

Micheal ondaatje's in the skin of a lion- introduction – canadian literature essa...

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Canadian Literature in English was first written during the time of The American Revolution.

The American loyalists, who did not join the revolution, took refuge in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Upper Canada (Ontario). They gave a slight beginning to a literature. The Rev.

Jonathan Odell (1737-1818) has a minor place in the literary history of his two countries as the writer of convivial lyrics and of satire on the Whig rebels. In the next generation the sons of the loyalists made a clear beginning of indigenous writing. In 1867 the separate colonies of British North America joined in a federal union to form the Dominion of Canada, except the Prince Edward Island and the Western territories and Newfoundland. A growing sense of national identity preceded the federal union. This identity was cultivated by its accomplishment. Two decades after the federation Charles Mair (1838-1927), who spent most of his life in the west, found the theme for his verse drama Tecumseh (1886) in the history of Canada. Historical romance is always a popular form in Canada. It is best represented in this period by *The Golden Dog* (1877) by William Kirby.

Meanwhile, a considerable number of semi-literary periodicals appeared in Canada. The most notable periodicals were the *Literary Garland* (1838-1851), *The Canadian Monthly* (1872-1878) and *The Nation* (1874-1876). A little later the best of the periodicals, *The Week* (1883-1896), was founded by Goldwin Smith. The first editor of *The Week* was Charles G. D.

Roberts who, with Bless Carman, Archibald Lampman and Duncan Campbell

Scott wrote the best poetry composed in Canada before the 1920s. The <https://assignbuster.com/micheal-ondaatjes-in-the-skin-of-a-lion-introduction-canadian-literature-essay/>

themes of this poetry were based on religion, politics, nature against man and realistic violence in narrative and descriptive form. Regional idylls and the tales of the frontier were popular types of best sellers. The best book of the period, *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) by Stephen Leacock, is predominantly a regional idyll.

The author's affection for an Ontario town does not diminish his comic sense of the pettiness of its life. Canadian Literature after 1920 felt the influence of the First World War. The Canadian Forum founded in 1920 supported the painters, the little theatre movement and the new poets, and offered criticism of politics, society and the arts. T. S.

Eliot influenced most of the young writers like A. J. M. Smith and Leo Kennedy. In early 1920s the art of novel was never cultivated in Canada as carefully as the art of poetry.

But later Mazo de la Roche published sixteen novels about the turbulent Whitcoak family. It was the most massive achievement in Canadian fiction. Frederick Niven (1878-1944), Wil R. Bird and Thomas Raddall were the writers of historical fiction. They wrote on the settlement of the west and of the eighteenth Century Nova Scotia. Canadian mores in small cities of Southern Ontario provided comic themes for Robert Davis, the witty and versatile author of several plays, a fictional diary and a collection of table talk and a satiric novel. Ethel Wilson's novels are set chiefly in Vancouver and the adjoining countryside.

She wrote with sensitivity and technical skill about the private world of emotion and conflict. Twentieth century Canadian Literature saw many important writers. It has writers of the First Nation, Inuit, Africa and Asian communities apart from the dominant French and English. The racial minority writers expected equity, parity and access like the mainstream writers of Canada. They also wanted the erasure of ethnic identity. As immigrants and settlers of different cultural backgrounds, they started writing novels with the history of Canada and their experience in it. Mordecai Richle who was born in 1930 was brought up in a Jewish family in Montreal. His *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) is about Jewish life in Montreal.

Brian Moore, a Belfast Irishman immigrated to Canada after the Second World War and wrote a novel on the experience of a middle-aged Irish immigrant in Canada. Michael Ondaatje, a south-Asian, is one among the immigrant writers. Michael Ondaatje was born in 1943 to Mervyn Ondaatje and Doris Gratiaen in Sri Lanka. They were prominent members among the inhabitants of what once comprised Ceylon's colonial society. Mervyn Ondaatje was a tea and rubber-plantation superintendent who was afflicted with alcoholism. Doris Gratiaen performed as a part-time radical dancer inspired by Isadora Duncan.

As a result of his father's alcoholism, Ondaatje's parents eventually separated in 1954 and he moved to England with his mother. He was educated initially at the St. Thomas College in Colombo. At the age of nine he migrated to England, and then to Montreal at the age of nineteen. He

received an undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto and a Master's Degree from Queen's University in Kingston.

He has written poetry, fiction, criticism and screen plays. Some of his novels are *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), *Running in the Family* (memoir) (1982), *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987) and *The English Patient* (1992) and *Anil's Ghost*. He was awarded the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize, the Prix Medicis, the Governor General's Award, and the Giller Prize for his novel *Anil's Ghost* in 2000. His most recent nonfiction work is *The Conversations: Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Films*.

His latest novel is entitled *Divisadero* (2007). Although he is best known as a novelist, Ondaatje's work also encompasses memoir, poetry, and film, and reveals a passion for defying the conventional form. Ondaatje's eventual career in fiction was boosted by the success of his book of poetry called *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970). It is an account of the factual and fictitious life of a famous outlaw, for which Ondaatje won the Governor General's award. He won the coveted award again in 1979 for a second book of poetry entitled *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do*. He has also written a book of poems *Handwriting* (1999) which "began the entrance of *Anil's Ghost*" ("*In the skin of a lion*", *The Hindu*, October 7, 2007). In the 1980s Ondaatje turned his attention to novels, publishing *Running in the Family* which is about his family's life in Ceylon.

In the Skin of a Lion is set in the 1930s Toronto. *The English Patient*, his classical novel, is set against the background of World War II. It won the Booker Prize in 1992, the very year of its publication.

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Anil's Ghost is about the central character Anil Tissera, a forensic pathologist. She is born in Sri Lanka and educated in the West. After her education she returns to Sri Lanka for the first time in fifteen years, to investigate unknown extrajudicial executions. The Cinematographic version of *The English Patient* appeared in 1996. It was produced and directed by Anthony Minghella and won the Academy Award. During his career Ondaatje has received numerous awards and honors. He was awarded the Ralph Gustafson Award in 1965; the Epstein Award in 1966; and the President's Medal from the University of Ontario in 1967.

In addition, Ondaatje was the recipient of the Canadian Governor-General's Award for Literature in 1971 and again in 1980. Also in 1980 he was awarded the Canada-Australia prize and in 1992 he was presented with the Booker McConnell Prize for his novel *The English Patient*. The characters of Michael Ondaatje reflect the major themes of fear, marginalization, betrayal, alienation, imprisonment, and fragmentation of the self. Alongside his writing, Ondaatje has taught at the York University in Toronto since 1971. He and his wife Linda Spalding make their home in Toronto and together edit the literary journal *Brick*. Having won the British Commonwealth's highest honor—the Booker Prize—Ondaatje has taken his rightful place as a contemporary literary master.

The novel *In the Skin of a Lion* is divided into three books. Book one has three units. Book two has two units and the third has two units.

This is a story told by a car driver to a young girl who stays awake to keep him company. Patrick, the protagonist of the novel, is born in Depot Creek

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and has lived there for twenty years since 1816. His father, Hazen Lewis, is an embarrassed man who is far removed from social life or the world around him. He has three farms and does jobs like cutting wood, haying, herding cattle. He is also talented in handling dynamite and an expert in moving logs along the Depot Lakes and the Napanee River. Patrick learns the trick of using dynamite from his father. Patrick as a small boy keenly observes some strangers, cows and farm passing through the driveway and longs for summer. He even stays awake at midnight to observe the insects and learns the details about them.

He remembers the adventure of recovering the dying cow from the frozen icy water with the help of his father. The second unit entitled " The Bridge" forms the center around which the action takes place. The bridge is built across the Don Valley.

It connects the east end with the center of the city. This difficult task is completed on October 18, 1918 and christened " Prince Edward". Before the completion of the work, two nuns unfortunately fall down from the bridge hidden in the darkness and one dies on the spot.

Thus the first child of Commissioner Harris, the bridge, has become a murderer. Another nun while falling is caught and saved by Nicholas Temelcoff in the mid-air under the central arch. Nicholas, a daredevil on the bridge, takes all the difficult jobs. As a builder " He descends into the air with no fear" (34).

He knows the complete structure of the bridge, his exact position in the bridge and easily glides down “ just like mercury slipping across a map” (35). Commissioner Harris never speaks to him but watches closely his manoeuvres. Nicholas never looks at others' eyes but hears the order without looking into their faces. He never listens to most conversations around him.

He also assumes that no one hears him. He has his own world of dreams. He has come from Macedonia to Canada without a passport in 1914 at the age of twenty-five to work in a Macedonian bakery. Like other immigrants he learns English from recorded songs and films. Ondaatje presents Patrick Lewis as a searcher under the title “ The Searcher”. Having spent twenty-five years in the country Patrick has now come up to the city of Toronto. He is an immigrant to the city without any money. In 1919 Ambrose Small, a millionaire, disappeared with a million dollars drawn from his bank account.

So his relatives announced a reward of eighty thousand dollars to anyone who could trace the whereabouts of Small. So everyone was looking for him. By 1921, one could be hired by a company at four dollars a week as a ‘ searcher’. This searcher roamed the city and the smaller towns dragging suspicious strangers into police stations to verify under the Bertillion process. After trying for various jobs in Toronto, Patrick Lewis becomes a searcher in 1929.

He goes in search of Small's mistress Clara Dickens and falls in love with her. He tries to remove Clara from Small. She is of the type for whom seduction is the natural progression of curiosity. This is how she gets to know more about

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a man. Clara seems to have entered his life like a spirit and disturbs him a lot. Through her Patrick comes to know Alice, a great stage actress.

Alice and Clara as friends have a happy moment with Patrick. To Patrick the name of Small sounds like a poison, like the word nicotine. Clara instructs Patrick not to follow her. He feels helpless to divert her attention away from the power of his unseen enemy and prevent her journey towards Ambrose. Patrick feels it meaningless to live without Clara. Alice meets Patrick again after several months. He is not interested in Alice. But except her, no one knows about Clara.

Clara's mother tells Patrick that Small has kept her daughter in a secrete place. Since Patrick is a searcher he easily identifies the place. He has known the place since his childhood days. Small is shocked to see Patrick and chases to kill him. He runs past the house he was born in, over the bridge he fished off, and up the stairs into the hostel room in Bellrock to save himself. The next day Clara comes to treat his injury and pleads Patrick to be away from her fearing Smalls crude behaviour. She leaves him undisturbed and gets some solace looking at Patrick's river. In the unit " Palace of Purification" the tunnel work to lay intake pipes for the new waterworks is under progress in Lake Ontario.

Patrick, with other workers, digs underneath one of the largest lakes in North America. They work under terrible conditions, pissing where they work, eating where someone else has left shit. Wherever the diggers come across rocks it is the duty of Patrick to dynamite it. He uses his skills learnt from his father. Building the Bloor Street Viaduct and the St.

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Clair Reservoir are the dreams of Commissioner Harris. He builds the Reservoir in Neo-Byzantine style. In the night the people of various nationalities gather in the doorway of the buildings for a public meeting. But “the noise of machines camouflaged their activity” (115). There the puppeteers perform different types of puppet shows but one puppet resembles a human figure. Patrick searches for the human puppet among the other puppets in the dark room and identifies it to be Alice Gull. She desires power but Patrick is self-sufficient and romantic.

She has a nine-year-old child called Hana born to Cato. Cato is a cruel and selfish man who seduced Alice. Cato is his war name.

He is so strange that he leaves some identification mark wherever he makes love with Alice. It is a kind of “sexual archaeology” (141). Cato's father came from Finland to Ontario as a logger. When Cato was in camp he has written many letters to Alice. But these letters take several months to reach her. One day in 1921, the owners of the company murder him for his struggle in the union battle.

But the murderers are acquitted in the inquiry. Patrick reads some of his letters to understand “the inferno of Cato's situation” (156). Most of the Macedonians and Greeks go to night shift to tanning factories, railway yards and bakeries.

They spend their time sitting with their families along the side of the lake. To them the landscape changes nothing but it brings them rest and alters

character as gradually as water on a stone. Later Patrick joins a leather factory.

The condition in the leather factory is very bad. The workers are allowed to clean themselves in water only for a few minutes. They try hard to remove the dyes from their skin. It looks like removing their skin. Cigar is the only thing they have, to forget the smell of the dye. They will surely die of consumption because " they had consumed the most evil smell in history..."(130). A small spark would ignite them and make them look like " a green men on fire" (131). They are paid one dollar per day and only the desperate marginalized sections take the job.

On the killer floors the cattle is killed and the skins are removed even before they die completely. Amidst soon-dying animals we see slow dying men due to tuberculosis, arthritis and rheumatism. It is upon the death of animals men live" (131). The workers in the leather factory are Macedonians, Poles and Lithuanians. These people are given English names and not called by their own names. They just have the pleasure of shower for few minutes in turns. The condition is so pathetic that " the dyers' wives would never taste or smell their husbands again in such a way; even if they removed all pigment and coarse salt crystal, the men would smell still of the angel they wrestled with in the well, in the pit" (132). The divide between the rich and the poor has been very great.

Alice is much worried about this divide. She even cautions Patrick to be careful with the rich people. Public meetings by foreigners are banned by the police Chief Draper who has imprisoned those who speak languages other

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than English. Patrick loves to read Joseph Conrad and Alice likes his theatrical style. They discuss politics and ideologies to overcome the sickening situation. The tannery workers call the others only by their language or nation. Patrick is called Canada. He knows others only through their body language.

Patrick has developed a kind of attachment to Alice and her daughter Hana. But Alice dislikes speaking of her past. Alice introduces her friend Nicholas Temelcoff, the owner of the Geranium Bakery, to Patrick. In the Riverdale Library Patrick collects various details on the bridge workers and the missing nun.

Patrick asks Nicholas about the nun because he saved her from death. But Nicholas, having started a new life in this country, is not bothered about the past. He is happy with his business and family. In "Remorse" we see Patrick's reaction to Alice's death. Patrick is interested in looking after Alice in her old age and even likes the idea of remaining with her forever.

But after her death he moves to the North, to Hunts Ville forgetting his past observing nature on his travel. Though the name Alice is a dead name it is permanent for him. As a carefree man not worried about the consequences, he boards the Algonquin Steamer with his fragile suitcase.

He moves towards North Portage never to return the same way. After firing the dock with explosives he hides in the Garden of the Blind in the Page Island. This news spreads throughout Muskokas.

In the dark under six stars and one moon he tries to escape in a boat.

Ondaatje gives the life of Caravaggio under the title "Caravaggio". He is a trained thief in unlit rooms, dismantling the legs of a kitchen tables and other objects. He is so skilled that he could even easily move the furniture out of his wife's bedroom and bring the sofa inside while she is sleeping.

He joined the company of thieves at the age of twenty-two. One day in order to escape from a house he jumps from some height and breaks his ankle. His trained red dog has failed to bark and alert the entry of the house owner. He manages to enter a mushroom factory to hide but is caught by Giannetta, a worker in the factory. But she falls in love with him and he marries her. In the Kingston Penitentiary prisoners Buck, Lewis, and Caravaggio are to paint the roof blue fifty yards above the ground to camouflage the prison roof with the colour of the ocean and the sky. Unmindful walk over the roof would lead to dangerous fall to the ground.

The blue even camouflaged them. Caravaggio is careful to remember the demarcation, which would help him to escape. Two of his friends paint him completely and help him to escape.

Caravaggio steals clothes and gloves from a shop and jumps onto a slow moving milk-train in Toronto and reaches Trenton in three hours. He wears a green sweater, black trousers, blue boots and a blue head. A kid considers Caravaggio a man from a Movie Company. On seeing the large scars in the neck in a mirror in the Redick's Door Factory, he is stunned. It reminds him of the gruesome attack in the prison where some dumb beastly men attacked him with homemade razor teeth, which swung in an arc to his

throat. When he touched his neck half of it was not there but managed to survive with the help of Patrick. It is a nightmare in the life of Caravaggio. Caravaggio runs to various places for safety and finally enters a cottage in the dark.

In the morning, clothing himself with the cloth stolen in the cottage, he meets a neighbor called Anne. She is interested to know more of Caravaggio. He phones his wife Giannetta to inform her of his position, without disturbing Anne. Anne likes the lake but fears the water creatures. She feels bereaved when the river is silent.

On seeing the blue on his neck she calls it ' aquamarine', a new word for him. He is happy of her generosity and leaves her for Toronto to meet his wife. In " Maritime Theater" Patrick plans to destroy the Pumping Station. After his release in January 1938, he goes to the Union Station, the place where Clara left him to see Ambrose. In the station he sees three large cages full of barking dogs. It sounds like the aristocrats claiming to be wrongly imprisoned. It also reminds him of his own imprisonment. After five years he goes to the Geranium Bakery to meet Nicholas Temelcoff who has been taking care of Hana since his imprisonment.

Dissident groups in Canada have been raising their voice for their rights even before the release of Patrick. So troops are deputed to protect the public buildings, especially the water works. Commissioner Harris fears the destruction of the waterworks by the dissidents. The crackdown on unions makes the rich happy and powerful. Caravaggio, with Patrick and Giannetta, plans to destroy the wealth of his enemies.

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In disguise he dances with the rich and cleverly collects information and addresses of them. Since only the rich were allowed in the area of the waterworks Patrick and Caravaggio with the support of a rich couple reach near the pumping station and chloroform them. They camouflage themselves in the dark and with much difficulty Patrick reaches the pumping station to dynamite the waterworks. Harris is tensed on hearing the false thump of the machine but feels relieved on seeing the military patrols near the pumping station. He is shocked to see Patrick entering his room with the blasting-box. He is unable to recognize Patrick because of the black grease and blood strained face with knuckles bleeding and one arm hanging loose at his side.

Patrick wants to avenge the death of his innocent people who were antagonized by the rich in power. No records are kept of those who gave their life for the country. The merciless murder of Alice Gull makes him more ferocious.

When Patrick faints, Harris immediately orders the officer to remove the blasting-box and to give him treatment. Clara's life with Ambrose Small is so complex. She tries to discover his real nature but she fails. " She saw his world as if she were tied to a galloping horse, caught glimpses of faces and argument and there was no horizon" (215). After his death Clara wants to join Patrick who is living with Alice's daughter Hana in an apartment in Albany Street in Marmora. At the end of the novel Patrick takes Hana with him to meet Clara.

She is eager to learn more about Clara. On the way Patrick tells her the whole story of Clara.