

## AT Speech

“Black space is time.” Time is a medium through which history is passed, and through which it is distorted by the luminance of those in the light. History is recorded by those with power, and the events of the present reflect upon the history of our society.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

Michael Ondaatje’s novel, In the Skin of a Lion, is a story that takes a different side to official history. Ondaatje’s text has been analysed as a Marxist view on the society portrayed, as well as that of a feminist perspective. However viewed, Ondaatje’s novel is based upon the idea of differing perceptions of ‘history.’

Ondaatje’s novel has been valued as a Marxist text for a long time. The way in which he uses poetic language to describe the workers gives them a persona that is gentler than the way ‘official’ history remembers them.

Nicholas Temelcoff, Patrick and Hazen Lewis are manual labourers who take no part in the grand schemes of construction, but they are the ones who put their life on the line every day during construction as they build the histories of others.

Ondaatje empathises with the side of the workers and he feels that the soul of all the constructions is the men who toiled to make it possible. One possible reason behind Ondaatje’s empathy is due to the fact that he himself was an immigrant, just like many of the workers. Ondaatje was born in what is now Sri Lanka and he would know only too well the struggles faced by the workers.

Nicholas Temelcoff is a worker on the bridge, a hard-working man who struggles with language. Yet, despite this, Ondaatje chooses to describe Temelcoff using some of the most poetic language in the entire novel. He is “the man in the air” who “floats” and “pushes in the air before him as if swimming in a river.” Ondaatje continually uses similes to describe Temelcoff as his movements in the air require a description more poetic than literal. He is described using another simile that “he knows his position in the air as if he is mercury slipping across a map.” Following Alice’s death, Temelcoff’s two solitary tears are described as “two little silver coaches” and this further adds to his poetic persona.

But Ondaatje’s use of poetic language on workers is not just limited to Temelcoff, as he also incorporates Patrick into his Marxist view.

Patrick is the son of an “abashed man,” and he is fascinated with moths, but his vendetta against Harris and the waterworks is what most makes Patrick’s actions satisfy Marxists. The very fact that a simple working man, a man who helped build the waterworks, is able to bring the entire construction to its knees is what is most encouraging for Marxists. Patrick manages to “swim through the tunnel” he “helped build” and set up a rig of explosives that could bring it all down. The fact that Patrick pulls out is testimony once again to his character that he is not the brutish worker portrayed in official history. However, what is relevant is that a simple worker, a man whom history will forget, came within inches of writing his name in history forever, for all the wrong reasons.

While Ondaatje’s text can be viewed as a Marxist one, it also has elements that can deliver a feminist reading to the responder.

Patrick is described as an avid reader in his childhood, but states that “in the books he read, women were rescued from runaway horses.” Despite this heroic stereotype, it is not a male who saves Patrick, but a female presence. After Clara leaves Patrick, he becomes lost and it is Clara’s friend, Alice Gull that gives Patrick a purpose. Patrick states that he “wants to grow old together” to Alice as she is the one who saves him when he needs it.

Alice also seems to be a voice that Ondaatje speaks his own attitudes through, Alice states that “you reach people through metaphor,” before going on to describe her performance at the waterworks as “what I reached you with earlier tonight.” The very fact that Ondaatje would

choose to express his own voice through a female character, in this case Alice, gives credence to the angle that Ondaatje's novel can be viewed as a feminist one.

Out of all the people Patrick deals with, it is only Clara and Alice who can really influence him. Alice says to Patrick using a simile that "like water, you can be easily harnessed." But despite this, it is only Clara and Alice that manage to do this.

Throughout the text, Patrick sees many people die around him, including his father, but the only one who really eats him inside is Alice. After Alice's death when Patrick is in prison he stays silent, trying to hold onto Alice, "as if saying one word would release Alice from his body." In traditional texts, the woman would fall for the man and follow him, but Ondaatje creates Patrick, a man who searches for Clara after she leaves. Despite Clara saying "I don't want you lost Patrick," she realises she can't stay with him. She is a freethinking woman in charge of her own destiny and does not go back with Patrick.

Following Alice's death and Patrick's scheme against the waterworks, it is another female that gives him a reason to carry on. Patrick takes on the role of the father to Alice's daughter Hana. Hana gives Patrick a reason to carry on despite having lost the woman he wished to grow old with.

Patrick's journey is made up of a number of obstacles, but when he gets stuck, it is not the male characters that pull him over, but the female characters of Clara, Alice and Hana. The text certainly contains a feminist theme that makes it fitting to modern audiences as well.

But Ondaatje's text is not just limited to Marxist or feminist, but has also been responded to by a personal reading that values the contributions made by every member of society, not just exclusively one group. This reading values the contribution made by each member of society towards an overall cause.

The story itself revolves around the construction of a bridge and waterworks, a project overseen by the commissioner of the public works, Rowland Harris. Harris is the man whom 'official' history remembers as the brilliant individual who ensured the construction was a success. A Marxist will tell you that it was the workers who are responsible for the success of the project, but a responder assuming this reading believes that the entire operation, from planning to construction to completion and operation, was made possible by everyone in the society pitching in. The project would not have worked unless there had been a commissioner to oversee the project and workers to build it.

For all Harris' faults, he had an incredible devotion to the project and its success. When the nun, Alice Gull, seemingly falls off the unfinished bridge to her death, Harris' reaction is not of fear for the nun, but sorrow for the bridge itself. Harris describes the bridge as "his first child" and his pity for it is shown as he realises that "it had already become a murder." Ondaatje has used personification in this example to show how Harris views the bridge...as a living child.

Harris himself even realises the contributions made by the workers, as he forgives Patrick for his attempted backlash against the waterworks. Patrick accuses Harris of excess when he states that Harris' "goddamn herringbone tiles cost more than half our salaries put together." Rather than deny this, Harris states that "yes, that's true," but argues that it is necessary for the waterworks to live on. This conversation between Harris and Patrick is a good summation of the efforts of both the workers and the commissioner during the project. Harris states cliché-like, that he fought "tooth and nail" to get the materials needed, but says that Patrick is "as much of the fabric as the aldermen and the millionaires."

This is where the two paths, that of the workers, and that of the commissioner, met, and Harris realises that Patrick and the other workers fought hard but are "among the dwarfs of enterprise who never get accepted or acknowledged."

This is why history is but perception, but Ondaatje's novel can be read as an account of the successes of all levels of society.

So, as Ondaatje's text continues to be examined from Marxist, feminist and numerous other angles, it becomes clear that while In the Skin of a Lion can be viewed in many different ways,

its underlying themes concerning the writing of history will ensure that it is valued now, and into the future. "Black space is time."