The Cinnamon Peeler Study Guide

The Cinnamon Peeler by Michael Ondaatje

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Introduction

Michael Ondaatje first published "The Cinnamon Peeler" in 1982 as part of his book *Running in the Family*. "The Cinnamon Peeler" appeared later in Ondaatje's collection *Secular Love*. As most critics note, this collection was influenced heavily by events in Ondaatje's life, namely his 1979 separation from his wife, Kim Jones, and his subsequent affair with another woman, Linda Spalding. The book is arranged into four different sections, which collectively detail the pain of Ondaatje's breakup and his path through despair to newfound love. "The Cinnamon Peeler" is located in the fourth and final section, "Skin Boat," and is one of the poems that glorifies love. In the poem, the speaker gives a very sensual description of his wife and their courtship, using the exotic qualities of cinnamon, especially its potent scent, to underscore his love and desire. Ondaatje's use of cinnamon, a plant found in his native Sri Lanka, indicates his desire to focus on his former homeland. Ondaatje, who has been a Canadian citizen since he was a teenager, often includes discussions of Sri Lanka in his works. Although critics responded favorably to the poems in *Secular Love*, this response pales in comparison to the critical and popular response that Ondaatje received for his third novel, *The English Patient* (1992), which was adapted into a blockbuster film in 1996. A copy of the poem can be found in *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems*, which was published in paperback by Vintage International in 1997.

Author Biography

Michael Ondaatje was born on September 12, 1943, in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). After his parents separated in 1948, Ondaatje's mother took him and two siblings to England, where Ondaatje attended Dulwich College. He was not satisfied with his British education and immigrated to Canada in 1962, at the age of 19, where he lived with his brother in Quebec. He attended Bishop's University in Lennoxville from 1962 to 1964, where he began to study English literature and write his first works. During this time, he met Kim Jones, wife of poet D. D. Jones, who some say was Ondaatje's mentor. Kim left her husband and four children in 1964 to marry Ondaatje, and the couple had two children together. The same year, he transferred to the University of Toronto, where he graduated with his bachelor's degree in 1965. He pursued his master's degree from Queen's University and graduated from there in 1967.

Also in 1967, Ondaatje began teaching at the University of Western Ontario and published his first book, *The Dainty Monsters*, a poetry collection. It was not until the publication of his third book, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), that Ondaatje received widespread recognition. The unique book combined poetry, prose, drawings, and other selections to bring the legendary American outlaw to life. The book won a Canadian Governor General's Award, an award that Ondaatje has won several times since. Ondaatje continued to impress critics with his poetry, publishing several collections over the next two decades, including *Rat Jelly* (1973) and *Secular Love* (1984). The latter was written during the period following Ondaatje's 1979 separation from Jones, when Ondaatje started living with Linda Spalding. The collection includes the poem "The Cinnamon Peeler."

Up until the early 1990s, Ondaatje was primarily regarded as a poet, although critics also gave him good marks for his two novels: *Coming through Slaughter* (1976) and *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987). In 1992, however, Ondaatje received worldwide recognition for his third novel, *The English Patient*, which was adapted as a blockbuster film in 1996. Since then, Ondaatje has been associated primarily with this book. His other works include a collection of poetry entitled *Handwriting* (1998) and a novel entitled *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Ondaatje has also served as a professor at York University's Glendon College in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"The Cinnamon Peeler" sets up a hypothetical situation right from the first line: "If I were a cinnamon peeler." Right away, readers can determine that the speaker is not a cinnamon peeler, but that the poem will discuss what might happen if he was. In the last three lines of the stanza, the poem takes on erotic overtones, as the speaker notes, "I would ride your bed / and leave the yellow bark dust / on your pillow." The verb "ride" is inherently innocent, but when it is combined with the word "bed," it becomes very sexual in nature. It is clear that the speaker is writing a sexual poem to his lover. The "yellow bark dust" that the speaker refers to is the dust that a cinnamon peeler has on his body after harvesting the spice, which comes from the bark of a specific type of evergreen tree that is Sri Lankan in origin. By talking about leaving the bark dust on his lover's pillow, the speaker sets up a graphic image of the couple making love and the man leaving evidence of his presence by the work-related cinnamon dust that falls onto the bed in the process.

Stanza 2

The poem gets increasingly erotic in the first line of the second stanza, as the speaker describes, in detail, which areas of the woman's body would smell of cinnamon dust. In addition to referencing the woman's anatomy, the speaker also notes how the cinnamon smell would mark the woman as his wife even when she left the house. To further emphasize the power of this scent, the speaker gives an extended example of blind people stumbling from the potency of the odor. The speaker uses two images of water to indicate that the woman could not wash away the scent.

Whether the woman gets slightly wet from the light stream of water that falls from a rain gutter or thoroughly drenched from the torrential downpour of a monsoon, the scent of the man's profession, which also serves as a symbol of his love and desire, will stick to the woman. A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. Symbols appear in literature in one of two ways. They can be local symbols, meaning that their symbolism is only relevant within a specific literary work. They can also be universal symbols, meaning that their symbolism is based on traditional associations that are widely recognized, regardless of context. The poem relies on the former type. While the speaker starts out discussing the potent scent of cinnamon, it becomes clear through his erotic descriptions that within the context of the poem, cinnamon is a symbol for sexual desire.

Stanza 3

In the third stanza, the poem gets even more erotic. Whereas the second stanza talked about the woman's "breasts and shoulders," now the speaker is moving lower on the

woman's body, indicating more body parts that his cinnamon scent would inhabit. The speaker mentions the woman's thigh. A woman's upper thigh has inherent erotic overtones. The use of the words "smooth pasture" increases the eroticism of the speaker's statement, because it highlights the smooth texture of the woman's skin. Smooth skin is another anatomical aspect that is used to indicate eroticism. In the third line, the speaker gives one of the most graphic descriptions in the poem: "neighbour to your hair." Although hair could normally mean the hair on a person's head, the fact that the speaker is talking about hair near the woman's upper thigh identifies it as the woman's pubic hair.

This reference is blatantly sexual, but the speaker only lingers here for a moment, before traveling on to the next body part, the woman's back. While not as blatantly sexual as a woman's pubic hair, a woman's back is still inherently sensuous, as is his last anatomical description of the woman's ankle. Although America's emphasis on sexual freedom has taken away the power and mystery of a woman's ankle, in some cultures, where women are expected to wear more clothes, the sight of even an ankle can be a very sensuous experience. The speaker sums up all of his descriptions in the last two lines of the stanza: "You will be known among strangers / as the cinnamon peeler's wife." In other words, the cinnamon peeler's scent, the symbol of his sexual desire and the marital connection that he shares with this woman, has marked this woman so much that even strangers will recognize the woman as the cinnamon peeler's wife.

Stanza 4

At this point, the poem switches gears. Up until now, it has functioned on a hypothetical level, as this married couple engages in a game of roleplaying. Now it switches to a description of the couple's actual past. As he notes in the first line of the poem, the speaker is not a cinnamon peeler. The speaker's love for his wife, however, is as strong as the love that this hypothetical cinnamon peeler has for his wife. In fact, the poet uses the hypothetical example of the cinnamon peeler for a reason. He wants to emphasize his desire to his wife in a symbolic sense, as if it is literally a scent that can be noticed by others. As the poem shifts in this stanza, the reader can see why the speaker goes to all this trouble. The speaker is remembering back to a time before he and his wife were married, when they were dating. He was afraid to look at his beloved, because he did not want to betray his feelings for her. Even more importantly, the speaker says he could never touch his beloved. If he were to do this, it would be like the cinnamon peeler who touches his wife and leaves evidence of his desire, in the form of cinnamon dust. The speaker would not necessarily leave physical evidence of his desire such as dust by touching his beloved. Yet, as he notes in the next line, others, especially his beloved's family, would be able to literally smell his desire for her.

Because the mark of his desire is so potent, the speaker must take further steps to hide the scent of this desire, even beyond not looking at or touching his beloved. The narrator says that he must hide the potent scent of his desire by masking it behind other potent scents.

Stanza 5

In the fifth stanza, the speaker switches gears again. Up until now, he has spoken about the hypothetical cinnamon peeler and his wife making love, and he has described how he was unable to even look or touch his beloved while they were dating, for fear of betraying his desire. Now, however, he talks about his own experience making love to his beloved while they were dating. The speaker remembers a day during their marriage when he and his beloved went swimming together. The poet notes that when they were both immersed in the water together, "you could hold me and be blind of smell." In other words, when the couple were trying to hide their desire from her family during their courtship, it was difficult to hide its potency. In addition, they were both focused on it because their desire is a forbidden thing, which makes it that much harder to resist. In this private swim together as a married couple, however, they could be "blind of smell" because they had no reason to hide their desire anymore. They were fulfilling their desire, which takes away its smell, at least temporarily. This idea sets up the rest of the poem.

Stanza 6

This line leads into the sixth stanza, which starts out with a statement from the speaker's beloved.When one reads the first line of this stanza, it might seem as if the woman is saying that the speaker has literally made love to other women. One can interpret the poem this way. Yet, the speaker's choice of a "grass cutter" and "lime burner" is significant, and suggests a different interpretation. Both of these professions, unlike the profession of cinnamon peeler, involve working with natural substances that have little or no scent. While the scent of fresh-cut grass is unmistakable, it does not have the potency of freshly peeled cinnamon bark. Lime, on the other hand, contrasts even more sharply with cinnamon. Lime is inherently an odorless substance, and the lime burner, who obtains lime from limestone by burning off the carbon dioxide, therefore does not carry the scent of his profession with him to other places.

Because of these choices, it does not seem as if the speaker's beloved is accusing him of sleeping with other women. Instead, it seems as if she is creating a hypothetical situation of her own, to counter her husband's hypothetical cinnamonpeeler situation. She is imagining what it would be like for her lover to be with these other women, who do not carry the scent of their husband's profession, as she would in the hypothetical situation where she is the cinnamon peeler's wife. In the last part of the stanza, the speaker's beloved smells her arms, which no longer carry the scent of their desire.

Stanzas 7-8

The seventh stanza is very short, only two words long: "and knew." Though it is short, it is a powerful stanza. In its short space, it implies that the woman is having a revelation, which is explained in the next stanza. The speaker's wife is continuing both hypothetical situations, saying that it is no good to be without a scent, as a lime burner's daughter is.

She would rather be marked with the scent of her husband's desire. To be otherwise, would be like she was "not spoken to in the act of love" or as if she was "wounded without the pleasure of a scar." The first idea suggests that the lack of strong desire between a couple is the equivalent of mechanical lovemaking without communication. The second idea is more visceral, once again using anatomical associations, although this time the speaker is talking about a wound, which most people would consider an inherently bad thing. Yet, within the context of the poem, even a wound can be a pleasurable experience if it leaves a mark, as the cinnamon peeler leaves a mark on his wife.

Stanza 9

The final stanza wraps up both hypothetical situations. The speaker's wife presents her body to her husband, and the poem once again focuses on a part of the woman's anatomy, her belly. The speaker's wife closes the poem by going along with the roleplaying game that her husband set up in the beginning. She acknowledges herself as his wife and tells her husband: "Smell me." In other words, as the speaker has demonstrated repeatedly throughout the poem, smell and scent are synonymous with desire in the speaker's mind and in this couple's experience. So when the speaker's wife asks him to smell her, she is asking him to desire her. This married couple is rekindling their passion for each other, by drawing on past memories and using a role-playing game where he becomes a cinnamon peeler, and she becomes the cinnamon peeler's wife.

Summary

"The Cinnamon Peeler" is Michael Ondaatje's sensual poem of the erotic love a man possesses for his wife. The poem is written from the man's point of view as he speaks to his wife. The man poses a scenario in which he is a cinnamon peeler. In this scenario, the dust and residue from the profession will leave their traces on his wife's body as well as on their entire life. The "yellow bark dust" will remain on their bed, and the woman's breasts and shoulders will emanate with the essence of the spice so that when she walks through the market everyone will know that her husband's hands have left their scented touch.

Even blind men will be able to see the man's effect on the woman as she approaches, and no attempt to wash under rain gutters or in a monsoon will ever erase the potent scent from her body. The man mentions specific body locations that will be particularly vulnerable to his touch, including the woman's upper thigh and the area around her pubic hair. Even the woman's ankles will bear the man's invisible touch.

The man moves from a description of the act of loving his wife to the longing felt before marriage when touching is forbidden and glances are stolen. Realizing that the woman's mother and brothers will be able to smell his desire, the man does many things with his hands to throw off the scent. He buries his hands in saffron, holds them over a tar pit and even helps the honey workers gather their fluid crop.

The poem transitions to a situation between the two lovers, who are swimming. The woman is temporarily free of any trace of the cinnamon scent and realizes that the scent of nothingness is how the wives of grass cutters and the daughters of lime burners must feel. The woman appreciates her own good fortune and laments for the other women, who never know the enduring scent left by a lover. To the woman, this can be likened to being wounded without having any scar to show as evidence. At the end of the poem the woman invites her husband to touch her belly, and declaring herself to be the cinnamon peeler's wife, she beckons him to smell her.

Analysis

The author's Sri Lankin heritage is the background for the sensuous nature of this poem, and he utilizes a precious island spice as the symbolism for his desire. There are other indicators that define the island setting including the mention of markets, saffron, honey and a monsoon. Culturally, an island lifestyle is implied when the man discusses not being able to look directly at the young woman before marriage and the ever present mother and "rough brothers" who hover around the man's beloved.

The role of cinnamon in the culture of Sri Lanka is important, and therefore it holds importance in the poem. The spice, although becoming more readily grown in more countries, was once grown only in Sri Lanka, adding to the spice's world value yet availability to natives. Cinnamon also involves several steps in the harvesting process

so that it is not easily attained, and it definitely leaves a fine golden dust and strong scent on those who work with it. The spice's value and exclusivity and value to the rest of the world is symbolic, as the man shares its rare essence with the woman he loves, making her feel treasured as well. The treasure of cinnamon is also a treasure exclusive to the culture that they share.

The two primary themes of the poem are erotic desire and love. As a game of love, the narrator poses the idea that he is a cinnamon peeler and describes how the traces of his hands would be left on his wife's body as evidence of his passion for her. The pillow on her bed would have traces of cinnamon dust indicating the marks left by his body in their bed. The scent of cinnamon also symbolizes his erotic desire, which completely envelops the woman in passion. All the physical parts of her body would be marked with this very distinct aroma.

The poem has a relaxed lyrical pace and an unblinking erotic tone consistent with the natural sensuality of island life. The man talks of his wife's shoulders and breasts and moves to the more intimate parts of her body and the "smooth pasture" of her upper thigh "neighbour to your hair." Even the descriptions of the woman's back and ankle, less obviously sexual areas, are sensually enticing in this context.

As the poem progresses, the author switches verb tense to indicate the timing of the action. At the beginning, the narrator posits the idea of "If I were a cinnamon peeler," which sets up the hypothetical situation. "You could never walk through markets without the profession of my fingers floating over you..." continues the imagined scenario. The narrator reflects on his passion before marriage when he "could hardly glance at you" and "buried my hands in saffron..." This change to the past tense indicates a new phase of the poem.

The element of scent is important for what it imparts as well as for its absence. When the woman bemoans the fate of the grass cutter's wife and the lime burner's daughter, it is because those two elements have a clean, crisp scent as opposed to the depth and richness of the brown cinnamon. The woman knows that her love life must be richer and more passionate than the women who smell of crisper scents.

The other women have nothing that lingers to remind them of their passion. To the woman in the poem, the other women must not be caressed or spoken to tenderly during the act of love and must have a sense of being wounded with no scar to remind them of the event, however pleasurable.

At the end, the woman takes the initiative as opposed to the man's assertiveness throughout the body of the poem. In the last stanza, the narrator says "You touched your belly to my hands... and said I am the cinnamon peeler's wife. Smell me." This is a shift from the woman being the passive receiver to taking a more active role in the lovemaking, almost as if the cinnamon has magical properties and aphrodisiac effects are at play. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant, as the whole poem is hypothetical and part of the couple's imaginary love play.

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Themes

Love

It is apparent from the beginning that this is a love poem from the speaker to his beloved. The use of the word "your" in the second line, especially within its sexual context indicates that the speaker is addressing his poem to a woman. This form of direct address is common in love poetry. As the poem continues, readers can see that the speaker is creating a hypothetical situation, a type of role-playing game in which he and his wife are such passionate lovers that their desire leaves a scent that others can notice. In addition to discussing this passionate scent, the poem also explores the path of love itself, from their courtship to their current marital relationship. The speaker discusses the time period during which they were dating. In this time of newfound love, their passion is so strong that they have to be careful around the woman's family members, for fear that they will betray their true emotions.

Sexual Desire

While the poem is a love poem, it is also specifically about the speaker's sexual desire for his wife and their desire for each other. From the first sexual reference in the beginning of the poem, where the hypothetical cinnamon peeler leaves evidence of his desire on his wife's pillow in the form of cinnamon dust, the poem gets increasingly more erotic. The strength of the speaker's desire is expressed in several ways, most notably as a scent that can be noticed by the "blind" and even by "strangers."

The Power of Scent

Unfortunately, the speaker notes that when they were dating this scent could also be sensed by the woman's mother and brothers. Smell is a powerful sense, which is used in the context of the poem to reveal hidden feelings and intentions. To keep these feelings hidden, the speaker had to mask his intentions behind even more powerful scents, including saffron and honey. In addition to revealing hidden feelings, the poem also indicates that scent evokes strong feelings and memories. Although the poem starts out as a hypothetical situation, the speaker's discussion of the cinnamon peeler, and the power of the cinnamon scent□a symbol of this man's desire□causes the speaker to think back on his own memories of the desire that he felt for his wife during their courtship.

Style

Setting

The poem takes place in Sri Lanka, a fact that can be determined by the author's background□he is a native of Sri Lanka□and by the importance of cinnamon in the poem, not to mention the reference to the cinnamon-peeler profession. Cinnamon is native to Sri Lanka, and a cinnamon peeler is a type of Sri Lankan agricultural harvester who cuts down the evergreen tree that produces cinnamon. The cinnamon peeler harvests the spice from the bark of this tree, in the process often getting the "yellow bark dust" on his hands. The poem contains other clues that indicate a Sri Lankan setting, including a discussion of "markets." Many Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, conduct business in rural markets, especially when it comes to the sale of agricultural products such as cinnamon. Likewise, the poem's reference to a "monsoon" indicates that the poem takes place in one of the Asian tropical countries that experience these torrential downpours. The setting is very important to the poem, not just because of the use of the cinnamon peeler but also because Sri Lanka□and the spice trade□have often been associated with the exotic. As a result, its setting gives the poem a more exotic feel.

Imagery

The poem also relies on both direct and subtle imagery to underscore its focus on love and sexual desire. Direct imagery includes the many references to the anatomy of the speaker's wife. The speaker talks about her "breasts and shoulders," the "smooth pasture" of her "upper thigh," and other aspects of his wife's anatomy throughout the poem. This imagery is as potent as the scents that the speaker is trying to describe, and it is clear that his intent is to underscore the strength of his sexual desire. The poem also includes blatant imagery in the references to making love, as in the first stanza when the speaker notes "I would ride your bed," or in the fifth stanza, when he notes "I touched you in water / and our bodies remained free." There is little left to the imagination for the reader, who understands that the speaker is describing sexual experiences with his wife.

Yet, the poem also relies on more subtle forms of imagery, such as the images that the speaker uses to describe how hard it would be for his wife to lose the scent of her desire. This scent is so strong that the woman could not wash it away. Other subtle images include the steps that the speaker must take to hide this desire, which include burying his hands "in saffron."

Tense

The speaker switches verb tenses throughout the poem, which helps the reader understand what parts of the poem are hypothetical and what parts belong in the

couple's actual past. In the first stanza, the speaker says "If I were a cinnamon peeler," and the use of the word "were" indicates that this is a hypothetical situation. Likewise, over the next few stanzas, the speaker continues using verb tenses that underscore the hypothetical quality of the situation. For example, in the second stanza, he notes that parts of his wife's anatomy "would" reek and that even though she "might" try to wash away the scent of his desire, she could not.

In the fourth stanza, however, the discussion switches from a hypothetical situation to the couple's actual past. This fact can be determined by the specific context of the word "could." The word "could" on its own can be used in a hypothetical situation, as it is in the second stanza, where the speaker notes that if his wife was the cinnamon peeler's wife, she "could" not walk down the street unnoticed. The use of the word "could" in the fourth stanza is different, however, thanks to the next line, "before marriage," which qualifies the statement and places it within a specific time in the past. The speaker also uses past tenses that are more direct, such as the first two lines in the fifth stanza.

Historical Context

Conflict and Transition in Sri Lanka

While Ondaatje focuses on the potency of his desire in "The Cinnamon Peeler," a poem that is set in Sri Lanka, the actual situation in the country was not ideal in the mid-1980s. During this time period, Sri Lanka was undergoing a period of political unrest, as various ethnic groups vied for power. The United National Party (UNP), a coalition of nationalist and communal parties, had come to power in the late 1970s, the latest of many times that this party had been in power. Yet, the authority and sovereignty of this government was constantly challenged by various radical groups, most notably the Tamils, who set up bases in jungle areas of Sri Lanka as well as in certain parts of Tamil Nadu□an Indian state. Although the UNP-led Sri Lankan government attempted to suppress these rebellions, it was not necessary. The common people, many of whom were Sinhalese, formed into mobs and attacked the Tamils themselves. As a result, many Tamil groups fled to Tamil Nadu.

The Spice Trade in Sri Lanka

Even while all of this fighting was taking place, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon) continued to play a huge part in the spice trade. Sri Lanka has been synonymous with the Eastern spice trade for thousands of years, and the island of Ceylon has been a central trading point for spices during this time period. In fact, the spice that Ondaatje focuses on in his poem, cinnamon, is a spice that is native to Sri Lanka. It comes from *Cinnamomum zeylanicum*, a form of evergreen tree that belongs to the laurel family. Cinnamon has always had exotic associations, and has been used in various cultures for spiritual rites and even witchcraft. In the modern world, it is used mainly as a flavoring, especially in baked goods. Its oil is also used in liqueur, perfume, and even drugs. Yet, despite the widespread use of cinnamon worldwide, its importance as a Sri Lankan export□and in fact the importance of other Sri Lankan agricultural products, such as tea and rubber□declined by the mid-1980s, when Ondaatje was writing "The Cinnamon Peeler." While these products were still being exported, they were no longer the number one export, a designation that was held by textiles and garments.

Critical Overview

Ondaatje's *Secular Love* has not received as much attention as his other works, most notably his 1992 novel, *The English Patient*, which became a critical and popular success, especially after it was adapted into a Hollywood film in 1996. Nevertheless, some critics have commented on *Secular Love*, and a handful have also commented specifically on "The Cinnamon Peeler." The overwhelming majority of critics discuss *Secular Love* in relation to the author's life, most notably the marriage breakup and new relationship that Ondaatje experienced while he was writing the poetry collection. Ann Mandel states in her entry on Ondaatje for *Dictionary of Literary Biography* that "In *Secular Love* . . . the pain of the marriage breakup and the sensual and emotional growth of new love make their way into the poems." In fact, as Lucille King- Edwards notes in *Books in Canada*, this autobiographical focus was not evident in his earlier works. King-Edwards writes "Until *Running in the Family* and now *Secular Love*, the passion that Ondaatje has put into his poems and novels has been projected onto characters from the myths of his imagination."

In *Secular Love*, this autobiographical focus is apparent even from the book's structure, which is another of the elements upon which most critics focus. Sam Solecki, in his article in the *Canadian Forum*, notes the four sections of the book that chronicle "the break-up of a marriage and a way of life, the poet's own near breakdown and finally, after what one section calls 'Rock Bottom,' his recovery and return through the love of another woman." In this structure, "The Cinnamon Peeler" falls within the fourth and final section, "Skin Boat," which Solecki calls the "affirmative, celebratory section."

As for "The Cinnamon Peeler" itself, critics have interpreted the poem in different ways. In his article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Michael Hulse notes that the poem shares the same "constant theme" as much of Ondaatje's other work. Hulse writes that "Above all, the breakthrough into communication is found instinctually in sexual harmony." On the other hand, reviewers such as Douglas Barbour, in his entry on Ondaatje for *Twayne's World Authors Series Online*, note the comedic aspects of the poem. Barbour states that the poem contains a "subtle comedy of marriage," which, when placed within the overall context of *Secular Love*, transforms it "into part of the personal discourse of confession this book sometimes admits to being."

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Ondaatje's use of structure to add to the poem's sexual overtones.

When one first reads Ondaatje's "The Cinnamon Peeler," it is clear that the poem is about sex, specifically, the speaker's sexual desire for his wife, which he rekindles through a role-playing game. In this game, the speaker poses a hypothetical situation where he is a cinnamon peeler and his wife is therefore marked physically by the scent of his profession. This cinnamon scent, indeed, scent in general, takes on very sexual overtones as the poem progresses. In fact, the poem needs no help from any additional poetic techniques to underscore its sexual theme. Yet, Ondaatje deliberately constructs his poem in ways that heighten its sexual overtones.

Poets are some of the most particular writers in all of literature. Since they are working with a much smaller canvas, space is at a premium, and so every word must count. In addition, poets often structure their poems in specific ways to achieve a desired effect. This structure can take place on the macro level, as in the way that the poet organizes stanzas and gives the poem its overall structure. It can also take place on the micro level, as in the way that the poet breaks certain lines so that they achieve maximum impact. In "The Cinnamon Peeler," Ondaatje relies on both of these techniques.

From a structural standpoint, Ondaatje takes his readers through two time periods, a hypothetical future and an actual past. The first, the hypothetical future, consists of stanzas one through three. In these three stanzas, beginning with the setup line "If I were a cinnamon peeler," Ondaatje creates an extended example of how his desire would literally coat his wife like a spice, if he were a cinnamon peeler. Throughout this example, Ondaatje increases the eroticism of the poem with each successive stanza, moving from general to specific details, as if he is building up his desire over the course of this opening section. In the first stanza, he briefly mentions a lovemaking session, "I would ride your bed," which some readers might think is risqué. Yet, this direct approach is not nearly as sensuous as the little details that Ondaatje adds in successive lines and stanzas. The first of these details, "the yellow bark dust / on your pillow," paints a very potent image of the cinnamon peeler and his wife after making love, during which he has literally left the sign of his profession on his wife's pillow.

The second stanza gets more specific, and focuses on the wife's travels outside of the home, where the evidence of their lovemaking—and of her husband's desire—would be clear. In this stanza, Ondaatje moves from the sterile image of the pillow, an inanimate object, to a brief discussion of her anatomy, her "breasts and shoulders." Although, since she is walking "through markets," one assumes that these parts of her anatomy are covered. That does not mean that the stanza is without eroticism. Ondaatje sets up a potent image in this stanza of a desire so strong that its scent can make blind people "stumble certain of whom they approached" and which cannot be washed away, even by the downpour of a "monsoon."

The third stanza takes readers back to the bedroom, but this time the woman's clothes are off, and the poet is describing various parts of his wife's anatomy, starting with her "upper thigh," which he calls a "smooth pasture," a description that heightens its erotic effect. He notes that this smooth pasture is "neighbour to your hair," a reference to the woman's pubic hair, and then discusses her "back" and "ankle." At the end of this anatomical inventory, the poet notes that even "among strangers," she will be known as "the cinnamon peeler's wife."

At the end of these first three stanzas, readers can see that Ondaatje is exploring sexual desire in depth, and is using his poem's structure to heighten this effect. In the second half of the poem, Ondaatje switches gears from the hypothetical future to the actual past of the couple in the poem. Although these last six stanzas are not nearly as salacious as the first three in the poem, they do continue to underscore the eroticism of the poem, once again through their use of specific details. For example, in the fourth stanza, the speaker notes that the scent of his desire during their courtship was so strong that he needed to mask it behind scents that were even stronger, such as "saffron" and "smoking tar," for fear that her "keen nosed mother" would discover this desire.

This trend continues into the remaining five stanzas, which are all organized around a moment in the couple's past when they were swimming together after they were married. Readers can tell that it is, in fact, after they were married by a clue that Ondaatje provides at the end of the fourth stanza. Here, Ondaatje includes an ellipsis, a form of punctuation that generally implies something has been removed. In poetry, this punctuation mark is often used to indicate the passage of time. So, in the first three stanzas, the poet was talking about a hypothetical future; in the fourth stanza, he flashes back briefly to the past to examine an intense memory of his desire for his wife during their courtship; and, in the last five stanzas, Ondaatje flashes forward again, this time to a lovemaking session that the couple has while swimming together. In this concluding section of the poem, Ondaatje has his characters, the speaker and his wife, reconnect with the desire that they have felt in the past. These stanzas wrap up the poem by connecting with the first stanza in which the speaker is role-playing as if he were a cinnamon peeler. In the final stanza, the speaker's wife comes full circle in this roleplaying game, telling her husband that she is "the cinnamon / peeler's wife. Smell me." In this short statement, the wife is indicating her willingness to play along with the role-playing game and rekindle their desire.

Besides this overall structure, Ondaatje also works in smaller structural ways to increase the sexual overtones of the poem, namely in his use of line breaks. Ondaatje uses these line breaks to increase the emphasis on certain statements. For example, in the second line of the first stanza, he notes "I would ride your bed." By ending the line here, the poet emphasizes this act, giving it more impact on its own, than if he was to tack on the next line "and leave the yellow bark dust." The statement given the most emphasis in the poem is the two-word stanza, "and knew." Ondaatje separates this part of the poem from the rest to heighten the sense of revelation that the woman has over the necessity of their desire.

In some cases, Ondaatje's emphasis also leads the reader to think that the poet is talking about something else. The most notable example of this technique is in the third stanza. In the first two lines of this stanza, the speaker has been describing his wife's upper thigh, which he says is "neighbour to your hair," a direct reference to his wife's pubic hair. Since he has, thus far, been moving around his wife's body as he describes her anatomy, the lines directly after this, "or the crease," seem calculated on Ondaatje's part. It seems as if he wants his readers to think, at least for a moment, that the crease he is referring to is his wife's vagina. Since he breaks this line abruptly after the word "crease," it makes it seem like this word is meant to stand on its own. Yet, Ondaatje only lingers on this concept for a minute before further explaining that the crease he is referring to is the crease "that cuts your back." Still, this playful line break suggests something much more and is in line with the other techniques that Ondaatje has used in the poem to increase its eroticism. Another example takes place in the sixth line of the second stanza, where he notes "though you might bathe." Although the speaker is talking about bathing in the sense of getting wet from "rain gutters" or a "monsoon," the word "bathe" sets up an image of a woman taking a bath, an act that commonly has erotic associations.

In the end, Ondaatje does everything he can to make the most erotic poem possible. On the surface, one can point to blatant examples of love- making and female anatomy. Yet, it is in the subtle structural details that Ondaatje's true art, and his ability to spice up an already erotic poem, makes itself known. Ultimately, this technique becomes as potent as the cinnamon spice that Ondaatje uses to indicate the strength of his speaker's desire.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Cinnamon Peeler," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

Toronto is an editor at the Pennsylvania State University Press. In this essay, Toronto discusses how cultural context affects the reading of Ondaatje's poem.

Ondaatje's "The Cinnamon Peeler" is a powerfully aesthetic portrayal of erotic love in which the transfer of scent, in this case that of a particularly potent spice, becomes a public and private declaration of union. The surface of the poem can hardly be scratched, however, before running into the signs of a clearly male-dominated society, with women being defined in terms of the males in their lives. The cinnamon peeler's wife is an obvious example, but there is also the lime burner's daughter and the grass cutter's wife. The woman referenced directly, not indirectly through a male, is the cinnamon peeler's mother-in-law, though her identity is still only gained through a woman who is already defined in terms of a man.

The lack of distinct identities also quickly becomes apparent. The men in the poem are only identified through their occupations□the cinnamon peeler, the grass cutter, the lime burner. Again, there is only one occurrence, in the fourth stanza, of brothers being defined without occupational terms, and, as with the mother, they are only defined in terms that are relational, which lead back, through the wife, to the cinnamon peeler. With men only defined by what they do, women are even further removed from any sort of personal identity since they are only referenced through men.

These characteristics might well agitate readers within modern Western cultures. Yet, Western readers are the target audience of the poem, demonstrated by the fact that it has been published within a novel as well as two collections of poetry in England, Canada, and the United States. When the poem was first published in 1982, these three countries had already made great strides toward gender equality. Each had made strides toward increasing opportunities for women in the workforce, progressive equalization of pay, and even electing women rising to high political positions, as with Margaret Thatcher, who became Great Britain's first female prime minister in 1979. Great value was also placed on individuality. Pop psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson had long since made their award-winning film, *Journey into Self* (1968). Self-help books already comprised a sizeable genre in the publishing market. The prevailing sentiments of the time seem quite contrary to those exhibited in "The Cinnamon Peeler." However, "The Cinnamon Peeler" is clearly not viewed so simplistically. Otherwise, it would not be nearly as well respected. Cultural context plays a large role in making the sexism and identity loss easier to tolerate. As it is examined, a subtext of community and tradition is discovered.

"The Cinnamon Peeler" appeared for the first time in *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje's semiautobiographical novel about his experiences during two long-term visits to the country of his origin, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon). It can safely be assumed that this poem portrays a Sri Lankan cinnamon peeler. It is also likely that he is Sinhalese, which is the dominant ethnicity on the island. Sri Lankan society is infused with a hierarchical caste system. The caste hierarchies of South Asia are difficult to define and can vary

significantly. Tamara Gunasekera offers one definition in *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism: Caste, Class and Power in Sinhalese Peasant Society*:

Castes are defined as groups possessing differential
degrees of social honour and prestige. These groups
place restrictions on marriage with individuals in
other such groups, and membership in them is hereditary,
depending on one or both parents being members
of a given caste. In societies where caste is
present, therefore, social honour and prestige or status
accrue to an individual by virtue of his birth in a
particular caste. Thus, in such societies, the status hierarchy
consists of the caste hierarchy.

"The Cinnamon Peeler" alludes to several specific Sinhalese castes, which are often associated with occupation: the cinnamon peeler caste, the honey gatherer caste, the grass cutter caste, and the lime burner caste. The men of the cinnamon peeler caste, known in Sinhalese as Salagama, were all cinnamon peelers traditionally, though it is no longer necessarily the case today, or when Ondaatje was writing the poem. The Salagama is a somewhat prestigious caste. They are also fairly numerous. Reinterpreting the poem in this light brings out rich and beautiful connotations that soften the patriarchal and labor-oriented identities.

The first stanza evokes passionate, almost violent lovemaking with the line "I would ride your bed." Using the verb "ride" connotes a way in which humans exert their will over an animal, like a horse. Replacing the woman with "your bed" continues to dehumanize and objectify the cinnamon peeler's wife. However, if the focus is shifted to the man emitting yellow bark dusk, though it still implies the marking of territory and ownership, it can also signify the bringing of his wife into the fold of the cinnamon peeler caste. The act of love allows her to gain an entire community, a community that will be able to recognize her, according to the concepts stated in Janice Jiggins's *Caste and Family in the Politics of the Sinhalese*: "[Sinhalese] society possesses an intimacy . . . that enables members of the same nominal caste to recognize each other as part of the same community." The riding of the bed becomes necessary for the sufficient broadcast of the sign of the Salagama.

The phrase "profession of my fingers / floating over you" in the second stanza, presumably the smell of cinnamon, could be interpreted as a type of claim to ownership. Within the context of caste, however, it can also be a proclamation of community and family, which provides additional measures of safety and security because to deal with one caste member is to deal with them all. As Jiggins states, castes are known "at times to act together, and to display a common response as a group to the demands and attitudes of other castes." The following stanza continues this idea by laying out the cinnamon peeler's wife's body in terms of land and urbanization, implying that she has been incorporated into something much larger than herself. This phenomenon is described by Jiggins as follows: "families are known to members of the caste throughout the island, and to varying degrees, each major caste has representatives in public life

who offer patronage and seek to wield influence on its members' behalf." The divvying up of her body is not merely another way to objectify. It parallels the regional spread a caste can have throughout the island while still maintaining connection.

The fourth stanza makes a stronger statement when seen in the context of the Sinhalese caste society. With only a little extrapolation, the reason for the cinnamon peeler disguising the scent of his hands is clear: his future mother-in-law has a keen sense of smell and would have been able to detect the slightest physical contact between the lovers, which was clearly off limits. These circumstances bring with them a certain amount of charm and humor to which people in many different cultures can relate. By looking at the Sinhalese caste society view on marriage, another idea materializes. Jiggins puts forth the following view:

Kinship and property descend in both the male and
female lines, and marriage is held to establish a kinship
bond not only between the husband and wife but
between the kinsmen by marriage. Marriage is thus
traditionally very much viewed as an alliance; it is
sometimes used to reinforce the circle of kinship by
renewing bonds of descent which have grown weak
and to bring back distant relatives into close relationship.

Marriages are more like contractual agreements. They are arranged based on finances and prestige as well as familial and social ties. A marriage based on love and attraction is rare. The fact that the cinnamon peeler literally could not keep his hands off his bride-to-be indicates that something special and out of the ordinary has occurred.

When the lovers touch in the water and "remained free" and "blind of smell," it symbolizes being without caste. Therefore, when the wife jests at the husband's infidelity, infidelity actually having severe consequences among the Sinhalese, she is alluding to the fact that extramarital sex does not come with the full benefits of marital bonds. If the cinnamon peeler were to "touch" or make love to the lime burner's daughter, she would not be brought into the fold of cinnamon peelers but would remain in the lime burner caste.

The cultural reading of the poem lends power to the final stanza. It becomes more than just a woman reveling in the claim made by her husband through the scent of his profession. The cinnamon peeler's wife accepts the gift of an entire caste offered through her husband's love. There are also implications for the couple's posterity, as suggested when the poem reads "You touched / your belly to my hands." Their children will receive all the honor, class distinction, and communal ties of the Salagama, a gift from the mother through her acceptance of it from the father. The cinnamon peeler's wife is also telling her husband that she accepts that her children will be cinnamon peelers. She then invites him to celebrate these gifts with the two words: "Smell me."

Sinhalese caste culture moves the patriarchal domination and identity loss occurring in "The Cinnamon Peeler" farther into the background, making them easier for Western

readers to look past. The fact that the poem starts with "If I were a cinnamon peeler" emphasizes the idea that Ondaatje's readers are outsiders looking in. This is similar to how the protagonist of *Running in the Family* feels, as quoted by Douglas Barbour in *Michael Ondaatje*: "I am the foreigner." However, the sentence is immediately followed by, "I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner." This distaste is somewhat manifest in the first line of the poem, "If I were a cinnamon peeler." It removes the readers, i.e., foreigners, from the characters of the poem by making it the fantasy of a foreigner, rendering any judgments passed on the characters as judgments passed on an outsider. It is the narrator who wants to lose himself in an occupation and the narrator who wishes to dominate and own his lover.

Barbour, in his critical analysis of Ondaatje's works, says "Ondaatje's texts seek to create a sensual and emotional awareness of the other's living, in the midst of his or her experience. To slip into the other body and feel what it's like." In "The Cinnamon Peeler" Ondaatje allows readers to "feel what it's like," especially when viewed through the lens of caste culture. However, he cultivates an awareness of the fact that the reader is still only experiencing art by framing it with the word "if"; it is a piece of art (the fantasy of the narrator) within art (the poem itself). It is as though Ondaatje wants to make it clear that art can only go so far in representing actual experience. Therefore, even as readers come to know how intimacy can be experienced among the Sinhalese, one must remember that one cannot truly know what it is like until one has lived it himself.

Source: Daniel Toronto, Critical Essay on "The Cinnamon Peeler," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Fernando is a Seattle-based editor. In this essay, Fernando argues that Ondaatje's poem explores the complexities of identity and displacement through the use of a mythical identity.

In reviewing Michael Ondaatje's 1991 collection of poetry, *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems*, poet Cyril Dabydeen, referring to the "seemingly distinctive personae" that each poem in the collection seems to have, writes in *World Literature Today* that "Ondaatje essentially creates a mythos about himself." This "mythos"□the creation of new identities□characterizes much of Ondaatje's writing. His best-known example is the nameless, faceless, and nation-less burn victim in his Booker-prize winning novel *The English Patient*. As an immigrant to Canada from the South Asian island nation of Sri Lanka, Ondaatje has been ascribed a variety of often-conflicting identities as an immigrant writer. W. M. Verhoeven, writing about Ondaatje's ethnicity in *Mosaic, a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, cites Arun Muhkerjee's complaint against Ondaatje for pandering to the mainstream and not writing enough about "his otherness." On the other hand, critic Tom Marshall, writing in his text *Harsh and Lovely Land: The Major Canadian Poets and the Making of a Canadian Tradition*, casts Ondaatje as an exotic outsider by calling his work "a heady mixture . . . strange and intriguing to Canadians." In the Canadian magazine *MacLean's*, Brian Johnson simply ignores the question of his ethnic and national identity by proclaiming him "a writer without borders." It is precisely this sense of borderlessness, or displacement, that fuels Ondaatje's work. Like many postcolonial and/or immigrant writers whose identities are indeterminate, Ondaatje is obsessed with identity, and his characteristic myth-making is one method by which his art dissects notions of identity. In his poem "The Cinnamon Peeler," he creates a mythical identity, the cinnamon peeler, through which he explores the issues of identity and displacement.

This poem itself takes the form of a daydream; the narrator wonders aloud to his lover what it would be like if he were someone else. With this first line, tensions and anxieties of identity and displacement are revealed in the sharp contrast drawn between the actual identity of the narrator (which is never revealed) and the person he dreams of becoming□ a cinnamon peeler, one who has a specific and defined place in society.

Cinnamon is a spice that is native to Sri Lanka, a country where, in traditional societies, a man's profession was determined by the caste into which he was born. In such a strict caste system, there was little or no social mobility or mingling between the castes, and professions were handed down father to son through the generations. The world dreamed of by the narrator echoes this narrow, class-conscious society. Here, men are not known by name but rather by their profession and, by extension, their caste. It can be surmised that this imagined cinnamon peeler was born, and will die, a cinnamon peeler.

The absolute unambiguousness of the cinnamon peeler's identity is represented throughout the poem by the pervading odor of cinnamon. The unmistakable pungency

of the spice is with the peeler constantly; he cannot help but "leave the yellow bark dust / on your pillow."

Cinnamon is the source of his livelihood and, thus, of his social identity, the only identity by which he is known. The hyperbolic permanence of the odor of cinnamon then becomes a metaphor for the permanence of the cinnamon peeler's station in life. It represents not only his livelihood, but also his caste and all the societal restrictions his caste places upon him. The cinnamon peeler's narrow and inescapable identity offers a sharp contrast to the nebulous, anonymous narrator who daydreams of being him.

Not only does the odor of cinnamon cling to the man, but it also marks the body of the woman to whom the narrator is speaking. The scent of cinnamon is passed on to her body by the touch of her husband.

It is no accident that the scent of cinnamon, transferred to the woman through the touch of her husband, marks her body as indelibly as it does his, for her identity, too, is imparted by her husband's livelihood and caste. In the society re-imagined in this poem, women play a subordinate role to men and are defined in terms of their relationship to their husbands. Thus, in the poem, one reads not only of "the cinnamon peeler's wife" but also of "the grass cutter's wife" and "the lime burner's daughter." Just as the cinnamon peeler does not have a given name, neither does his wife, but the woman's lack of individual identity holds with it the additional, powerful connotation of the subordination of women as passive possessions.

The theme of woman as possession is evident in the language used by the man to describe how he touches her body. In the third stanza, he describes her body in terms of geography. The narrator literally maps this woman with the scent of cinnamon, much like a colonizer marking his new territory. The narrator imparts the indelible pungency of cinnamon on to her body to mark her as his; the scent of cinnamon thus becomes her identifying feature, as well.

The identities attributed to the characters are constricting, even demeaning by today's western standards. These characters lack even the most basic markers of individuality, and the woman is further demeaned by the lack of recognition of her existence as an individual separate from her husband.

This constricting, seemingly inescapable identity is precisely the mythic identity the narrator not only dreams for himself, but which he also describes in a language of erotic desire. Although cinnamon has been interpreted thus far strictly as a symbol of the characters' inescapable identities, its sensual attributes should not be ignored. Ondaatje turns its pungent odor and the yellow bark dust left on a pillow into the residue of lovemaking. In metaphorically ascribing sensuality and desirability to these identifying roles, it may seem that the narrator is naïvely romanticizing his mythical world and ignoring the oppression of the type of society it mirrors. However, even though the idea of a concrete, socially ascribed identity seems to be idealized by the narrator, it also becomes characterized as a source of oppression. For even as it is described sensually, the presence of cinnamon is almost too overpowering to bear. The woman's breasts and

shoulders "reek" with its scent no matter what he does to rid himself of the smell. In the fifth stanza, the couple resorts to touching each other under water to escape from the scent.

Here, the poem shifts from one extreme to another, from the narrator's dream of bodies marked so strongly by the scent of cinnamon to these individualized bodies, underwater, liberated of the spice's identifying scent. In the water, the couple is free of the earth, and this freedom connotes a complete detachment from the land, their village, their caste.

But, this image is abruptly interrupted by the woman who suddenly "climb[s] the bank." She leaves the water to return to the land. At this instance, the course of the poem shifts. The woman becomes an active participant, asserting her own voice.

Until now, the woman has merely been the narrator's object, directly addressed in the poem but voiceless. She has also been the passive recipient of his touch and identified more as his possession than as an independent individual. When she finally speaks, however, she does not cast off the identity.

Although the woman recognizes the "wounding" effect of the social constrictions placed upon her, she chooses to embrace the resulting scars as her own. By the poem's end, she is able to assert her own individuality despite still being defined only in relation to her husband. Stepping out of passivity and subordination, she asserts herself by "touching [her] belly to [his] hands" and saying: "I am the cinnamon peeler's wife. Smell me."

This final line brings the poem to something of a balance between the desire for social definition and the repulsion against its constrictions. The woman, when she is finally allowed to assert her voice, asserts her individuality in the simplest but clearest of ways: by calling herself "I." She further asserts her individuality by the imperative, "Smell me." Again, she signifies her individuality by using the word "me," and she demands that it be *she* who is sensed, not the cinnamon that outwardly marks her. It is no longer the all-pervasive cinnamon that is being smelled; rather, it is the woman herself who is being recognized. It is her *self* that triumphs over the identifications that mark her, even if her identity is still recognized in relation to her position in society.

"The Cinnamon Peeler" opened with an idealization of a mythical identity. In a way, the woman's ultimate, but all-too-easy individual triumph, is also an idealization. It may be that for Ondaatje, only in the realm of a mythical world can such triumph not only be actualized but sustained, and thus the poem does not ever wake up from the daydream of its imagined world. In closing the poem this way, Ondaatje is able to strike a balance between the tensions of displacement by portraying an evolved, complex self-awareness that asserts individualism even as it recognizes the inextricable part social identity plays in the shaping of the self.

Source: Tamara Fernando, Critical Essay on "The Cinnamon Peeler," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Wakoski discusses the similarities and differences between the poetic styles of Ondaatje and Walt Whitman.

It is ironic that Michael Ondaatje is a writer who exemplifies every aspect of the Whitman tradition in American poetry, for he is a Canadian Writer, though once removed, since he was born and spent his boyhood in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). His exotic story is told in a work of prose, *Running in the Family*, which most people read as if it were poetry. Indeed, Ondaatje is a melting pot of techniques, and his work, as Whitman said of his own, "contains multitudes."

Ondaatje's writing can take the form of intense lyric poems, as in "Kim at Half an Inch":

Brain is numbed
is body touch
and smell, warped light

hooked so close
her left eye
is only a golden blur
her ear a vast
musical instrument of flesh

The moon spills off my shoulder
slides into her face

It also can look like prose but work as poetic language and the retelling or making of myth, as does what is perhaps his best-known book, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which won the Governor-General's award in 1971. Moving in and out of imagined landscape, portrait and documentary, and anecdote and legend, Ondaatje writes for the eye and the ear simultaneously. A critic reviewing his work for *Books in Canada* in 1982 said that "each new book of Michael Ondaatje's seems wholly different from those that preceded it, and wholly the same . . . the characters keep outgrowing the confines of fact."

Like Whitman, Ondaatje is a writer of democratic vistas. He is fascinated by the lives of common people who do uncommon things, such as Billy the Kid, or figures from the world of jazz like Buddy Bolden, the subject of *Coming through Slaughter*. His own family seems impersonally related to him, as with Whitman's eye he sees equally both the large and the small, the close and the distant. Also like Whitman, he is fascinated by the taboos and peculiarities that combine to give him a voice that is unique but also universal.

Unlike Whitman, however, Ondaatje has a dark, witty side that makes his poetic voice irreverent, though rarely abrasive. His language alternates between the short lines of

lyric and the long lines that actually become prose or prose poetry. His work lends itself to theater, and he has made several films as well. Yet his identity is as a poet, for it is the voice that is central in Ondaatje's work, a voice giving him control over both interiors and exteriors, as in these lines from *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*:

I am here with the range for everything
corpuscle muscle hair
hands that need the rub of metal
those senses that
that want to crash things with an axe
that listen to deep buried veins in our palms
those who move in dreams over your women night
near you, every paw, the invisible hooves
the mind's invisible blackout the intricate never
the body's waiting rut.

What Ondaatje also possesses is a gift to draw on the myths of American culture in such a way that the reader can understand the depth of common experience. From a young outlaw of the American West to a strange, neurasthenic New Orleans jazz trumpet player to his eccentric relatives with their pet cobra warming itself on the radio in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje writes with lyric intensity about the differences we all share.

Source: Diane Wakoski, "Ondaatje, Michael," in *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed., edited by Thomas Riggs, St. James Press, 2001, pp. 891-92.

Critical Essay #5

In the following essay, Mandel examines Ondaatje's life and writings.

Winner of two Governor General's awards for poetry, Michael Ondaatje is one of the most brilliant and acclaimed of that impressive group of Canadian poets who first published in the 1960s, a group that includes Margaret Atwood, Gwen MacEwen, and B. P. Nichol. Ondaatje's widely praised books range from collections of tightly crafted lyrics to a narrative mixing poetry, prose, and fictional documentary, and a novel of lyric intensity. Using myth, legend, and anecdote drawn from the Wild West, the jazz world, film, and newspapers, his books have had wide popular appeal while at the same time occasioning considerable analysis by critics in Canada and elsewhere. The world of his poems has been called "surreal, absurd, inchoate, dynamic," "a dark, chaotic, but lifegiving universe," and "the dangerous cognitive region which lies between reportage and myth."

Philip Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), to Philip Mervyn and Enid Gratiaen Ondaatje. His paternal grandfather was a wealthy tea planter with a family estate in Kegalle. Ondaatje remembers "a great childhood" filled with aunts, uncles, many houses, and, judging from the stories he recounts in his autobiographical *Running in the Family* (1982), gossip and eccentricity. In his poem "Light" he tells of his grandmother "who went to a dance in a muslin dress / with fireflies captured and embedded in the cloth," and in "Letters & Other World" he speaks lovingly of his father's life as a "terrifying comedy" of alcohol and outrageous acts. In Colombo Ondaatje attended St. Thomas College. His parents separated in 1948, and in 1952 Ondaatje followed his mother, brother, and sister to London, England, where he attended Dulwich College. Dissatisfied eventually with the English school system which kept him trying "O" levels in maths when he wanted to study English, he immigrated to Canada at the age of nineteen, joining his brother Christopher already living in Montreal.

He entered Bishop's University, Lennoxville, majoring in English and history. It was there, finally able to concentrate on English literature and influenced by a teacher, Arthur Motyer, who "aroused an enthusiasm for literature," that Ondaatje began to write. It was there, too, that simultaneously with his reading of Browning, Eliot, Yeats, and younger modern poets, he came in contact with contemporary Canadian poets, notably D. G. Jones. It was his sense that Canada had "no big history," no weighty literary tradition, which freed Ondaatje to try to write.

A concluding year at the University of Toronto, at the end of which Ondaatje earned his B.A., brought him into contact with poet Raymond Souster, who included Ondaatje's work in his im- portant anthology of young poets, *New Wave Canada* (1966). When Ondaatje won the university's Epstein Award for Poetry poet Wayne Clifford brought him to the attention of Coach House press. Coach House, a small but influential publisher of finely designed books, offered to publish one of Ondaatje's manuscripts, and though he refused then, it was with Coach House that his first collection, *The Dainty Monsters*, was published in 1967. From 1965 to 1967 he completed an M.A. at Queen's University,

with a thesis on Edwin Muir ("because there was very little stuff written on him"), edited a university magazine, the *Mitre*, and wrote many of the poems included in his first book.

In 1964 Ondaatje married Kim Jones, an artist, and two children (Quentin and Griffin, for whom Dennis Lee wrote a children's poem) were born in the next two years. His wife had four children by a previous marriage, and the daily life of family and friends provided subject matter for many poems in his first book and in the 1973 volume *Rat Jelly*.

The Dainty Monsters, its title taken from a poem by Baudelaire, is divided into two sections: "Over the Garden Wall," thirty-six lyrics in which this domestic world collides with, or is transformed into, an exotic, violent, disorienting vision; and "Troy Town," nine poems centered on mythic and historical figures such as Lilith, Philoctetes, and Elizabeth I. The first section, with its plentiful animal imagery, concerns the "civilized magic" of family life. This magic can become extravagant: a dragon gets entangled in the badminton net, manticores clog Toronto sewers, a camel bites off a woman's left breast, pigs become poets, and strange, as yet unrecognized gods alter and reshape landscape, genetics, and the color and mood of a moment. Forces inside the body match forces outside it as all of the external world is involved in human visceral activity. Jungles and gorillas coexist with cocktails and cars, birds fly like watches, clocks swagger, zoo gibbons move like billiard balls, cars chomp on bushes with chrome teeth. Just as the natural world ranges from the domestic dog to the uncaged leopard, so each body or organism, animal or human, has the ability to hold within itself "rivers of collected suns, / jungles of force, coloured birds" as well as urges toward the suicidal refinement of overbreeding. As Sheila Watson has remarked in an article published in *Open Letter* (Winter 1974-1975), Ondaatje "is aware that all life maintains itself by functional specialization of some kind and as often as not loses itself for the same reason." Similarly, poetry is no absolute: it breaks the moment it seeks to record. It must, therefore, be sensitive above all to changes—to the altering moment, to the transforming imagination, and to the demands of an age when, as Ondaatje writes in *The Dainty Monsters*, "bombs are shaped like cedars." In some poems in the second section the poet imagines the characters of legendary figures: Prometheus in his martyred pain attracting mermaids at dusk, Lilith rioting with corrupted unicorns in Eden. Others are monologues in which historical characters—Helen, Elizabeth I—speak their lives and emotions. Formally these poems reflect Ondaatje's interest in longer discontinuous structures, but as far as subject matter is concerned, they represent a conclusion to one stage of his career. As Ondaatje recalls it, his friend the poet David McFadden told him "no more Greek stuff," and he took that advice.

The Dainty Monsters, published in an edition of 500 copies, received more attention than most first books of poetry. Reviewers were especially impressed by Ondaatje's startling imagery. The volume is still in print, as are all his major books.

In *The Dainty Monsters* Ondaatje began his exploration of the intersection of animal, human, and machine worlds and of the intricate meshing of primitive, violent forces and ordered, exact responses. The book also, in direct references and in its imagery,

suggests an interest in the visual arts, especially in the paintings of Henri Rousseau. Ondaatje's second book, *The Man with Seven Toes* (1969), had its origins in a series of drawings the Australian artist Sidney Nolan had done, based on the life of Mrs. Eliza Fraser, a Scottish lady who was shipwrecked off the Queensland coast, lived among aborigines, and was helped to civilization by an escaped convict to whom she promised free- dom, then promptly threatened to betray. Ondaatje began with these drawings and Nolan's series of paintings of Ned Kelly, together with a sense of the Australian landscape as it is evoked in Alan Moorehead's books and a brief account of the Eliza Fraser story of Colin MacInnes. He began working on the poem in the fall of 1966, after spending a hot dusty summer working on a road gang—"the nearest thing to desert I could get"—and completed the poem about the time *The Dainty Monsters* was published. The book, a fine limited edition of 300 copies published by Coach House Press, appeared in 1969.

The Man with Seven Toes is Ondaatje's first major attempt at a long sequence, thirty-three short lyrics and a concluding ballad, prefaced by a striking reproduction of Canadian artist Jack Chambers's *Man and Dog*, which visually suggests something of the loneliness, agony, and violent rich beauty in the poems. The woman of the poems is nameless, left in the desert by a departing train which hums "like a low bird." She comes across fantastically decorated aborigines, is raped, and escapes with Potter, the convict. Their trek takes them through swamp where teeth like "ideal knives" take off some of Potter's toes and snakes with "bracelets of teeth" hang in the leaves; they proceed into the hot plain, where Potter kills a sleeping wolf by biting open its vein. When they are found, the woman says only "god has saved me."

The poems move from a narrator's voice in and out of the minds of the convict and woman, sometimes describing what happens, at others reflecting emotions. In the first poem she is merely a woman too tired to call after the receding train, but in the imagery of her responses to the rape, of the slaughter of animals, of the rape itself, the spilling of semen and blood are confused in ways that fuse terror, beauty, rich colors, sexuality, and death. And after her rescue, resting in the civilized Royal Hotel, she moves her hands over her body, "sensing herself like a map." While she sleeps, a bird is chopped up in a ceiling fan and scattered about the room. Her acceptance of violent death coincides with her acceptance of her sexual body, though she has rejected the moral dimension of her experience.

The poem conveys Ondaatje's acute awareness of song and the spoken voice. It has been performed as a dramatic reading for three speakers, first in Vancouver in 1968, then at Stratford in 1969. The second staging was directed by Paul Thompson in Toronto, with whom Ondaatje later worked on the 1971 adaptation and staging of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, on the making of the 1972 film, *The Clinton Special*, and on the 1980 stage adaptation of *Coming through Slaughter*.

In 1967 Ondaatje became an instructor in English at the University of Western Ontario in London. During the summer of 1968, while staying in Ganonoque, Ontario, he wrote *Leonard Cohen* (1970), a short critical study of the poet and novelist who had recently become known as a songwriter and performer. Ondaatje has said that Cohen was the

most important influence on him as a young writer and on his generation, especially through the novel *The Favourite Game* (1963), which seemed refreshingly unelitist. Ondaatje's was the first book-length study of Cohen and remains an important work on that writer, though the book also illuminates Ondaatje and his work. He is clearly close to Cohen, sharing Cohen's love of the sensuous startling image, his understanding of the detached mind of the artist, of the authentic fakery of art, and, as Ondaatje writes of Cohen, of the necessity of promoting "our own private cells of anarchy."

Shortly after completing *The Man with Seven Toes*, Ondaatje, feeling dissatisfied with the form of that work, began to browse through Edmund Wilson's *Patriotic Gore* (1962) with the vague intention of writing a Civil War story or poem. Somehow deflected west, he wrote a few poems using the voice of Billy the Kid and, as he described it in a 1975 interview with Sam Solecki for *Rune*, "moved from these to being dissatisfied with the limits of lyric; so I moved to prose and interviews and so on." The legend of Billy merged with Ondaatje's memories of childhood cowboys-and-Indians games in Ceylon, and he wrote over a period of about two years, taking another year to edit and rearrange his materials. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left Handed Poems* appeared in 1970, designed by Coach House and published by House of Anansi, another small but important Canadian press.

Winner of the Governor General's Award for 1970, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* has become Ondaatje's most celebrated work, praised by critics and readers and roundly condemned□to his delight□by federal MPs for dealing with an *American* hero and outlaw. The familiar Wild West characters are in this volume□Billy the Kid, sheriff Pat Garrett, and other historical characters taken from Walter Burns's *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (1926)□ but the focus is not on the historical outlaw nor on the Wild West motif. The book has been interpreted by some as a parable of the artist/outlaw, but Ondaatje has commented that though Billy may be on some instinctual level an artist, he did not intend to create a "portrait of the artist." Rather, the book continues thematically his exploration of the ambiguous and often paradoxical area between biology and mechanization, movement and stasis, chaotic life and the framed artistic moment. The artist in the book is not Billy but Ondaatje himself as writer, shaping and faking material, bringing into the poems some of his own experiences while at the same time standing apart, watching his characters feel and act, and, in the end, leaving them as he wakes in his hotel room alone.

The book includes poems, prose, photographs and other illustrations, interviews, and a comicbook legend. It begins with Billy's list of the dead, including his own death in the future at the hands of Pat Garrett. The narrative sections, funny, witty, full of strange stories, tell of such events as Garrett's gunning down Tom O'Folliard, Billy's pastoral sojourns on the Chisum ranch in Texas, his arrest, ride to trial and escape, Garrett's peculiar self-education in French and alcoholism, and finally Billy's murder. In the lyrics and especially in the frame of the story, Ondaatje's concerns become clear. Before the text, there is a framed blank square and a quotation from the great frontier photographer L. A. Huffman about the development of a technique which allowed him to take photographs of moving things from a moving horse. The book concludes with a small framed picture of Ondaatje, aged about six, wearing a cowboy outfit. The volume's

subtitle, *Left Handed Poems*, refers to Billy's hands, small, smooth, white, and trained by finger exercises twelve hours a day, the hands of a murderer who is a courteous dandy, a gentle lover, a man sensitive to every nerve in his body, every sense extending to the whole sensual world: a man with "the range for everything." Pat Garrett, the lawman whose hands are scarred and burned, is a "sane assassin," an "academic murderer" who decided what is right and "forgot all morals." Garrett's morals are mechanical, insane in their neutrality. Billy reflects that he himself can watch "the stomach of clocks / shift their wheels and pins into each other / and emerge living, for hours," but insane images blossom in his own brain, and he knows that in all ordered things, the course of the stars, "the clean speed of machines," "one altered move . . . will make them maniac." Awareness and exactitude imply stress; the frame holds within it the breaking moment. It is better to be in motion. Inside the small boy Michael Ondaatje are Garrett's and Billy's future legend; the three are held inside the book; the structure in its altering forms collects them all.

Canadian critics described *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* as "one of the best books . . . in a long time," "profound in its dimensions," and praised the originality of the form. The critic for the *New York Times*, reviewing the American edition, published in 1970, called it "carefully crafted and thoroughly literate," though a "miniature." It has sold at least 20,500 copies in Canada and is currently in print in both Canada and the United States. In one American anthology, *Modernism in Literature* (1977), the entire book is republished in facsimile as an example of contemporary impressionism, literature which, through ambiguity, calls attention to itself as a conscious construct and insists on the relativity of experience.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid evolved into a play, beginning with radio and stage readings. Ondaatje reshaped, cut, and added songs, and the play, in its present form, was first performed by the Toronto Free Theatre in October 1974, directed by Martin Kinch. It was performed at the Brooklyn Academy, New York, in October 1975 and continues to be presented in many countries.

Given the visual quality and inspiration of Ondaatje's work, it was natural for him to turn to film. One effort, using family and friends as cast, involves the dognapping of the family bassett hound, Wallace, and bears the title *Carry on Crime and Punishment* (1972). A more serious effort is a thirty-five-minute film, *Sons of Captain Poetry* (1970), on Canadian sound and concrete poet B. P. Nichol, made when *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* was going to press. It is an entertaining and thoughtful introduction to the impulses behind sound and concrete poetry and an appreciative homage to a man from whom Ondaatje says he has learned much.

After finishing *The Dainty Monsters* and during the writing of his two subsequent books, Ondaatje continued to write short lyrics, collected in 1973 in *Rat Jelly*. Published by Coach House, the book has a stunning cover taken from a nursery school stained-glass window, depicting a pieman who clearly has sinister designs on Simple Simon. The book is divided into three sections, "Families," "Live Bait," and "White Dwarfs," which contain domestic poems, animal poems, and poems about art respectively. The first two sections continue the themes of the previous books, though the structure and line are

generally more relaxed, the tone more humorous and casual. Ondaatje's genius for vivid images is here: his wife's ear is "a vast / musical instrument of flesh"; bats "organize the air / with thick blinks of travel"; a window "tries to split with cold," a moth in his pajamas is the poet's heart "breaking loose." Violent events explode into everyday life: "At night the gold and black slashed bees come / pluck my head away"; a woman's naked back during lovemaking is a wrecked aircraft scattered across sand; the fridge contains a live rat pie. In the second section the deaths of animals are related to man's hate for his own animality and mortality: men kill to "fool themselves alive." It is the third section of *Rat Jelly* which is perhaps the most interesting in that it contains several poems explicitly on art and the relationship of art to experience. In "King Kong meets Wallace Stevens" these two figures are humorously juxtaposed: Stevens all insurance and thought, Kong whose "mind is nowhere." As the poem develops, it is the poet who "is thinking chaos is thinking fences," whose blood is bellowing in his head. Ondaatje's constructed beast loose in the city is the poem as anarchic animal, fashioned in the poet's subversive imagination. The poem entitled "The gate in his head" contains lines which have often been cited as Ondaatje's clearest aesthetic statement. Looking at a blurred photograph of a gull, the poet writes:

And this is all this writing should be then,
The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong
moment
so they are shapeless, awkward
moving to the clear.

Certainly these lines reflect his wish to catch movement and to capture life without killing it, as clarity or the certainty of, say, Garrett's morals does. In "White Dwarfs," the concluding poem in the book, the poet speaks of his heroes as those who have "no social fuel," who die in "the ether peripheries," who are not easy to describe, existing in "the perfect white between the words." Silence is the perfect poetry, the silence of a star imploding after its brilliant parading in an unknown universe.

In 1971 Ondaatje left the University of Western Ontario ("they wanted me to do a Ph.D. and I didn't want to") and took an assistant professorship at Glendon College, Toronto. In a Toronto *Globe and Mail* interview in 1974, Ondaatje reported that he was working on a prose work about different characters in the 1930s. That work may yet see print, but the book which did appear in 1976 was *Coming through Slaughter*, a novel about New Orleans jazz musician Buddy Bolden, a cornetist who went mad in 1907. The book, as Ondaatje disclosed in a 1977 interview for *Books in Canada*, was begun in London, triggered by a newspaper clipping describing "Buddy Bolden, who became a legend when he went berserk in a parade." Ondaatje worked on it for several years, especially during summers on the family farm near Verona, Ontario. In 1973, well after he had started on the book, Ondaatje went to Louisiana to do research and absorb the geography of Bolden's life. Very little is, in fact, known about Bolden: in the novel, on one page, Ondaatje lists the available facts. He used tapes of jazzmen remembering Bolden, books about New Orleans's Storyville district and the period, and the records of the hospital where Bolden lived, mad, until his death in 1931. But as in his work on Billy the Kid, Ondaatje's interest is not historical. He has altered dates, brought people

together who never met, and polished facts "to suit the truth of fiction," as he comments in the book's acknowledgements. For him, "the facts start suggesting things, almost breed," and the landscape of the book is "a totally mental landscape . . . of names and rumours."

The book is in large part "a statement about the artist," Ondaatje noted in a 1980 interview published in *Eclipse*, though Bolden is an individual, not a generalized artist. It is, according to Ondaatje, "a very private book," in which an identification between author and character is made explicit in the text—"The photograph moves and becomes a mirror"—but it is also a controlled and impersonal creation, examining the tensions that exist among kinds of art, within certain artists, and within himself. By Ondaatje's account, one germ of *Coming through Slaughter* was the tension he observed among some of the London, Ontario, painters who were his friends, especially between Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers, one a "local" and the other a "classical" artist.

The book follows Bolden from New Orleans, where he barbers during the day, plays cornet at night, his two-year disappearance from family and the world of music, to his discovery by his policeman friend, Webb, his return to friends and music, and his explosion into madness. The structure is unchronological. The first section is mainly narrative, much of the second takes place in Bolden's mind, the third alternates interior monologue with narrative, and the final pages mix Bolden's thoughts in various mental hospitals with historical documentation, narrative, and explicit comments of the novelist. The book ends, as *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* does, with the writer alone in a room: "Thirty-one years old. There are no prizes."

Bolden's relationship with Webb parallels structurally that of Billy and Garrett. Bolden's other relationships—with Nora, his wife, and with Robin Brewitt, the woman he comes to love during his retreat, with various other musicians, and especially with Bellocq, a photographer of Storyville's prostitutes— all develop aspects of Bolden as man and as musician. He is an "unprofessional" player, the loudest, the roughest, his music "immediate, dated in half an hour . . . showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story." His playing appears formless, but only because "he tore apart the plot" trying to describe something in a multitude of ways, the music a direct extension of his life. His life is haunted by fears of certainty: "He did nothing but leap into the mass of changes and explore them." Bolden is the totally social, unthinking, chaotic man and artist until he meets Bellocq, who introduces him to privacy, calculated art, the silence beyond the social world. Bellocq eventually commits suicide. After Webb "rescues" Bolden from his self-imposed absence from music, Bolden retreats to a cottage alone, and in his mental addresses to Webb, he meditates on his muse and his life. He thinks about the temptation to silence and about the music of John Robichaux, whose formal complete structures "dominated . . . audiences," a tyranny Bolden loathes. Instead, he wants audiences to "come in where they pleased and leave when they pleased and somehow hear the germs of the start and all the possible endings." In his silence Bolden grows theoretical, and, returning to the "20th century game of fame," he brings self-consciousness into his uncertainties. He compares himself, needing and loathing an audience, with the sad transient mattress prostitutes, selling a wrecked talent. On his fifth morning home, playing in a parade, he sees a woman strut into the procession, and

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he begins to play for, at, her: she becomes all audiences, all the youth, energy, sexuality he once had, all women, all pure cold art: "this is what I wanted, always, loss of privacy in the playing." He "overblows" his cornet, hemorrhages, and collapses, his goal realized, for he has utterly become his music. Bolden is released into madness and a calm serenity. In the passage in which Ondaatje connects himself to Bolden, he suggests that the temptations of silence, madness, and death have also been his, and, by implication, that Bolden's art, aesthetics, and tensions are his, too.

During the writing of *Coming through Slaughter*, Ondaatje directed and edited a film about Theatre Passe Muraille's play *The Farm Show*, an actor-generated theater presentation based on the actors' experiences in a farming community. Ondaatje's interest in his film *The Clinton Special* is the play's merging of document, local gossip, and re-creation of these materials, a process which continues to hold his attention.

At the close of 1976 Ondaatje went to India for a Commonwealth Literature conference, the closest he had been to his birthplace in twenty-four years. On sabbatical in January 1978, he traveled to Sri Lanka for a five-month visit with his sister and relatives. The closing section of *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do* (his 1979 volume of selected poems covering the years 1963 to 1978 that won the Governor General's Award for poetry in 1980) contains new poems, some of which are based on this trip. Others further his concern with local history, and there are a few poems which develop his sense of the seductive, silent moon-world of night.

The final poem takes up his family history, a subject that Ondaatje continued to explore in his next book. He began a journal during his first trip to Sri Lanka and continued it while he was there, recording family stories he barely remembered. By the time he spent a second period in Sri Lanka in 1979 and 1980, he had become deeply involved in the lives and stories of his family history, a history he had ignored for years. *Running in the Family*, which he has refused to consign to any one genre□"the book," he claims, "is not a history but a portrait or 'gesture'"□furthers Ondaatje's experimentation in writing along the borders that separate history, story, and myth. At the same time it is an autobiographical quest, through memory and the tangled scandals and legends of family and a lost colonial world, for parents and the origins of his imagination.

Sri Lanka, fabled and invaded by Portuguese, Dutch, and English as Serendip, Taprobane, and Ceylon, peopled by a mix of Sinhalese, Tamil, and European, provides the tropical setting in which Ondaatje writes and records the memories and gossip of aunts, family friends, sisters and brothers, the history of his parents' courtship and divorce, the antic acts of his grandmother, Lalla, and the doings, "so whimsical, so busy," of earlier generations of Ceylonese society. History is shaped by conversation, anecdote, judgment, by its usefulness as family backdrop and to retelling the family's stories. Combining fiction, fact, poetry, and photographs, Ondaatje evokes the jungles, natural and social, in which his earliest memories grew. His father, an outrageous alcoholic whom he never knew as an adult, especially haunts his son's story. "I think all of our lives have been shaped by what went on before us," writes Ondaatje. Nevertheless, in imagination resides the power to bestow a countering magic on the past, which the writer uses to grant his flower-stealing grandmother the kind of death

she always wanted. The book was praised by critics as much for its recreation of a particular society as for its stylistic exploration of the relationship between history and the poetic imagination.

Ondaatje spent the summer of 1979 teaching at the University of Hawaii. In 1980, as he continued his writing about his Sri Lankan family, his Canadian family situation changed radically when he separated from his wife and began to live with Linda Spalding. In *Secular Love* (1984), a collection of lyrics and lyric sequences, the pain of the marriage breakup and the sensual and emotional growth of new love make their way into the poems. One of the book's four sections, "Claude Glass," was published in 1979 as one of Coach House's manuscript editions. The book as a whole explores various landscapes: nighttime, moonlit, and rain-filled natural landscapes, the landscapes of love, a lover, a new life, and language. Like Billy the Kid with "the range for everything" and Bolden exploring chaos and change, the poet wants to know and see completely everything in his altering, altered life, from the "tiny leather toes" of geckos to the "scarred / skin boat" of another's body to the "syllables / in a loon sentence" signaling the lost and found moments which trace and locate a life. Again merging autobiography and poetics, the writer looks for a language which, like the love he seeks, names but does not dominate, which connects but does not control.

In June 1981 Ondaatje went to Australia as winner of the Canada-Australia Exchange award. He continues to be interested in theater and film and has written a screenplay for Robert Kroetsch's 1975 novel *Badlands*, which remains unproduced. Experimentation with the long poem has resulted in "Elimination Dance," a potentially endless comic poem taking off from a high-school dance ritual. One (unpublished) "elimination" is "All those bad poets who claim me as an early influence." He has worked for some years as an editor at Coach House, seeing through the press a number of important Canadian books; his own involvement in the design and production of his books is, by his own admission, obsessive.

He is now a professor at Glendon College, where he teaches Canadian and American literatures, contemporary literature in translation, and creative writing. In February and March of 1986 he spent four weeks teaching and lecturing at universities in Rome and Turin. In 1987 a novel that he had been working on for over three years was published in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Called *In the Skin of a Lion*, it draws its title from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: "The joyful will stoop with sorrow, and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion." According to Ondaatje in a 1987 *Quill and Quire* interview with Barbara Turner, it is his "first formal novel." Dealing with many of the social issues that most concern him—the "gulf between rich and poor, the conditions of the labour force, racism . . . in Canada"—the novel provides a historical glimpse of Toronto in the early years of the twentieth century. "I suddenly thought," says the author of the process of composing the book, "of a vista of Upper America where you had five or six people interweaving and treading . . . but somehow connected at certain times." The narrator of the novel not only tells his own story but also observes the lives of others: the immigrant workers who (without speaking the language of the community) build a bridge, the Bloor Street Viaduct, and the powerful Ambrose Small and his

sometime lover Clara. What the narrator learns about life, he says, he learns in these years of tension: years of construction that placed the lives of the powerless in danger, years when the powerful were nonetheless susceptible to forces beyond their control. The historical millionaire Andrew Small disappeared at the height of his power in 1919 and was never found. The novel uses this event and the fictional lives of the years leading up to it to question the disparities between the character of life lived and the official versions of recorded history and culture.

Though Ondaatje is always insistent about the help he has received from other writers and friends, he is clearly an original writer, and his work has been received with enthusiasm by both scholars and general audiences. His importance lies, precisely, in his ability to combine a private, highly charged, sometimes dark vision with witty linguistic leaps and welcoming humor.

Source: Ann Mandel, "Michael Ondaatje," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 60, *Canadian Writers Since 1960, Second Series*, edited by W. H. New, Gale Research, 1987, pp. 273-81.

Adaptations

Ondaatje's novel *Anil's Ghost* was adapted as an unabridged audiocassette and audio CD in 2000, both available from Bantam Books and both with Alan Cumming as reader.

Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient* was adapted as a feature film in 1996 by Miramax Films. Written and directed by Anthony Minghella, the film starred Ralph Fiennes, Juliette Binoche, Willem Dafoe, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Colin Firth. It is available on both DVD and VHS from Miramax Home Entertainment.

The English Patient was also adapted as an abridged audiocassette in 1993 by Random House. This audiobook is read by Michael York.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of cinnamon as it relates to the international spice trade. Try to find one story, from any point in history, involving the importance of cinnamon in government or culture. Describe how you would direct this story as a modern-day film.

Research the profession of cinnamon peeler in Sri Lanka. Write a modern-day job description for this position, including salary, expected duties, hours, etc.

Research dating rituals in modern-day Sri Lanka and compare them to dating rituals described in the poem. Imagine that you are a Sri Lankan teenager and write a journal entry that describes a day in your courtship, using your research to support your ideas.

Choose an important person from any point in Sri Lanka's history and write a short biography about this person.

Compare and Contrast

1980s: The Sri Lankan government faces a rebellion from the Tamil minority, although this rebellion is largely suppressed by certain groups of the Sri Lankan people.

Today: Following the assassination of the Sri Lankan president in 1993, the premier is appointed acting president. The Sri Lankan army continues to battle the Tamil rebels.

1980s: Sri Lanka tries to shore up its faltering economy by developing offshore banking and insurance industries.

Today: Despite its efforts to strengthen its economy through foreign trade and investments, Sri Lanka is still dependent on foreign aid.

1980s: Sri Lanka's economy is primarily agricultural, although textiles and garments become the biggest export product.

Today: Although Sri Lanka's agricultural products□ including cinnamon, tea, rubber, and coconut□ continue to be in demand, textiles and garments are still the biggest export product.

What Do I Read Next?

Food of Sri Lanka: Authentic Recipes from the Island of Gems (2001), by Douglas Bullis and Wendy Hutton, is a cookbook that offers recipes from the little-known Sri Lankan cuisine.

In *The Emperor of Scent: A Story of Obsession, Perfume, and the Last Mystery of the Senses* (2003), journalist Chandler Burr chronicles the struggle that scientist Luca Turin faces when trying to get the scientific community to accept his new theory of smell. In addition to the main theme, the book examines the history of scent and olfactory chemistry and also gives anecdotes from the perfume industry.

In Chitra Divakaruni's first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Tilo is a young Indian woman who ends up on a remote island, where she is taught the magical, curative properties of spices. She is sent to Oakland, California, as a spice mistress, destined to live alone while she heals others with her gift. However, when she meets an American man who sees through her oldwoman disguise and falls in love with her, she must choose between love and duty.

In Joanne Harris's novel *Chocolat* (1999), Vianne Rocher, a choclatier, opens a chocolate shop in a repressed French town during the Lenten season. Over the course of the novel, Vianne and her daughter Anouk win over many of the townspeople through the magic and mystery of their chocolate confections.

Most critics consider Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* (1970) to be the author's most important volume of poetry. The collection combines verse, prose, photographs, and drawings in a fictionalized biography of William Bonney, the famous American outlaw who went by the name of Billy the Kid.

In *The Monkey King & Other Stories* (1998), editor Griffin Ondaatje collects an anthology of Sri Lankan folk tales, each retold by a contemporary. Michael Ondaatje contributes two stories, "The Vulture" and "Angulimala."

The English Patient (1992), Ondaatje's most famous work, is a complex World War II novel that follows the story of a Canadian nurse, who stays in the remains of a bombed Italian convent to tend to a severely burned patient.

Further Study

Jewinski, Ed, *Michael Ondaatje: Express Yourself Beautifully*, Canadian Biography Series, ECW Press, 1994.

In this illustrated biography of Ondaatje, Jewinski discusses how Ondaatje's writing is usually inspired by a single intense image and relates this trend to the author's own intense life. The book explores Ondaatje's relationships with his family and links these relationships to his later works.

Le Guerer, Annick, *Scent: The Mysterious and Essential Powers of Smell*, Kodansha International, 1994.

Le Guerer explores the historical and cultural relationship among the sense of smell and mythology, religion, psychology, and other areas. This book also includes some sections on the relationship of scent to seduction and magic.

Rouby, Catherine, Benoist Schaal, Danièle Dubois, Rémi Gervais, and A. Holley, eds., *Olfaction, Taste, and Cognition*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

In this first multidisciplinary research anthology, more than fifty specialists discuss smell, taste, and cognition as it relates to neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and linguistics.

Seneviratne, H. L., ed., *Identity, Consciousness, and the Past: Forging of Caste and Community in India and Sri Lanka*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

This collection of nine essays explores the historical and anthropological issues associated with Sri Lanka, Ondaatje's birthplace and the setting of the poem.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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