

**"If everything is stable, one is not going to move very far":
Reality and Illusion in Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table***

Jessica Barratt

Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table* is not your average coming-of-age narrative. While all the elements of a typical Bildungsroman are present – a youth on a journey, growth, and change – the novel exceeds expectations by offering a highly relatable and self-reflexive analysis of main character Michael as he comes to recognize and accept his past, and his identity. Moreover, Michael's various acts of self-reflection allow his present day counter-part to learn a certain truth about the nature of his own reality: that it is subjective, and therefore fragile and sometimes illusory. It is, I feel, the unique combination of these two processes that define Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table* as a "novel of formation" (Abrams and Harpham 255), one which portrays an intensely realistic depiction of a boy's journey toward self-knowledge.

As I've suggested, it is primarily due to his retrospective account that Michael may re-evaluate the events which occurred during his twenty-one days aboard the *Oronsay*, a ship bound for England in the early 1950's. Indeed, the story is continuously filtered through the mind of the eleven year old Michael and his present-day counterpart, thereby allowing him to objectively face his past and ultimately come to terms with it, and by extension, his identity. As the narrator comments: "over the years . . . lost corners of stories have a clearer meaning when seen in a new light, a different place" (Ondaatje 253). For instance, when he boards the ship, Michael describes himself as solitary and distant. It comes as no surprise, then, that he misjudges certain characters aboard the ship, and specifically, female ones. Take Emily de Saram (Michael's cousin) and Miss Perinetta Lasqueti (a mysterious passenger aboard the *Oronsay*) for example. First, Michael has trouble identifying with his cousin Emily de Saram despite their similarities: indeed, both experienced a relatively parentless upbringing (11), and Michael admits he often "modelled [him]self on her judgements" (10). For him, "there was a wide gulf between Emily's existence and mine, and I would never be able to cross it" (113). In much the same way, Miss Lasqueti is understood to be an odd and insatiable spinster (73) by Michael and his two friends, Cassius and Rhamadin. What Michael later discovers, however, is that both Emily and Miss Lasqueti have had to repress their femininity in a variety of ways, thus making them seem both cautious and mysterious. Emily, whose past bears mark of sexual harassment (11), was abused while aboard the *Oronsay* by the Hyderabad Mind, a member of the "Jankla Troupe" (170), and Miss Lasqueti, similarly damaged by an abusive

relationship, must leave the ship dressed as a man if she wishes to explore the countries where the Oronsay docks (105). It isn't until Michael arrives in England, however, that he discovers these truths regarding the lives of the women he had previously felt distanced from. As a result, Michael gains a truer and more satisfying understanding of them, thereby allowing him to puzzle together, and thus accept, the parts of his past that formed his present identity.

While these small discoveries are of importance, it becomes clear as the narrative progresses that one of the greatest unsolved mysteries of Michael's past concerns the escape of the Oronsay's prisoner, a man called Niemeyer. Throughout his recollection, Michael describes many interesting characters, three of which play a role in helping Niemeyer escape: the Hyderabad Mind (Sunil), a deaf-mute girl named Asuntha (Niemeyer's daughter), and (though unknowingly) Emily herself. Only when he visits his cousin years later, at her secluded home on Bowen Island, can Michael begin to piece together the events surrounding Niemeyer's escape. Until then, his impression of the event concerns a wounded prisoner trying to escape, the abduction of the innocent Asuntha, as well as their subsequent fall into the sea (Ondaatje 241-3). And this event has affected the rest of his life: as Michael laments, "[he] didn't know if what [he] had seen was what [he] thought [he] had seen" (238). With the help of Emily, however, Michael learns that Niemeyer was actually Asuntha's father, and Sunil (the Hyderabad Mind) was deeply involved in the attempt to free Niemeyer (178-86). Thus, Michael's anger regarding what seemed to be two needless deaths is thereby diminished in light of this new information, for he understands that the daughter, both literally and figuratively, held the key to her father's escape (255). In short, Michael is finally able to lay his past to rest, and begin to accept who he has become.

Although it is "painful to realize that nothing [is] permanent" (Ondaatje 72), especially in terms of one's memories, Michael eventually understands that the reality around him is variable; clearly, his discovery of the truth surrounding the Oronsay's prisoner speaks to that. It should be noted, though, that the seeds of this very truth were planted during his time aboard the ship. Indeed, there are several instances when young Michael, who already possessed a "skill in lying" (Ondaatje 13), uncovers previously hidden truths about his surroundings while still on the Oronsay. For instance, with the help of Miss Lasqueti, Michael realizes that his own aunt had been spreading rumours about the ship's prisoner (18), and later, Michael learns that the Hyderabad Mind uses deception in order to make his audience believe he has psychic abilities. Thus, it is during these occasions of disillusionment that Michael "witness[es] for the first time what possibly took place behind the thin curtain of art" (45), and, in conjunction with the discoveries that took place once his journey ended, ultimately help Michael discover and accept that his reality is subjective, and therefore fallible, a truth which affects how he views his own past.

It is, I believe, due to Michael's self-reflexive analysis of his own life that he comes to understand more of himself, and is able to truly accept his past. His acceptance, too, is based on his eventual understanding regarding the illusory nature of reality. This duality, I feel, engenders the kind of maturation process that fulfills the requirements of a typical Bildungsroman. Ondaatje's genius, then, is in the way he structures the narrative to reflect the way in which Michael recognizes that his memories are fallible, in that they may be affected by the "memor[ies] of [his] own from later" (Ondaatje 199). As Michael says near the end of the novel, "it is only we, the spectators, who can read [a] face as someone who knows the future" (200). In other words, and to conclude, only when one comes to know and accept the details surrounding his or her past can one surpass the limitations set by one's perceptions and ultimately come to accept themselves, knowing they are as fallible as all others.

References

- Abrams, M. H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 10th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2012. Print.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *The Cat's Table*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2012. Print.