to the cliché that the Oriental comes across as "childlike" at times, we can also find the jealous-second-child cliché here. "The younger brother—one could not quite

trust him somehow" (*M* 36). Mountolive is unsure of Narouz's motives and hears "Narouz chuckling like a Mephistopheles" (*M* 18). In the end "[...] Narouz becomes a reckless fanatic" (Bode 535). Narouz is also the one who accidentally kills Toto de Brunel, thinking it was Justine: "I swear I did not mean to do it. It happened before I could think. She put her hand upon me, Clea, she made advances to me" (*B* 230). Instead of simply telling her that he is not interested, he loses control of himself and murders her (Toto). This fits the image of the Arab as a brutal being, acting before thinking. Clea's term for Narouz is "creature" (*B* 231), which is derogatory in itself. Similarly violent: "With his right hand [Narouz] drove his dagger into the wood, pinning the Magzub's arms to it through the long sleeves of his coarse gown; with his left he seized the beard of the man, as one might seize a cobra above its hood to prevent it striking" (*B* 161). During a visit to Leila's farm, Mountolive witnesses a scene which he believes is typical of the country's customs:

[...] there were other scenes, less palatable perhaps, but nonetheless representative of the *moeurs* of Egypt. [...] A dark youth stood uneasily here before a different Narouz, scowling fiercely yet with ebbing courage into those blue eyes. Mountolive had heard the words "Master, it was no lie" spoken twice in a low clear voice as he lay reading; he rose and walked to the window in time to see Narouz, who was repeating in a low, obstinate voice, pressed between his teeth into a hiss, the words "You lied again", perform an act whose carnal brutality thrilled him; he was in time to see his host take out a knife from his belt and sever a portion of the boy's ear-lobe, but slowly, and indeed softly, as one might sever a grape from its stalk with a fruit-knife. A wave of blood flowed down the servant's neck but he stood still. "Now go," said Narouz in the same diabolical hiss, "and tell your father that for every lie I will cut a piece of your flesh until we come to the true part, the part which does not lie." [...] Narouz wiped his knife-blade on his baggy trousers and walked up the stairs into the house, whistling. Mountolive was spellbound! (*M* 34)

Narouz's treatment of animals corresponds equally to the stereotype that Orientals are unkind to animals. When Nessim visits his brother "He heard now the sullen crack of the whip [...]" (*M* 222) which Narouz uses to kill bats. "Nessim, whose eyes had become accustomed to the dusk, now saw that the courtyard was full of the bodies of bats, like fragments of torn umbrella, some fluttering and crawling in puddles of their own blood, some lying still and torn up" (*M* 222). This is cruelty to animals at its worst, and purely grotesque. Isernhagen writes that the "spiritual cruelty of Justine is not different in kind

from the cruelty of the Arabs cutting up the camel alive, it merely appears in a different form. This cruelty is an integrated part of Egyptian life to Mountolive, who is fascinated with it, in spite of himself" (172). Durrell incorporates many scenes of cruelty into the *Quartet*, pointing to his own fascination with such details of 'authentic' Egyptian life.

#### 5.3.5.1. 'Authentic' Egyptians of the *Quartet*

There are no major 'Oriental' characters in the *Quartet*, merely a few minor ones and descriptions of 'authentic' Egyptian life in general. Locals *do* exist in the *Quartet*, yet they are treated superficially, as a part of the scenery, in order to add spice to the novels. One is never given insight to these characters as one is given to the major characters. These scenes show a relationship between the stereotypical Orient à la *Arabian Nights*; mystical and magical on the one hand, and on the other, more negative side, dingy and destitute. There are the characters of "one-eyed Hamid, the Berber servant" (*J* 18) and Selim, Nessim's driver and man for everything. The most prominent of these Egyptian minor characters is Memlik Pascha, the corrupt politician. Similar to the example of Narouz, Durrell frequently brings violence and dirt into his 'authentic' scenes of Egyptian life, and additionally many characters lose various body parts. Clea loses her hand, Hamid only has one eye, and Nessim loses a finger and an eye.

As Herbrechter argues, "the only Muslim Arab who is permitted access to Durrell's *Quartet* is Memlik Pascha, as an emblem of the corruption of Egyptian officials, ridiculed in his decadence and indecision [...]" (267). To make Memlik's degree of corruption clear, one can allude to a conversation between Mountolive and one of his officers, who says that "[Memlik's] susceptibility to a bribe is ... almost legendary in Egypt" (*M* 247) and alludes to the fact that probably all Egyptians are susceptible to bribery (see *M* 247). Furthermore, Memlik is not only corrupt, but violent.

[...] Memlik acted with all the authority of someone with a Sultan's *firman* or dispensation in his hands. There was, in truth, nobody to gainsay him. He punished hard and often, without asking questions and often

purely upon hearsay of the most remote suspicion. People disappeared silently, leaving no trace, [...] or else they reappeared in civil life elegantly maimed or deftly blinded—and somehow curiously unwilling to discuss their misfortunes in public. (“Shall we see if he can sing?” Memlik was reputed to say; the reference was to putting out a canary’s eyes with a red-hot wire—an operation much resorted to and alleged to make the bird sing more sweetly). (*M* 256)

The extent of his violence and corruption is obvious, and once again there is reference to cruelty to animals. Interesting, also, is that corruption is generalized to include all Egyptians. Nevertheless, Scobie, the only British character in the *Quartet* who has managed somewhat to integrate into the ‘true’ Egyptian life, says: “You see the Egyptians are marvelous, old man. Kindly. They know me well. From some points of view, they might look like felons, old man, but felons in a state of grace [...]. They make allowances for each other” (*B* 35).

Moving to the ‘authentic’ Egyptian population in the *Quartet*, one is again confronted with the stereotypical cliché of the Orient. “The whole toybox of Egyptian life was still there, every figure in place—street-sprinkler, scribe, mourner, harlot, clerk, priest—untouched, it seemed, by time or by war” (*C* 33). It seems like a circus scene. Durrell calls these Egyptians “figures”, which is an appropriate term, since one is never given insight into their ‘authentic’ life. Their only function seems to be to spice up the novel with their eccentricities and ‘authenticity’, which is important as Durrell wants to make us believe that his Alexandria is ‘real.’ There are predominantly negative connotations to the ‘authentic’ scenes in the *Quartet*. For example: “In Tatwig Street dark gnomes on ladders with scarlet flower-pot hats were stretching strings of flags from the balconies” (*C* 243). This image is very stereotypical; one can perfectly imagine a black slave boy with the tarbush, the classic cap worn by Muslim men in the Middle East. The following scene once again brings to the foreground the image of ‘authentic’ Egypt as a dirty, smelly, violent and miserable place and not as the mysterious and mystical Orient that so many dreamed of and portrayed in their stories:

Shuttered balconies swarming with rats, and old women whose hair is full of the blood of ticks. Peeling walls leaning drunkenly to east and

west of their true centre of gravity. The black ribbon of flies attaching itself to the lips and eyes of the children—the moist beads of summer flies every-where; the very weight of their bodies snapping off ancient flypapers hanging in the violet doors of booths and cafes. The smell of the sweat-lathered Berberinis, like that of some decomposing staircarpet. And then the street noises: shriek and clang of the water-bearing Saidi, dashing his metal cups together as an advertisement, the unheeded shrieks which pierce the hubbub from time to time, as of some small delicately organized animal being disemboweled. The sores like ponds—the incubation of a human misery of such proportions that one was aghast, and all one's human feelings overflowed into disgust and terror. (*J* 24)

The word “disgust” appears frequently in the *Quartet* and correspondingly Mountolive “stumbled into a house of child prostitutes, he realized with a sudden spasm of disgust and pity. Their little faces were heavily painted, their hair scragged up in ribbons and plaits” (*M* 291). Similarly, violence is also a recurrent image: “The darkness was full of their barbaric blitheness” (*M* 16). The images are overwhelmingly evocative but at the same time overwhelmingly laced with a tinge of repulsion.

Furthermore, Durrell presents a clear difference between the foreign women of Alexandria and the Egyptian women, whom he presents as stereotypical oppressed females, eliciting feelings of pity from the reader. They are not given a voice and, in comparison to rebellious foreign women, they have apparently been subjugated for years. However, this does not seem to affect them, since they are “happy.”

The women of the foreign communities here are more beautiful than elsewhere. Fear, insecurity dominates them. They have the illusion of foundering in the ocean of blackness all around. This city has been built like a dyke to hold back the flood of African darkness; but the soft-footed blacks have already started leaking into the European quarters: a sort of racial osmosis is going on. To be happy one would have to be a Moslem, an Egyptian woman—absorbent, soft, lax, overblown; given to veneers; their waxen skins turn citron-yellow or melon-green in the naphtha flares. [...] Their feelings are buried in the pre-conscious. In love they give out nothing of themselves, having no self to give, but enclose themselves around you in an agonizing reflection—an agony of unexpressed yearning that is at the opposite pole from tenderness, pleasure. For centuries now they have been shut in a stall with the oxen, masked, circumcised. Fed in darkness on jams and scented fats

they have become tuns of pleasure, rolling on paper-white blue-veined legs. (J 66)

In addition to Egyptian women and corrupt officials, homosexuals appear in the *Quartet*. It is clear that the Orient was not only a place where Europeans went to have sex with women or female prostitutes, but also with homosexuals. This is in line with Boone's ideas about the cliché of the Orient with both hetero- and homosexual practices. "Before them ran a helter skelter collection of male prostitutes with powdered faces and long flowing hair, chuckling and ejaculating like chickens in a farmyard" (C 269). These prostitutes were not only male but it seems also dressed up as ladies. The strangeness of male prostitutes ejaculating freely on the street can be compared to one of the graphic scenes depicted by Flaubert: "A marabout died a while ago—an idiot—who had long passed as a saint marked by God; all the Moslem women came to see him and masturbated him—in the end he died of exhaustion—from morning to night it was a perpetual jacking-off...." (qtd. in Said 103). One can hardly imagine that these scenes are real. "Flaubert frankly acknowledges that his is grotesquerie of a special kind" (Said 103) only to be found in the Orient, which thus "becomes a living tableau of queerness" (103). Such scenes are not found in Europe but are part of the weird and wonderful attraction of the 'Orient'.

## 6. Conclusion

The ambiguity of the *Quartet* encompasses most aspects. Durrell insists his Alexandria is real, yet this is only partially true. His city is both real and imaginary. The city is portrayed as an enigma, and so are its major characters. It is certain that Alexandria, the real and imaginary city, was powerful enough to inspire Durrell. Alexandria was ultimately the reason for Darley's progress and development. This proves that the city had a grasp over its inhabitants, both real and imagined. Ian MacNiven writes that "[s]etting determines character with a vengeance" (*Introduction* 434). The city, the spirit of place, determines the behaviour of its exemplars, but without them, Alexandria would not have been the same. Therefore it is appropriate to say that the relationship between city and inhabitants is reciprocal.

One can find many Oriental clichés in the *Quartet*. Although it is the West which has forced these clichés on the Orient, one cannot say that the clichés are wholly superficial, since they must have originated from somewhere. Therefore, in reality, there must have been, or still are, people who conformed to these stereotypes. At the same time, one cannot apply these stereotypes to a whole nation. It is noticeable that, although other writers were only referred to briefly in this thesis, the scenes depicted were similar, presenting recurrent Oriental themes and stereotypes. Sex, in all forms, is a persistent aspect.

Said believes that Westerners think they know the East, and that they give impressions of it which are 'authentic' or 'real'. The West projects its fantasies onto the Orient, but as this study has proven, the reverse is equally true. Leila Hosnani has a certain image about England in her mind, and loves Mountolive precisely because of this assumption. Additionally, Said believes that Westerners equate the Orient with sex. As mentioned in the introduction, Durrell fits into both niches. Durrell pretends to know Egypt, yet he only knows one part. This is the part which he presents to his readers. These are the impressions that he had of Egypt. Durrell moved in the cosmopolitan circles of Alexandria, could not speak Arabic, and did not bother to dig deeper into the 'real' Egypt. Durrell's Alexandria is most definitely an "imaginary geography", yet this term must also be thought of as ambiguous. In his portrayal of Alexandria and its exemplars, Durrell included 'authentic' aspects, just as he included imaginary aspects. Both serve to entertain the reader. Some aspects inevitably irritate the critics, as they do not accept them as 'real'. Yet one has to remember that Alexandria, the real Alexandria, was home to both the cosmopolitan elite and the local Arabs. The *Quartet* similarly contains both. It is nevertheless true that Durrell focuses more on the cosmopolitan society, which he knows well. However, this does not make *that* part of Alexandria false. As Kums says:

A little appreciation of Durrell's often ironic playfulness, and attention to the artistic and hence often unorthodox use he makes of all his ingredients, may forestall a lot of angry impatience with his writing. It is a little surprising that so many critics have overlooked this and have immediately identified Durrell's versatility with 'trickiness' or 'meaningless theatricalisation'. (57)

Durrell's perception of his surroundings was selective, as is everyone's. The 'authentic' Arabs, or elements included in the *Quartet*, serve as part of the scenery, as part of the spirit of place. Through them, the city becomes what it is in the *Quartet*. Durrell could not have excluded them even if he had wanted to. But the Arabs are portrayed on a superficial level only.

Sex is ever-present in the *Quartet*, in so many ways. It drives the characters and indeed the *Quartet* itself. Everything is defined through the sexual relationships that the characters have with each other. Scobie is able to cross-dress in Alexandria and, if caught, pretend that he is undercover. Durrell additionally includes male and female prostitutes as part of the city, and through their depiction contributing to Oriental clichés. Narouz is portrayed as a brutal yet naïve stereotypical "hypervirile Arab". Thus, in the *Quartet*, the Orient *is* equated with sex and *does* contain Oriental clichés, superficial as they may be.

Said thinks that many travel writers went to the Orient to experience what they could not get in their home country. The difference between them and Durrell's fiction is that neither Durrell nor Darley came to the Orient looking for sex. As Durrell wrote in a letter to Henry Miller, the city was full of temptations, and in the *Quartet* Darley found this to be true too.

Alexandria is presented in a number of ways. It is both an Oriental city and a European city. The city is contrasted to Cairo, which is viewed by the characters as the 'real' Egypt. Additionally, the city is presented as a character, mainly as a female who overpowers its inhabitants. "For Durrell Alexandria is, even more, dark femininity" (Pinchin 167). Alexandria is, like its true child Justine, at the same time, the princess and the whore. This, again, returns us to the principle of ambiguity found abundantly in the *Quartet*. Justine is the main love interest for most characters, yet at the same time she only has power over others because of their own weakness. Once they fall out of love with her, she becomes uninteresting, and similarly the city loses its strangling grasp over its residents. Although she comes across as an emancipated Alexandrian



woman, Justine is also portrayed as Oriental. She does not care about her body, and Nessim finds in her “the perfect submissiveness of the Oriental spirit”.

Although, there has been much controversy over the *Quartet*, and although “[h]is readers get angry with Durrell—for overblown action, for a patronizing vision of the female and the oriental [...]” (Pinchin 199)—he was nevertheless able to evoke an exotic yet ambiguous city, with all sorts of inhabitants, be they ‘colonials’ such as Darley and Scobie, or corrupt Arabs such as Memlik. Additionally, the locals and the Egyptian countryside Durrell uses for his ‘backcloth’ fulfill their role of supporting acts, adding the essence needed to make the *Quartet* everything that it is. There is no doubt that thus Durrell “had immortalized Alexandria” (Bowker 274).

## 7. Abbreviated Titles

### Primary Sources:

<i>B</i>	= <i>Balthazar</i>
<i>C</i>	= <i>Clea</i>
<i>J</i>	= <i>Justine</i>
<i>M</i>	= <i>Mountolive</i>

### Secondary Sources:

<i>Asiatics</i>	= <i>The Asiatics</i>
<i>A Study</i>	= <i>Lawrence Durrell: A Study</i>
<i>BT</i>	= <i>The Beaten Track</i>
<i>CK</i>	= <i>Colonial Knowing</i>
<i>Correspondence</i>	= <i>A Private Correspondence</i>
<i>Enigma</i>	= <i>The Enigma of the Quartet</i>
<i>For Cavafy</i>	= <i>For Cavafy, with Love and Squalor: Some Critical Notes on the History and Historiography of Modern Alexandria</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	= <i>Introduction. Pied Piper of lovers.</i>
<i>Key</i>	= <i>A Key to Modern British Poetry.</i>
<i>SP</i>	= <i>Spirit of Place</i>

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## Zusammenfassung

“*Alexandria, Princess and Whore*” *The City and its Exemplars* ist eine Arbeit, die an erster Stelle versucht, die Stadt Alexandria, deren “Spirit of Place”, und die Wirkung dessen auf ihre Bewohner zu untersuchen. Lawrence Durrell’s Gedanken über das echte Alexandria werden anfangs erläutert, um diese mit seinem fiktionalen Werk zu vergleichen. Durrell benutzt die Stadt als Bühne für seine Charaktere, wobei er die Aspekte der Stadt, die uninteressant sind, auslässt. Er hat Alexandria zu seinem Nutzen verändert. Im Gegensatz dazu werden Orte untersucht, die *nicht* Alexandria sind. Interessant ist hier, dass, obwohl Alexandria in Ägypten liegt, die Stadt damals von vielen Europäern bewohnt war, und diese, im Gegensatz zu den lokalen Einwohnern, sich auch im *Quartet* wiederfinden. Auch Ansichten anderer Kritiker werden erläutert, um einen Überblick der sich unterscheidenden Ansichten über das *Quartet* zu bekommen und dadurch eine solide Basis für eine Analyse zu finden. Von besonderer Wichtigkeit sind die Kritiker die es für negative halten, dass Durrell nur selektive Aspekte der Stadt in seinem Roman integriert hat. Dieses selektive Wahrnehmen findet sich in den Konzepten von James Buzard wieder.

Es wird ausserdem untersucht ob und wie weit eine Verbindung zwischen dem *Quartet* und Orientalismus, und hier wird besonderer Nutzen von Edward Said’s *Orientalismus* gemacht, hergestellt werden kann. Die Verbindung hier bezieht sich auf die im Orientalismus immer wiederkehrenden Motive der Sexualität, welche auch im *Quartet* immer wieder auffindbar sind. Weiters gilt es herauszufinden, ob die Klischees, die dem Orient nachgesagt werden, auch in diesem Werk vorhanden sind. Es wird untersucht welche Stereotypen des Orients sich im *Quartet* wieder finden. Andererseits wird Leila Hosnani als Beispiel für *reverse Orientalism* verwendet, indem gezeigt wird, dass sie ihre eigenen Ideen über englische Stereotypen hat. Das verdeutlicht, dass nicht nur Europäer den Orient mit Klischees verbinden sondern dass das Klischeedenken ebenso in der entgegengesetzten Richtung funktioniert.

Wie sich herausstellt, sind fast alle Aspekte des *Quartets* doppeldeutig. Von Alexandria selber, die als orientalische und europäische Stadt dargestellt wird,

aber auch als Prinzessin und Hure, über deren Repräsentantin Justine, bis hin zu Darley, der sich durch seine Beziehungen, hauptsächlich zu Justine aber auch zu anderen Charakteren, entwickeln kann. Weiters ist Durrell's Alexandria in dem *Quartet* teils real, teils fiktiv. Es werden Ortsnamen genannt, die es im echten Alexandria auch gab, und seine Charaktere basieren höchst wahrscheinlich auf Menschen, mit denen Durrell während seines Aufenthaltes in der Stadt Kontakt hatte.

Ausserdem finden sich im *Quartet* tatsächlich Klischees wieder, die der Westen dem Orient nachsagt, auch wenn diese oberflächlich und seicht sind. Doch diese Klischees entstanden nicht aus dem Nichts. Es muss also Menschen im damaligen Alexandria gegeben haben, die diesen Stereotypen entsprachen. Der Orient wird seit langer Zeit mit Sex gleichgestellt und im *Quartet* kommt dies sehr deutlich heraus. Die Charaktere, und in der Tat das *Quartet*, werden durch Sex vorangetrieben. Sex in all seinen Formen ist ein beständiger Aspekt der das ganze Werk durchdringt.

Durrell schafft es, Alexandria als exotische zweideutige Stadt darzustellen, in der die verschiedenartigsten Menschen leben, seien es Briten wie Darley oder korrupte Ägypter. Durrell verwendet die Einheimischen und die ägyptische Landschaft als Hintergrund, und gibt dem *Quartet* dadurch seine Essenz. Durrell hat es durch das *Quartet* geschafft, Alexandria zu verewigen.

## Lebenslauf

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