

In the Skin of a Lion

1. **Eight Characters and why they are important:**

Nicholas Temelcoff

Temelcoff is a means through which Patrick realises the nature of history. Temelcoff realises that he will have to pass down his own story, and that official history will not remember him.

Alice Gull

Alice is the one who gives Patrick a purpose. Patrick is a “searcher” after Clara leaves but he finds security with Alice.

Hazen Lewis

Hazen is the person who has shaped Patrick. Hazen acts as the context for Patrick in the novel.

Patrick Lewis

The central character in the novel who is symbolic of the struggles faced by the workers of the time.

Ambrose Small

Small is the man who is representational of the rich people of the society who care nothing for the struggles of the working class.

Rowland Harris

He provides the angle that even though it is hard, some of the working class can climb their way up the ranks.

Clara Dickens

She is the one who first encourages Patrick to open up to other people.

Caravaggio

He was a thief, but a character that seemed to have a positive influence on Patrick. He brings hope and leaves an impression on Patrick.

2. **The Basis order of the main incidents**

The story begins with reflections of Patrick as a child. We then see Nicholas Temelcoff save the nun, Alice Gull, when she falls from the bridge. Patrick meets Clara, falls in love, but then she leaves him. Patrick then stays with Alice, but goes “searching” for Clara only to have Ambrose Small pour petrol over him and attempt to set him alight. He then gives up on Clara and befriends Alice. Alice dies in a misguided attack and Patrick goes to prison.

When he is released, he plans a terrorist attack on the waterworks, only to pull out at the last minute. He takes on a carer role for Hana and goes searching for Clara.

3. **An example of a metaphor in the book and its significance**

“You’re among the dwarfs of enterprise who never get accepted or acknowledged.”

Describing the writing of history, and how the simple working folk will be forgotten by all but their own families. They are the dwarfs that are overlooked when history is penned.

4. **What you consider to be at least 3 main themes**

- The perception of history. Ondaatje raises issues surrounding the way in which history is recorded. He is of the view that history favours those with power and leaves out the simple folk who toiled day in, day out, to achieve the feats that others will be credited with.
- The material nature of life. Ondaatje has a shot at the way in which many people feel they will be remembered due to their physical possessions. Harris is one, as he buys herringbone tiles for the waterworks, just so it will be remembered.

- The value of life. Throughout the text, numerous lives are lost in construction and by other means. However, when quizzed by Patrick about the number of lives lost during construction, Harris replies “there was no record kept.”

5. What you think is the essence of the dominant reading.

I believe the dominant reading is a Marxist one. 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.

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.

6. What you feel a feminist might feel reading this book

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.

7. What you feel a postcolonial theorist might feel

Much of the answer to this has been covered in part 5. However, particular lines, including the one regarding Nicholas Temelcoff, does have a post colonial attitude. Temelcoff is described as "walking around syllables" and "picking one up he fancies" before "replacing it with another." It is the language barrier and the fact that the majority of workers were migrants, which would have post colonial theorists feeling that Ondaatje hit the spot.

8. What a resistant reader might say about the book's themes and style

A resistant reader might feel that Ondaatje structured the book too loosely, and that by creating such a loose, difficult to follow plot, it has detracted from the themes. The themes have been lost in amongst the time shifting as Ondaatje got carried away with the poetic prose, rather than focusing on the plot.

9. Your ideas about Patrick's Journey

Patrick's journey is one of self discover. He realises many things about himself and begins to value having company. Following an isolated childhood, Patrick learns to like the idea of "growing old together" with Alice. When she dies, he turns his attention to taking care of Alice's orphaned daughter, Hana.

10. Your own main response to this book

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.