

The animal inside us: a close reading of running in the family



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Throughout the novel *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje, there are many occurrences of humans, mainly men, displaying their animalistic nature over their human nature that sets them apart from other animals, especially with one of the major themes of the whole novel being the comparison between foreigners and native islanders and the difference between civilization and nature on a broad scale. Thus, through the passage of the Visitor's Book, Ondaatje uses symbols, hyperboles, and imagery in order to demonstrate the fact that every human, no matter how civilized, has an animalistic nature within them.

As he presents the Visitor's book, Ondaatje employs symbols relating to the visitor's book in order to demonstrate the fact that there is an animalistic nature within everyone. More specifically, throughout this passage, Ondaatje develops the idea that this whole feud simply represented the evolution of news and media in developed countries, which, in the height of their conflicts, best represented the animalistic nature in people. When the conflict is first introduced, Ondaatje refers to it as his "father wag[ing] war with...a close relative of the eventual Prime Minister of Ceylon" (Ondaatje 151). Not only does he refer to it as so extreme as to be "waging war" but he also makes a key note about the position and rank of Sammy in society at the time as well. Ondaatje uses that symbol of the two rich and high class men waging war with each other to symbolize the press and how there are constant conflicts between significant people, but more importantly to symbolize the animalistic nature in both Sammy and Mervyn after creating a war over a Visitor's Book. In addition, later in the passage, as the 'war' escalates, "pages continued to be torn out, ruining a good archival history of

two semi-prominent Ceylon families” (Ondaatje 152). Their literary war goes so far as to ruining a historical relationship between their two families, yet Ondaatje uses this as a symbol for modern media as well. The fact that this simple conflict was enough to separate two families was just Ondaatje’s attempt at symbolizing the horrendous effects of all out warfare over press and media as well, both of which finally end up showing animalistic nature of these two elite men who otherwise seem like completely civilized people. Finally, the fact that the “ literary war broke so many codes,” was another attempt by Ondaatje to symbolize the animalistic nature within these two men and the conflict that they were part of (Ondaatje 152). The war between them, at this point, had escalated so much that it was regarded as breaking even the codes of normal wars, symbolizing what Ondaatje thought about the nature of humanity in general. Thus, these symbols were used by Ondaatje in order to present the fact that humanity always has an animalistic nature inside that can reveal itself in times like this.

In addition, Ondaatje uses vivid imagery throughout the passage of the Visitor’s Book in order to highlight the point that humans are essentially animalistic in nature. Through the beginning of the conflict highlighted in this passage, the types of things that Sammy and Mervyn were writing in the visitors’ books were just so extreme, starting with “ bitch[ing] about everything, from service to badly made drinks...” all the way to “...one and a half pages of vindictive prose, dropping hints of madness and incest” (Ondaatje 151). The imagery used to describe the conflict and actions of the two men is so strong that it seems unreal, and yet it is made specifically like that by Ondaatje in order to illustrate the wildness those two men get into.

Thus Ondaatje uses that highly expressive and extreme imagery to illustrate how equally extreme these men were getting because of their inner animalistic natures taking over. Later on in the passage, as the conflict begins to escalate to unsustainable levels, Ondaatje describes the situation involving “pages [having] to be ripped out of visitors’ books. Eventually one would write about the other even when the other was nowhere near the other” (Ondaatje 152). The vivid language and imagery used by Ondaatje in this excerpt not only emphasized the gravity of the situation with the two men but also the extent to which they had lost their human like aspects and had followed their animalistic nature and instincts completely, leading to such a dangerous situation. Thus not only does Ondaatje use the vivid imagery for presenting the extent to which these men had displayed their animalistic nature over their human nature, but also to communicate how dangerous of a situation it creates when people resort to their animal natures.

Ondaatje, moreover, uses hyperboles throughout the passage of *The Visitor’s Book* in order to establish the fact that all people have a core animalistic nature within them, which, at a basic level, defines how they act. When Ondaatje introduces the conflict that started the feud, he writes that “it was on his travels by road that my father waged war with a certain Sammy Dias Bandaranaike” (Ondaatje 151). Despite the fact that this whole conflict was simply an issue between the two men themselves, and resulted in each writing bad comments about the other, it is talked about like a war in Ondaatje’s perspective and thus greatly exaggerated for the effect of dramatizing the implications of this conflict. Ondaatje ultimately uses this

hyperbole as a method of more significantly presenting the fact that humans, at the core, operate based on an animalistic nature. Later on in the passage, as the conflict was escalating, “Sammy left first, wrote a half-page attack on my father...My father wrote one and a half pages of vindictive prose about the Bandaranaike family” (Ondaatje 151). Both men begin to escalate the conflict to new highs on a much more personal level, which was also completely unwarranted based on the origin of the actual conflict. The true effect that Ondaatje made with that hyperbole, however, was to exemplify the animalistic nature of the decisions and actions done by both Sammy and Mervyn, in order to highlight that despite how civilized of men they were, there was no escape from acting based on their animalistic nature and instinct, which led them to do what they did. Finally, near the end of the passage, when Ondaatje reflects on the effects of the literary warfare that occurred, he comments that “the war petered out when neither Sammy...nor my father was allowed to write their impressions of a stay or a meal...‘constructive criticism’ dates from this period” (Ondaatje 152). The effect of the actions of the two men resulted in both effectively being muted in order to prevent the warfare from continuing any more. Ondaatje uses this hyperbole to comment not only on the fact that the men were so animalistic in their actions from their nature, but also that it was so destructive that they had to be completely muted. What Ondaatje is trying to present through the end of this passage is not only that humans are fundamentally animalistic in nature, but also that civilization’s way of dealing with that problem is by completely muting those aspects of people until they effectively disappear.

Thus, through the passage of the Visitors' book, symbols, imagery, and hyperboles all work together to indicate that not only do all people have a fundamental animalistic nature within them, but that the animalistic nature is also perceived as very dangerous by society and thus muted as much as possible by modern civilizations. This means that in addition to the point that Ondaatje is making about the novel as a whole and the events that occur in Ceylon at the time, he is also making a commentary on the rest of the world, and how modern civilizations across the world have dealt with the perceived problem that Ondaatje highlights by controlling, to some extent, the level of freedom that people have in acting in an animalistic nature exclusively.