

Spirituality in anhil's ghost



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Throughout Ondaatje's novel *Anil's ghost*, there are a multitude of allusions to an underlying theme of the struggle between the spiritual world and the physical. Ondaatje does a fantastic job in weaving these two world views into the singular perspective of the reader; it seems as if the goal of the text isn't to show the differences in spirituality and the physical world, but rather to effectively display how physical events are perpetuated by spiritual concepts. This said, in spite of the seemingly effortless mesh of the two themes, it's clear that within the confines of the text spirituality plays a deep role in the way the story plays out, and performs the task of giving an explanation as to why certain events happen.

Ananda's character development and the ritual painting he performs as his trade portray a massive amount of links between spiritual and physical lives. Ritual painting is a concept first introduced within the novel within the chapter titled *The Grove of Aesthetics*. From its introduction it's clear that the event in question is a highly regarded act. Throughout the novel, and at its terminus, ritual painting serves a deep role in the development of the story. The process is first explained to us by Palipana, when he recommends Sarath and Anil search for a ritual painter. Palipana describes the ritual painting process as follows: "Coomaraswamy points out that before eyes are painted there is just a lump of metal or stone. But after this act, " it is thenceforward a God." (91). The surrounding passages serve a similar purpose, the main idea being that without its eyes, the statue has no life.

Ananda's job, as a professional artificer, is to give inanimate objects the gift of life, an event which is implicated a few times within the novel. We see a significant event with spiritual implications take place when Ananda

completes the clay moulding around Sailor's skull; instead of a portrait of sailor, the skull ends up becoming a portrait of Sarissa, Ananda's dead wife. In reference to Sarath, Ondaatje writes: "He would already know as she did that no one would recognize the face. It was not a reconstruction of Sailor's face they were looking at" (179). This scene itself is excellently built up to as well; Prior to the skull's unveiling we see Ananda fondling the statue in front of Anil. While Anil writes this off (as she's able to sympathize with Ananda's apparent desire to see the statue as human) it can be seen by glancing back upon this excerpt that Ananda has long seen a part of Sarissa within Sailor.

We see more spiritual events surrounding Sarissa within an italicized section in the chapter. The flashback we see of his wife also plays to the theme of a connected spiritual context, as can be seen in the following excerpt: "She does not even think of releasing them from this public gesture. Cannot touch anything because everything feels alive, wounded and raw but alive. She begins running forward, past their eyes, her own shut dark until she is past them. Up the hill towards the school. She keeps running forward, and then she sees more". (166) Of course the detached heads themselves aren't alive. Sarissa is instead stating that the heads seem to hold some living essence. This idea itself is an allusion to the presence of the spiritual essence of the students within their severed heads. Sarissa closes her eyes as she passes by them because she feels their presence. Of course this is a very human instinct for her to have; exposure to the severed heads of one's acquaintances would likely drive anyone to attempt to run away in fear. Here however lies a fallacy, as Sarissa didn't run away. Instead, she continues to run towards the school because of her fear of being watched by the

perpetrators of the crime. The heads have been mounted in an attempt to instill fear. This fear isn't just spiritual in a restricted sense— it has a spiritual meaning to all humans, in that this same fear is instilled in all of us.

A final event within the text that ties into this theme occurs at the very end of the novel, when Ananda is performing the Nētra Mangala by painting the statue's eyes. The statue of Buddha that he's been tasked with recreating however seems to follow in the footsteps of Sarath's skull in that the image it's being modeled after isn't the Buddha, but instead Sarath. An excerpt states that " He was on the platform most of the time now, wearing one of the Indian cotton shirts Sarath had given him some years back. His sarong was heavy and dark from the rain." (282) While he performs this ritual, Anand wears under the costume one of the shirts given to him by Sarath. This seems like a terrible choice on Ananda's part. First, he's in a very warm region. Second, it's said that it's raining at the time of the ritual, which means that wearing a cotton garment is an awful idea. Palipana's description of an artificer at this point was very glamorous, and Ananda seems to starkly contrast against this. It seems then that Ananda is wearing Sarath's shirt because it serves as a memento; holding some greater value to Ananda after Sarath's death, and perhaps assisting him in painting Sarath's eyes onto the Buddha statue.

Spirituality plays a key role in the development and setting that take place within Anil's Ghost. The entire plot of the story is driven secondarily by these existential ideas, with them directly influencing characters' actions and ideas. From the start of the novel to its final pages, these events seem to

provide a place for input from a second type of world view, one not only influenced not by hard facts or knowledge, but also by ghosts.