

# "The English Patient Reposed in his Bed like a [Fisher?] King": Elements of Grail Romance in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

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Volume 22, Number 1, Winter 1997

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc122\\_1art02](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc122_1art02)

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Publisher(s)

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Fledderus, B. (1997). "The English Patient Reposed in his Bed like a [Fisher?] King": Elements of Grail Romance in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 22(1), 19–43.

Article abstract

Michael Ondaatje's novel is rooted in a body of literature for which the term "romance" was originally used: twelfth- and thirteenth-century retellings of Arthurian legends. The novel contains character and plot elements that are analogous to certain character types of Arthurian romance and to the earliest written narratives of quest for the holy grail. Examining the fisher king, the wasteland and other romance elements in *The English Patient* enables readers to develop a more critical judgement and interpretation of this (post)modern novel.

# "THE ENGLISH PATIENT REPOSED IN HIS BED LIKE A [FISHER?] KING": ELEMENTS OF GRAIL ROMANCE IN ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

Bill Fledderus

The word on the street and in newspaper commentary about Michael Ondaatje's 1992 novel *The English Patient*, especially since a movie version came out in 1996, is that the story marks a return to "the good old-fashioned romance." This common quip bears a second glance, for beyond the novel's superficial connections with thirty years of mass-market, formula love-stories and with 1930s Hollywood movie plots, this novel is self-consciously rooted in a body of literature with which the term "romance" was originally used: twelfth- and thirteenth-century retellings of Arthurian legends. The characters and plot of *The English Patient* are in fact analogous in very significant respects to certain character types of Arthurian romance and to the earliest written narratives of quest for the holy grail.

The connection is not an obvious one, however. While *The English Patient* revels in a plethora of overt intertextual references, explicit references to Arthurian romances are few and far between. Nonetheless, careful examination reveals that Ondaatje's use of Arthurian elements is central and crucial to the novel. More specifically, the novel is informed by the early anthropological school of romance criticism (c. 1915), in which Dame Jessie Weston applied the ideas of Sir J. G. Frazer to make a now well-known anthropological reading of the grail quest. Weston's reading focuses on the fisher king, the wasteland and other romance elements as holdovers from the ritual practices of ancient fertility cults. Examining the exploitation of these materials in *The English Patient* will help readers develop a more sensitive aesthetic and critical judgement and interpretation of this (post)modern novel.<sup>1</sup>

These various texts and authors from different eras of history have many connections. Frazer, at the turn of the century, saw that a diversity of ancient fertility myths had at their root a common attempt to explain the changing of seasons and the passing of generations. Weston discovered elements of these same myths in Arthurian romance, and focused her analysis beyond the obvious Christian symbolism in romance to the pagan (Celtic) substructure on which it had been constructed. Ondaatje sets his story in the age of Frazer and Weston, the age of the (European) world wars when the simplicity and unifying power of a mythopoeic worldview may have seemed an attractive haven from the disasters brought by purportedly Christian nations upon each other. Ondaatje's novel follows the lead of Weston's criticism and undercuts Christian uses of these myths in favour of a celebration of the possibility of new life and community amid war. Of course, the celebration is tentative and the community is temporary, but such are the characteristics of the age — call it late capitalist or post-modern if you like — which has developed since then. Ondaatje uses the myths to affirm that individual human transcendence can be found in temporary, intense human community, as well as to affirm that an even broader social transcendence can be found in a cyclical (mythological) approach to history. He is also careful to undercut the possible ethno-political appropriation of the myths (e.g., Weston's modernist exaltation of Celtic roots) in favour of an affirmation of unity amid human diversity.

Many modern novels have preceded Ondaatje in their use of Arthurian romance as a structuring device. From Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* to Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, examples (even purely postmodern ones such as Donald Barthelme's *The King*) continue to appear regularly. A number of bibliographies, such as E. L. Smith's, have been compiled (see Works Cited; Smith excludes more straightforward retellings, for which see Goodman, Reimer, or Lacy). In many cases, fiction with Arthurian underpinnings follows the "mythic method" advocated by other early modernists such as T. S. Eliot: to make parallels between daily life and ancient myth in order to "give shape and significance to the immense panorama of anarchy and futility which is contemporary history" (681, and cited in Smith 51). In Eliot's own practice of this method, particularly in his 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, he began a

tradition of incorporating Arthurian myth and legend as interpreted by Weston. Weston's book *From Ritual to Romance*, which relies heavily on Frazer's mammoth *Golden Bough*, attempted to show continuity between the ancient cults of Tammuz-Adonis-Attis and the grail-romance period in twelfth-century Britain and France. Though Weston's thesis has never been well regarded by Arthurian scholars, the cultural stature of Eliot's *The Waste Land* has lent her peculiar "ritual interpretation" of grail motifs a continuing literary allure.<sup>2</sup>

The mythic method as distilled in this citation from Eliot has been adopted by a number of writers involved in or dealing with war, as a way of making order in a time of wide-scale destruction (e.g., *The Waste Land* and David Jones's *In Parenthesis*). Myth crosses international boundaries and offers apparently timeless or continually reinterpretable truths, and its historical authority and unified vision seem especially attractive in times when the boundaries are being redrawn, whether as a result of international war (e.g., the historical and geographic backdrop of *The English Patient*), or as a result of ethno-religious infighting (e.g., the former Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka). Myth may also be appealing to those whose personal boundaries of identity and ethnicity are being redrawn as a result of migration, an increasingly visible population in Canada and around the world. Generally speaking, the shifting confusions and complexities of today's postmodern moment offer rough parallels to earlier eras when myth was popular, and thus it would not be inappropriate to consider the relevance of the mythic method to Ondaatje's wartime novel.

All of Ondaatje's writings have incorporated myth of one sort or another. Some of his earliest poems retold stories from the Trojan war, others were part of a more general project of constructing a Canadian mythology, and yet others played with Eliot's method by mythologizing family life. Ed Jewinski discusses Ondaatje's master of arts thesis, "Mythology in the Poetry of Edwin Muir," as a significant example of his early preoccupation with myth (46). Although Ondaatje has distanced himself from Eliot since then, his writings have continued to resonate with the Modernists' interest in myth, even for example in his use of pop-myth figures such as Billy the Kid and jazzman Buddy Bolden.<sup>3</sup> Scholars must also go back to an early essay to find a written Ondaatjean definition of

myth, which summarizes it as being "biblical, surreal, brief, imagistic," and rooted in "dramatic sources" ("O'Hagan's" 25). George Elliott Clarke has expanded this definition to include "exotic" (i.e., baroque, grand, gaudy), "amoral" (i.e., untrue or fictitious), "violent" and "recurrent" in order to apply the definition to Ondaatje's own use of mythology (3). That all of these descriptors still prove to be accurate for *The English Patient* suggests an important continuity in Ondaatje's diverse oeuvre.

A more recent example in Ondaatje's writing, his 1987 novel, *In the Skin of a Lion* (which features the first appearances of Hana and Caravaggio), takes its title from and patterns some of its characterization and structure on the *Gilgamesh Epic*, a relationship discussed at length by Gordon Gamlin and Carol Bevan (see Works Cited). The *Gilgamesh* narrative and the Sumerian-Babylonian culture from which it comes are interests which Ondaatje shares with Frazer, Weston and Eliot. The attraction of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (and its contemporary cultural manifestations such as the cult of Tammuz) is their historical age, since textual records from this period are among the oldest in existence and are evidence of a tradition which has affected many cultures. These texts suggest themselves as a potential bridge between Western culture and the cultures of the Indian subcontinent such as Sikhism, which have become prominent in Canadian cities in recent decades. Weston also sought to highlight such ancient West-East links in keeping with the drive to unity common to the anthropology of her day. Perhaps interpreting Arthurian romance as a repository of ancient lore appealed to the archeological detective in such early modernist scholars. In fact such interpretation proves central to *The English Patient*, set in Weston's own era.

Assuming the importance of grail romance to the novel, a question arises as to why, in a novel bursting with explicit literary references, romances are not more explicitly alluded to. Such explicit allusion is entirely unnecessary in a novel, of course, and would distract from its effectiveness if foregrounded. But many other sources are documented in detail on the acknowledgment page, and Ondaatje is known for tricky documentation. Thus taking the omission as an intentional subversion of documentation also suggests itself as a fruitful approach, especially since it bears an uncanny number of parallels to the practices of Arthurian ro-

mance writers, with whom false attribution and unacknowledged borrowing were common. In the Parzival romance, for example, the author cites a Provençal poet named Kyot as a source, though the attribution is considered a red herring. Other romances appeal to a master Bleheris, which critics also take to be untruthful. The *Perlesvaus* romance describes itself as a translation from a Latin book, a doubtful attribution. And the Prose Lancelot falsely claims to be written by Walter Map. The entire genre grew up as a result of the appropriation of plot elements, particularly borrowings from the writings of Chrétien (see Norris Lacy's *Encyclopedia* on "authorship"). Ondaatje has followed the example of romance authors in his surreptitious subversion of the documentary tradition, turning it on its head through "cavalier distortion of his sources" (Barbour 180) and in his inclusion of brazen anachronisms such as the Buddy Bolden's radio episode (Ondaatje, *Coming* 93) or, here, Hana's citation of Anne Wilkinson, "'Love . . . can tear itself through the eye of a needle'" (288). Today such methods are also commonly seen as a postmodern strategy to draw attention to the untrustworthiness and essentially revisionist nature of intertextual references.

Despite the paucity of explicit romance references in *The English Patient*, many of its aesthetically surprising moves appear sensible in light of romance. Another introductory example is the ephemeral appearance of self-consciousness on the part of the narrator at the novel's end: "She is a woman I don't know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life" (301). Admittedly, the brief foregrounding of the narrator is common in Ondaatje's endings, as Solecki has noted: "each of the longer works begins and ends more than once. The books don't so much end as dissolve suggestively back into the author . . . and into their successors" (338). But this practice provides an interesting comparison with the ending of Chrétien's *Perceval*, which calls attention to its author, since in fact Chrétien died before he could finish it. The unfinished nature of his work is important to an appreciation of the ambiguous identities of his characters and the suspense of grail romance in general. Certainly the many facets of grail character types would have been less rich if so many writers had not been inspired to attempt to write conclusions to his story.<sup>4</sup>

These introductory connections show potential and superficial links between *The English Patient* and Arthurian romance, but the heart of the comparison is found in character typology (and narrative structure, which will be addressed later).

The title character of *The English Patient* offers perhaps the clearest connection with Arthurian legend. He shares a number of significant attributes with the fisher king figure of Arthurian romances, including the fact that both are identified by a somewhat mysterious wound. In grail romances the wound is generally located in the thigh area, resulting in a characteristically lame and bedridden fisher king. Similarly, the burned patient is unable to leave his bed, where he "reposes grandly" (90), and even "like a king" (14). And though his main wounds are head-to-foot burns, his upper legs are especially damaged: "Above the shins the burns are the worst. Beyond purple. Bone" (1).

According to Weston, "this central figure is much confused [among the different grail romances]; generally termed Le Roi Pesecheur, he is sometimes . . . incapacitated by the effects of a wound, and is known by the title of Roi Mehaigné, or Maimed King. Sometimes he is in extreme old age" (118). As Weston would have it, his thigh wound is a euphemism for impotence, as is explicitly revealed in late romances such as *Parzival* and *Sone de Nansai* (23, 25, 44). The thigh-wound motif is common in romance, with Perceval's father and Tristram supposedly suffering similar fates. Ondaatje appears to follow this school in his depiction of the patient, whose penis is characterized as "sleeping like a seahorse" (1), an appropriately piscine expression for a fisher king. The patient's impotence or chastity is also implied in a parallel (94) between him and the aged King David of 1 Kings 1, who has no sexual relations with Abishag, the virgin sent to bed with him to help him keep warm. The parallel between the patient and David is significant in light of Arthurian romance, wherein heroic genealogies are often traced to David (see Guerin). And as becomes commonplace when consulting Frazer, one finds a link back to Tammuz: King David reportedly adopted his name in association with Tammuz, in the manner of the previous Canaanite kings of Jerusalem (v, 18-19).

In addition to the reclining fisher king, many grail romances contain a scene in which a dead knight is discovered on an altar in

a candle-lit room. *Wauchier* and *Manessier* (see my Appendix and Lacy for the various romances) set such a scene in the “perilous chapel,” whereas *Bleheris* (Weston’s name for *Pseudo-Wauchier*) sets its scene in the fisher king’s castle (116, 175-88). In *The English Patient* candles are often found in the patient’s presence; a particularly resonant example describes Hana’s dislike of “his lying there with a candle in his hands, mocking a deathlike posture, wax falling un-noticed onto his wrist” (62). A similar comparison of the patient with the sculpture of the dead knight in Ravenna recurs several times (96, 135).<sup>5</sup>

Weston traces the motif of the reclining dying noble to the first half of ancient fertility rituals, which included a mock funeral procession. She argues for the existence of a basic ritual in which a local god-king or ruler associated with the principle of life and fertility (or, in later forms, his effigy) underwent a mock death and was carried in a public procession on a bier (53-61). Her primary examples are the ancient cults of Adonis and Attis who, like the fisher king, were wounded in the genitals (48). The funeral procession practised by these cults informs what happens to the patient after his crash: “They found my body and made me a boat of sticks and dragged me across the desert” (5) in a “palanquin” (9). The element of public religious worship discussed by Weston is also suggested in a passage which describes the patient “on an altar of hammock” imagining “in his vanity hundreds of them around him” (6).

After the death and funeral, the ancient rituals usually went on to dramatize a resurrection. Weston appropriates Frazer’s concept of the “slain god” in pointing out that this resurrection reveals the motivation for the whole ritual, namely to ensure or encourage the coming of the rainy season. Frazer’s *Golden Bough* contains four chapters on fertility rituals involving the burning to death of kings (v, 110-222). Although these chapters are not cited in *From Ritual to Romance*, they certainly inform Weston’s thesis — and Ondaatje’s burned patient. It seems unlikely that Frazer’s discussion of Lydian kings (v, 182) including Candaules and Gyges, would not be connected to the citation of that story in *The English Patient*, 234-5 (from Herodotus i, 8-12).

Weston’s interpretation suggests that the ritual may also have signified other cycles of fertility as well, such as the replacing of one human generation by the next — thus the marked stress



on the fisher king's age often found in romances. Weston refers to *Diû Crône*, for example, in which the fisher king turns out to be in fact "really dead, and only compelled to retain the semblance of life till the task of the Quester be achieved" (115-16). In comparison the burned patient, though only about fifty years old, appears much like a shrunken old man. The intimate way he talks about historical events (e.g., his discussion of "Pico and Lorenzo and Poliziano," 56-58) makes him seem even more ancient. The patient implies that he already considers himself dead when he quotes the line "'Death means you are in the third person'" (247), a parallel with the animated dead of *Diû Crône*. The patient is also referred to elsewhere as a ghost (28, 45) and an effigy (161).

In many romances the fisher king's disability is mirrored by the wounding or wasting of his land, usually described in terms of drought but also in terms of war, as in the *Peredur* (Weston 18). Weston feels that her work proves "that in the Grail King we have a romantic literary version of that strange, mysterious figure whose presence hovers in the shadowy background of our Aryan race; the figure of a divine or semi-divine ruler, at once god and king, upon whose life and unimpaired vitality, the existence of his land and people directly depends" (62). This ancient concept of a sympathetic, magical tie of health between king and kingdom is clearly illustrated in ancient texts such as Herodotus (iv, 68), a major intertext for Frazer and, it turns out, an even more important one for *The English Patient* than is readily apparent in the descriptions of the patient's use of it as a bedside book.<sup>6</sup> The patient's situation offers obvious parallels with Weston's wounded land scenario, since he is surrounded by a world at war, a blasted Italy, a local area where food is scarce, and a ruined villa. In the flashbacks to Almásy's explorations, the scene is one of barren desert covering ruins of once-thriving settlements.

The ruined villa brings to mind the grail castle, Corbenic, of the Vulgate Cycle. Corbenic is not a ruin *per se*, but is lonely, desolate and apparently abandoned, an enchanted, otherworldly place which disappears or is difficult to find even after one has been there before (see Lacy). *The English Patient* follows the romance model in stressing the villa's isolated nature (29, 31) and its age (33). Its many past uses as nunnery, hospital, home for the Medici and German barracks may suggest new appearances. The name

Corbenic, which comes from the French words for “blessed body (of Christ),” would be entirely appropriate for the place where the patient experiences his (redemptive?) bodily suffering.

The ruined villa with its ruined library (11) is emblematic of the wasted land, as suggested by the blurring of land and building with its “doors into landscape” (13). This blurring is also suggested in a later passage: “There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth” (43). The reference here to *the* earth (at the end of a sentence in which the definite article is repeatedly omitted) suggests that the condition of the villa mirrors that of the entire planet, and perhaps alludes to the potential for global destruction in the nuclear age about to dawn.

The wounded patient is also connected with the political state of the land. He wonders: “This country — had I charted it and turned it into a place of war?” (260). War informs all of the grail romances, originating as they did in the First Crusade, and reflecting its us-versus-them spirit. In *The English Patient* the author draws explicit parallels between medieval warfare and the Allied campaign in Italy (69). Herodotus’s *Histories* deals extensively with wars, with questions of national boundaries and citizenship, and with nomadic peoples (e.g., the Scythians in iv, 1-143, portrayed as a strange “other” compared with the settled Greeks). War runs throughout the patient’s favourite book as it runs through the most crucial events of his life. His entire identity, as it is uncovered or perhaps imagined in the novel, is reshaped by war.

The patient’s guilt about contributing to the North African campaign can be traced to Weston’s wasteland scenario, where such guilt is both political and sexual-moral. For example, in *Elucidation* the blighting of the land — for a thousand years, until the coming of King Arthur — is reportedly caused by the rape of a group of generous dryads committed by King Amangons and his knights (see Weston 172). Another example of this moral aspect can be found in the decline of Camelot, which according to most accounts began in adultery, between either Lancelot and Guinevere or Arthur and Morgause. These examples of sexual transgression offer rough antecedents to Almásy’s adultery with Katharine, and its tragic results, and may suggest some sort of fated judgement. As John Russell argues (regarding the 1996 film version of *The Eng-*

lish Patient), "The Count's and Katherine's [sic] fiery end is a *moral* allegory. . . . It is fitting that they should burn, in effect, in their own heat. . . . But the . . . deeper point is that it is part of being human that we find ourselves so in thrall to love that we are often powerless over it. This is an old story from Plato: love as divine madness that mortals are ill-equipped to handle" (A15). Weston notes that this kind of explanation is found in *Parzival* and *Sone de Nansai*: "the wound of the King was a punishment for sin, he had conceived a passion for a Pagan princess" (122). Even Almásy describes Katharine and himself as "sinners in a holy city" (154), and Katharine as Eve (144) who, with Adam, according to the Bible, caused humanity's fall into sin.

A final parallel between the burned patient and the fisher king exists in the uncertainty of their identities. Understanding who the fisher king is and how the quest is to be achieved are usually mysterious for most questers — and, presumably, first-time audiences — throughout individual romances. Similarly, the patient's identity is at first as mysterious as that of a preserved "bogman" from the Celtic age, to use one of the novel's expressions (96).

Further mystery is associated with the fisher king as a result of contradictions within the complex romance tradition. For example, in some romances the king is either the biblical character Joseph of Arimathea or Nicodemus or one of their descendants, guardians of the holy grail (Weston 115). Slight variants in the original French spellings have resulted in the word "fisher" sometimes being replaced by the word for "sinner."

Such uncertainty is exacerbated in the realm of criticism by Weston's dismissal of the Christian associations suggested by a *fisher* king and her assertion that the fish imagery is essentially pre-Christian, since it symbolizes life and fertility in many non-Christian cultures (123-36). The continuous supply of holy food from the grail found in some romances can refer, in Weston's opinion, either to the eucharist or preferably to the mystic meals of vegetation cults (129-32).

All these complexities and more, often mysterious and confusing, inform the identity of the patient — mystified in the first half of the novel (he "could have been the enemy he was fighting in the air," 6) and tentative in the second half. Christian symbolism is used with special duplicity to characterize the patient. For

example, one of the opening images describes him with an "antlered hat of fire" (6), an image which can suggest the devil's horns, the horned/antlered king of Celtic Britain and perhaps a saintly halo. He is also termed the "eternally dying man" (115) and one who has "fallen from the sky" (18), from the "war in heaven" (5) — all three being Miltonic (or Blakean or Shelleyan) images which could make him Christ coming to earth or an angel or the devil being thrown from heaven. (The "eternally dying man" also suggests the cyclicity of Frazer's slain god and Weston's fisher king.) The patient is said to have been made "inhuman by desert" (238), which may also be reminiscent of Christ or the devil at their meeting at Christ's temptation in the desert (or of the desert saint tradition of early Christianity, since he is called the "despairing saint," 1). He is attributed the "hipbones of Christ" (1), and has been "anointed" (6) and attended by a figure that is both an archangel (6) and John the Baptist (9), the latter especially suggested by expressions such as "beheaded" and "lost its civilization." His association with fire (his "head is on fire," 5) and his black shrunken form may be reminiscent of traditional Christian depictions of demons or apostles. Telling of Katharine's death, he even wonders, "Had I been her demon lover? Had I been Madox's demon friend?" (260), a phrase clearly connected with Romantic inversions of traditional Christian notions of good and evil. Nonetheless Ondaatje refuses a clear unidimensional use of these Christian elements (whether traditional or Romantic) in favour of a characteristically postmodern, ambiguous balancing act, to the end that the patient's identity raises questions and suspense without definitively answering them.

Caravaggio may conclude that the patient is the Hungarian count, Almásy, but as Stephen Scobie has noted, this is not certain. Under the influence of morphine the patient's narrative (or as Scobie would have it, Ondaatje's narrative) "becomes complicit with Caravaggio's desire [for a spy drama]. Whether Caravaggio's version of the English patient's identity is true or not scarcely matters, but what does matter is the fact that the story he tells satisfies, precisely, the need for story" (98). While Scobie's idea of complicity makes the uncertainty of the patient's identity more acceptable, an appeal to the fisher king's uncertain identity as a precedent strengthens the argument and grounds it in an intertextual reference.

These identity questions have so far ignored the existence of a "real-life" historical Count Almásy in favour of a mythological approach, the reason being that historical elements in Ondaatje's writing have always been chosen for their indeterminacy. Since many of the details are unknown about such characters (e.g., Buddy Bolden or Almásy) Ondaatje can endow his works some of the prestige of historical scholarship while feeling free to be creative. As Ondaatje has described his approach: "Why should I hold facts sacred when they can be more valuable as clues, beginnings to truth?" (Witten 10). The technique is postmodern in the way it simultaneously validates historical texts while suggesting their unreliability.

The fact that the historical Almásy was Hungarian is nonetheless in keeping with the indeterminate identity of Ondaatje's patient. Weston's scenario, along with the languages, religions, and cultures of Hana, Caravaggio, and even Kip, can be traced back to a hypothetical single root culture dating from between 10,000 and 5,000 B.C., known as Indo-European — or, in Weston's day, as Aryan. Since the Greeks, Celts, and Indians all migrated from this source, some nineteenth-century observers began to credit this "race" as the greatest in world history, an idea that was being discredited by scholars in Weston's time, but which nonetheless was put to nefarious political use by the Nazis. But the patient, who seems the epitome of all things English (and thus in Weston's scenario, Celtic/Aryan) turns out not to be some archetype of the English folk at all, but perhaps a member of an enemy nation, Hungary. This nationality is appropriate to such a multivalent and politically ambivalent character, since the Hungary of 1944-45 was characterized by ambivalent or divided political loyalty. Being lumped into the Russian sphere of influence at Yalta in 1945 was largely against its will, as became evident in the uprising of 1956. Historically, the Magyars in culture and language have an entirely different root than Indo-European, and thus the patient is of a racial otherness that undercuts Weston's trumpeting of the fisher king scenario as the artefact of a specific cultural matrix.

In fact the patient has a strong desire to have nothing to do with ethnic or political identity (see 138-39), a revulsion not at all in keeping with the real Almásy's commitment to Nazism. The patient's anti-nationalism suggests an awareness of modernist er-

rors, exemplified in Weston's case in the racial undertones in her apparent exaltation of the pre-Christian elements of Arthurian romance, and exemplified more broadly — and, in hindsight, more obviously — in the drastic reinterpretation of the concept of Aryan culture by the nineteenth-century commentators whose statements were soon to be used to attempt to legitimate genocidal Nazi policies. The patient's prescient position is ultimately in harmony with the postmodern fear of exalting a new but inevitably biased orthodoxy, and it resonates with the social position of postmodern Canadian immigrants such as Ondaatje who refuse labels like Ceylonese or Sri-Lankan-Canadian, and writers like Ondaatje who reject a narcissistic concept of "Canadian literature" in favour of one that consciously aims to hold its own on the stage of world literature (witness the international scope of the journal, *Brick*, that Ondaatje co-edits).

In the grail romances the fisher king figure is crucial to the quest but is not the central figure — that role is played by the hero, Perceval (or Galahad in later romances), to whom Ondaatje's character Kirpal (Kip) Singh corresponds. Perceval, a travelling knight, comes upon the fisher king and attempts to perform some feat that he does not fully understand, often the asking of a question. Achieving the quest usually resolves the situation by restoring the king to health or youth and improving the land, whether wasted or not (23). Variants of this pattern can be found in later romances: Weston's favourite example is *Diù Crône*, in which the success of the quest brings freedom to the king by allowing him to die, and *Perlesvaus* portrays a hero who does not succeed in time, causing the king to die without cure or restoration. In most cases, the successful hero becomes the fisher king's successor as guardian of a magical object and consort to the queen.

Tracing the scenario back to the ritual funeral, Weston suggests that the role of the quester emerged from variants in which a healer and/or priest brought in a new, younger actor (or stepped in himself) to play the role of the resurrected god (34-51). This role informs the one played by Kip, who heals the land by defusing bombs. Kip's nickname is said to relate to a type of fish (87), an appropriate name for the "knight" (273) who is to become the fisher king's successor. The patient himself suggests this succession

when he says that "Kip is me younger" (116). Weston also relates the archetypal ritual resurrection in her scenario to an ancient celebration of the "freeing of the waters" observed in India to commemorate Indra's freeing of the seven rivers (26-27).<sup>7</sup>

Kip is often described in relation to saints, angels, and gods. Both the patient and Hana think of him as a "warrior saint" (209, 273), and Kip himself speaks of warrior saints, perhaps Sikh ones (217). Nonetheless, mythology concerning Christian warrior saints relates in many ways to grail romance. Consider for example three of the most prominent saints: St. George, patron saint of England and slayer of the Libyan dragon, whose legend has much the same flavour as Arthurian romance (and whose cult Frazer associates in v, 78 with the begetting of children via ritual prostitution throughout the eastern Mediterranean); St. Michael, patron saint of France and archangel-captain of heaven's armies, often portrayed as an androgynous youth (see *The English Patient*, 90); and St. Longinus, the soldier who pierced Christ's side with his spear, an allusion which suggests Weston's theories once again, since she associates a Celtic version of this lance with the fisher king (68). When Hana holds Kip, he is compared to "an Indian goddess . . . wheat and ribbons" (218), an image suggesting both virtue and his role as a renewer of fertility. This saintly quality may have roots in later grail romances which are marked by ascetic alterations, even to the point where the stainless hero Galahad is added (Weston 207).

Both *Perceval* and *Parzival* describe the young Perceval as the innocent son of an absent father, a description which could also fit Kip. Perceval's first sight of knights, whom he mistakes for angels, inspires him to leave his mother to seek King Arthur, whereas the youthful Kip goes to England, the legendary homeland of Arthur. Perceval trains under an isolated knight named Gornemant, a parallel to Kip's training under Lord Suffolk (181-92).

According to *Bleheris* Perceval's quest begins when a nameless knight is slain in his company and Perceval dons the dead knight's armour, an emotionally exact parallel to Kip's continuation after the death of Suffolk and his group: "He was expected to be the continuing vision" (196). Perceval fails in his first visit to the grail castle, because he follows his teacher too literally or slavishly. He fails to ask the "unspelling question" because of Gorne-

mant's dictum that asking questions is rude — an event similar to Kip's uncritical adoption of the Western ways of his teacher.

During the learning period, the grail hero also usually has an experience in a chapel. Kip's visit to the Sistine chapel is the most remarkable analogue (78), while his sleeping in other chapels is reminiscent of Perceval's experiences in the "perilous chapel" and of other incidents of the hero falling asleep (e.g., *Diû Crône* and *Bleheris*). (Other examples of his being lowered to a bomb in a pit, or even, knight-like, into a chalk horse (171), may faintly suggest this kind of heroic episode in the underworld or the dragon's lair.)

During Perceval's visit to the castle, he notices a lamenting woman in the company of the fisher king, the role filled in *The English Patient* by Hana, the patient's "squire" (135). In some romances, the lamenting woman also keeps a relic that is partnered with the grail, which may perhaps be echoed in Hana's possession of the crucifix/scarecrow (14). Weston traces this adjunct figure back to the women who would have lamented (and later celebrated) at the fertility ritual (47), women whose participation may have involved ceremonial sexual unions. Hana's birthday meal (267) may also be reminiscent of the mystery meals of Attis (Weston 147), especially in the sense of community closeness it exhibits and encourages. Weston points to the "Loathly Damsel" in *Perlesvaus* who has lost her hair as a result of the hero's failure to ask the question (51) and offers as ritual precedents a number of examples in which fertility ceremonies involved the cutting of hair (48; and see Frazer v, 37-38, 225 and Herodotus i, 199). In the novel a contrast is made between Hana's cut hair (219) and Kip's long hair, a sign of his vitality and his religion (217), and the novel concludes mentioning Hana's restored long hair (301), her children (300, replacing the one she aborted or killed, 85) and Kip's children (302), perhaps the indirect products of their brief healing relationship (a sexual one, and thus relevant to fertility concerns).

To expand briefly on the identification of Hana, it can also be said that both Hana and her antecedents play nun-like roles. Caravaggio accuses Hana, for example, of throwing "herself out of the world to love a ghost" (45). In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Hana's mother Alice was formerly a nun, and here the villa is a former convent. In acting as a nun Hana also follows the lead of Guinevere, whose last days were as a nun. Hana admits her devotion to the patient



can be seen as both that of a daughter to her father and that of a wife to her husband (84). The daughter-father aspect first brings to mind the idea that the patient is a replacement for her dead step-father, Patrick, who died of burns like the patient (84, 90, 296). But a father-daughter relationship is also in harmony with the nun-devotee idea, since nuns not only consider themselves married to God but also to be, like all Christians, his adopted children. (Caravaggio, who reflects elements of both the knightly and fisher-kingly role, thinks that Hana reminds him of his wife, 39.)

Like nuns to God, like daughter to father, like the fertility queen to the fisher king, Hana and Katharine are in many ways adjuncts to a symbolically more important male. Like the quest hero, Hana exists first of all to heal the fisher king, though in *The English Patient* she also effects healing in herself and in Kip. It may not be too far to suggest that Hana is a madonna figure: recall how the patient comments, as Hana leans over him, "There are not brunettes among Florentine madonnas" (96). It is surprising that Ondaatje's portrayals of women such as Hana, often celebrated by critics as fully-dimensional, have not been the object of more feminist criticism, since at its most basic level Ondaatje's female character palette seems limited to either madonna or whore, nurturing saint or temptress. Such a reductionist view of women is no more realistic than the roles allotted for women in ancient fertility rituals or for the queens of romance. (Ondaatje's main innovation seems to be in having characters flip roles: witness Hana crawling into Kip's tent for a rendez-vous "like a saint," 128.) Such feminist criticism, which could have some valid points in light of contemporary gender standards<sup>8</sup> would need to be tempered by an acceptance or at least understanding of the limits extant in the novelistic project Ondaatje seems to have set for himself, namely to illustrate links between the world-war era and grail romance.

In the rituals cited by Weston, the actor is often brought back to life by a priest or healer, but in some variants he is called back by a beloved goddess figure, either sister or paramour (Weston 34-51). Hana has attributes of both a priest-healer and a beloved goddess, as previously cited examples suggest (i.e., she is a nun-like nurse), and also as found in the gardening activities with which she is occupied from the opening page of the book. A related analogous character in grail romance, Elaine of Corbenic,

assists the grail keeper and, to engender Galahad, tricks Lancelot into thinking she is Guenevere. Hana's waiting for the water in the fountain (92) may prefigure a more total "freeing of the waters" that lies ahead, and most likely is meant to connect her to the queen figure of Weston's ritual, who is often found by a well. The love and pity that Hana evokes from the patient seem to heal him in a psychological way, and perhaps in this action her role is analogous to that of the beloved goddess. In the patient's eyes, she seems at times a stand-in for Katharine (who would be Guinevere to the adulterous Arthur-Almásy). In this sense her switch of attachment from the patient to Kip follows the archetypal pattern. Perhaps these cases of people seeing someone else in Hana form a wry commentary to the postmodern approach that identity is not essential but constructed.

As the symbolism of Hana's and Kip's hair suggests, Kip's religion is important to the fisher king scenario. Certainly an Indian character with an Indian religion is in keeping with the interests of Weston, Frazer and their followers to draw parallels between Western and Indian traditions and continue to establish the scholarly legitimacy of the Indo-European or Aryan culture. Sikhism, founded in the late 1600s, is historically a bridge religion (the bridge-building of engineer Kip is entirely appropriate) between Islam and Hinduism, rejecting the caste system to the point that "they [newly baptized members] actually put food into the mouths of others and take it from others into their own mouths and pass a common cup of drink from lip to lip" (Archer 312). This image is often found in Ondaatje's writing, including the episodes in this novel with plums and dates (6). In the Amritsar temple of Kip's religion "all faiths and classes [are] welcomed" (272), an attribute which the anti-tribalist patient would surely appreciate. Many Sikhs avoid intoxicants (including Kip, 267) and some also avoid meat, not because of some divine revelation but out of respect for neighbouring Muslims and Hindus.

A number of other aspects of Sikhism overlap with the romance tradition. The military orientation of Sikh culture parallels chivalric culture, and both mix militancy with religion. Gobind Singh (1660-1708) and his immediate followers are remembered with much the same mythic reverence as King Arthur and the knights of the round table. Like the knights, Kip wears a number

of religious talismans including his *kara*, the Sikh bracelet (126). In 1941 there were almost six million Sikhs, though the religion was not well known even in many parts of India — thus Hana's lack of fear and the other characters' apparent lack of curiosity about Kip's background may be anachronistic. Ondaatje's choice not to incorporate any of this sociological religious material (Archer, *passim*) fits with his novel's expansive religious vision that avoids specific traditional religious practices or theology in favour of a generalized spirituality.

Kip is, however, an easygoing Sikh, a *sahajdari*, since he does not seem to wear the Sikh dagger, the *kirpan*, nor let his beard grow. Thus his ethnicity is not absolutized, nor the purity of his non-Western culture exalted. Kip's appreciation of contemporary Western pop music is unmistakable. Though anthropologists could argue that Kip's Indian culture is unknowingly undergirded by the same ancient body of myth (i.e., Indo-European) as most of Western culture, a more relevant truth to his experience is the imperialist stance taken by Britain over India (another truth which he does not yet know fully). Ondaatje's avoidance of depicting or glorifying a pure ethnic culture, something Weston has done in the case of the Celtic roots of her own culture, is a significant difference between their approaches, which will inform further discussion on modernism and postmodernism.

First, however, a parallel to the grail is needed to solidify the proposed link between Kip and Perceval. One may want to argue that the preceding comparisons still seem forced, and that there are in fact no exact parallels to the grail in *The English Patient*. Such absences would not necessarily negate the importance of Arthurian romance to the novel, since the bulk of purported Arthurian or grail romances make only passing references to Arthur or the grail. Nonetheless, almost all are structured in a recognizable quest or picaresque/chivalric adventure format, the structure of which may indeed be discovered in *The English Patient*. Specifically, one finds that interiorized personal quests govern the novel's narrative structure, with the main quest in particular modelled exactly on the fisher-king scenario.

Perhaps the most obvious quest is the uncovering of the mysterious identity of the English patient. In this sense Caravaggio would be seen to share part of Kip's role as quester. Caravaggio

is also a knight-like figure in the sense that he is “a lover and not a family man” (117) — indeed, he seems almost to have forgotten his family back home in Canada. He plays the role of knightly quester particularly in the episode which takes place in the “palace of war-women” (36), a phrase which echoes the common Arthurian motif of the “Castle of Maidens” (see Lacy). In the grail quest, the knight sometimes experiences the “perilous bed,” which offers a rough parallel with the danger of exposure Caravaggio finds in the woman’s glance (35-39). His getting caught naked by a woman who is busy making love may echo the Arthurian motif of catching adulterers (e.g., Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristram) as well as the Gyges story from Herodotus. However, Caravaggio’s quest for the patient’s identity is only part of the main quest in *The English Patient* — the patient’s identity has as precedent the characteristically mysterious identity of the fisher king, and thus the identity is not the grail itself.

In different romances the grail appears in many forms, often accompanied by other magical, sacred talismans. Most often the grail appears as a miraculous provider of food and spiritual sustenance — for example, in the episode in which a hermit tells the hero that the grail king feeds only on the host which is magically produced by the grail (72). Weston dismisses the ideas that the grail can be traced ultimately to a Celtic cauldron of plenty or to a vessel used at the Last Supper, and prefers to see it as an even older symbol of feminine fertility, matched by the masculine lance which often accompanies it (73). In *The English Patient*, Caravaggio and the patient feed, in a sense, by lancing themselves with morphine ampoules, and their physical wounds would seem to tie them to the (doubled) grail kings. But the best candidate for a feeding grail is the Herodotus, which like the grail may or may not be a pagan mythological item presented in a Christianized form (i.e., in its pages of pasted-in Bible passages).

More importantly, the Herodotus can be referred to as the *History* of Herodotus, a title which suggests that the hero’s quest is in fact a quest for history, perhaps a quest to understand history or a quest for culture. This interpretation about cultural identity could bring postcolonial and postmodern thought to bear on the novel, but many pertinent “post-” issues are also addressed in Arthurian romance and even in Herodotus. For example, in Chrétien

the unspelling question is “whom does the grail serve?” and the assumed answer is “the fisher king, your uncle” — thus the question implies an inquiry into the quester’s own history (Cavendish 153). Kip calls the patient “Uncle” during the confrontation episode (283), and more than anything else it is his questioning of his colonized status that serves as the novel’s parallel for the quester’s search to understand his identity. Such an emphasis on personal enlightenment is preceded particularly in later grail romances, wherein the hero’s quest is increasingly depicted as a personal instead of a national duty (e.g., in *Parzival* the question which must be asked is “Why do you suffer so?” which implies that the hero must learn compassion). Kip’s search for self-identity more than parallels the search for the patient’s identity — the two have much in common and on the psycho-mythic or archetypal level seek the same truth.

Like the naive Perceval, Kip must make a long journey before he reaches the point where it is possible to ask the unspelling question. Although his brother has reportedly pushed Kip towards questioning (201, 217), and Caravaggio asks him why he is risking his life defusing bombs in Italy (122), Kip fails at first to question his own status as a colonized subject of the British empire. The patient is also aware of this immaturity, as is evident when he says, “Kip and I are international bastards — born in one place and choosing to live elsewhere. Fighting to get back or to get away from our homelands all our lives. Though Kip doesn’t recognize that yet” (176). Kip has bought into English/Western prerogatives and culture without much thought, and it takes the dropping of the atomic bomb before he truly asks and begins to answer the question (287). Before the bomb Kip’s complicity with the warring English empire is near total, as evident in his change of name, an Anglicization associated with kipper grease in many respects forced on him by the colonizing power (87). Descriptions of Kip as “warrior saint” may also be meant to suggest that he has been appropriated by such a power, in the same way that saints have been appropriated as national symbols (e.g., St. Michael and St. George).

This power, of which Lord Suffolk is an idiosyncratic icon and “Christian” Europe the home, is not portrayed as entirely evil; it has much to offer which Kip welcomes, such as his training and also the Christian Italian art he is working to rescue:

Because he had loved the face on the ceiling he had loved the words. As he had believed in the burned man and the meadows of civilisation he tended. Isaiah and Jeremiah and Solomon were in the burned man's bedside book, his holy book, whatever he had loved glued into his own. He had passed his book to the sapper. (294)

Kip refuses the book, and thus the culture it represents, saying instead, "we have a Holy Book too" (294).

Kip's tentative rejection of the book is multiplied exponentially and hardened to the strength of diamond upon his hearing radio reports of the atomic bomb. His violent reaction is a climactic point in the novel, and any critical approach needs to take it into account, especially since a number of critics have come down hard on an action that even Scobie, a highly sympathetic critic, admits is "implausible" for its "full horror of a post-nuclear sensibility" (94). Craig Seligman, for example, writes: "seeing the 'new revealed enemy' before him, [Kip] suddenly swells up and becomes a new character — Asia. . . . He throws himself onto his motorbike and careens away, as hysterically disillusioned as Lana Turner howling at the wheel in *The Bad and the Beautiful*" (41).

In light of Weston's scenario, however, Kip's action can be understood much better. It is appropriate that Kip as the hero who replaces the fisher king should experience a crisis and a withdrawal similar to the violent crisis and social withdrawal the patient has experienced. It is never shown if Kip realizes how much his life has followed the pattern of the patient's, but the parallels are obvious to the careful reader. As seen by Caravaggio, the patient has betrayed the Allies and has finally withdrawn to become an international or post-national citizen. That this action is a twist on the loyalty theme of romance should be clear: the patient basically refuses to be manipulated by the dominant culture (a *non serviam* in the manner of the Romantics' reinterpretation of the one uttered by Milton's Satan). It must be remembered that loyalty and other spiritual motives in romance take such precedence over other story elements that they cause what appear to modern readers to be huge gaps in verisimilitude, but that such was the aesthetic of the time.

But Kip's rejection is also different from Almásy's, and more radical. At first reading it may seem that Kip chooses to fail the

quest, that he quits it and goes home. The idea seems to be ruled out that he may somehow have achieved his quest goal and reached enlightenment. Whereas the patient has, despite his rejection and withdrawal, continued as a lover and carrier of Western history and culture, Kip tries to reject this role and chooses to return to Sikhism and his birth culture.

However, his rejection cannot eliminate the experience of being from a colonized culture or his experiences as a ranking member of that culture, which could explain why Kip has the experience of "carrying the English patient with him" (294). The patient, in his switch of political allegiance, probably also meant to turn his back on everything to do with the Allied West, only to find its history and culture part of himself. Though rejecting the patient's role as keeper of high Western culture (e.g., the patient even knows the whereabouts of all Giotto's, 96), Kip carries in his head at least the "low" Western culture of popular song.

Kip's drastic action — his rejection of Western societal responsibility after a hearty initial acceptance — can be appreciated not only in relation to the patient's rejection and withdrawal from national identity; it is also paralleled (in true anthropological style) by the other characters' actions. Hana, often depicted in the library, and for whom "books are half her life" (7), still sings the Marseillaise in a rebellious way (53, 269) and "would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good" (15). Caravaggio echoes a number of the patient's concerns in a speech (121-24) in which he argues, "'The armies indoctrinate you and leave you here and they fuck off somewhere else to cause trouble. . . . We should all move out together.'" This conjunction of the characters' emotions with their politics is reminiscent of chivalric behaviour and typical of Ondaatje's postmodern validation of the personal in history over official impersonal or naively heroic historical narratives. These parallels between Kip and other characters contextualize Kip's rejection and suggest that it can be seen as the fulfilment of a natural human life development (which recycles with each generation).

All of these anti-establishment gestures, including Kip's, are imperfect and ineffective because of the characters' complicity with the establishment. Kip's rejection, while the most dramatic, is not unqualified, for his motorcycle accident occurs on a bridge

while he is removing his goggles, a possible sign of enlightenment as to his inability to escape complicity, first in his birth culture and second with the empire. Bridges in Herodotus can also be symbolic in this way (e.g., iv, 87-93). Seligman, in calling the action a mere "snit" (41), fails to take into account the possibility that the accident suggests the immaturity and rashness of Kip's response. Ironically, these failures may be meant to imply some success in the quest (295), if one takes the parallels with the other characters as an indication of what the author proposes as truth.

To clarify the functions or purposes of Ondaatje's incorporation of grail material is no easy task. Of course his allusions to romance character types and to the grail quest enrich the reading experience of the novel by opening it onto a whole network of other texts, and the archetypal elements especially make characters whose experiences are on some level relevant to all. But surely there is more at the root of Ondaatje's grail fetish.

Admittedly, some critics refuse to see past the inclusion of so much intertextual allusion (Arthurian, ancient, Christian and other). They argue instead that the allusions overburden and ruin the story. For example, Hilary Mantel has complained that Ondaatje's characters "are wraiths, freighted with abstraction, weighted with portent," though he does admit, "Perhaps this is not a fault" (22). Philip Marchand writes, "The characters . . . are not human beings but devices for registering exquisite perceptions. Ondaatje simply doesn't do character, at least in this novel. . . . [Moral] questions simply do not occur to the readers . . . who are too busy making their way through the lush greenery of Ondaatje's prose" (K10). Seligman chides Ondaatje for failing to maintain an adherence to realism, for characters

conceived completely in the abstract. . . . Ideally, of course, they could be both [individuals and abstractions]; as it is, now they're one, now the other. The tension . . . finally ends up ripping [the narrative] down the seams. . . . Ondaatje hasn't written a novel at all, he has written a storybook . . . on level with [the film] *Casablanca*, . . . and his characters are storybook characters. (39-41)

Seligman argues that the book is not a novel (i.e., what he considers to be serious adult literature) based on a very narrow definition



of the novel as realistic. But to take Ondaatje's novel on its own terms requires accounting for its allegiance to Arthurian romance and myth. And in many cases, characters are secondary to structure in romance.

Romance is structured not on believability but on ritual patterns, and readers of romance usually forgive "verisimilitude-shattering" elements (Seligman 40) such as Caravaggio's knowledge of Almásy's collaboration and Kip's reaction to the radio broadcasts of the atomic bomb. Kip's version of the unspelling question *does* undo the spell which holds the patient in life and which holds himself, the patient's double/successor. That is not to say that Ondaatje's novel has no pretensions to the status of realistic historical fiction — obviously there is enough realism to fool Seligman into judging the work exclusively by inappropriate standards. Such misunderstanding, due to political concerns blocking any appreciation of the use of romance and other non-realist traditions,<sup>9</sup> is ironic since one of the appeals of romance, at least in the anthropological school, is that purportedly every culturally informed person is supposed to know the story at some conscious or subconscious level. Certainly the inclusions of the Candaules-Gyges-wife narrative and the King David-Abishag narrative are explicit examples, whereas the grail-quest elements are implicit, of the use of mythic structures vaguely familiar to the populace to make the difficult cut-and-paste style of the novel more readable. (Anthony Minghella's film adaptation, released November 1996, followed and emphasized these grand motifs, and reduced the cut and paste in its structure, a simplifying move which has perhaps led to the movie's broad popular success beyond critical circles.)

A search for the significance of Ondaatje's use of grail romance elements should also admit that the importance of romance to the novel is not unlimited, despite the number of characteristics shared between Arthurian romance and *The English Patient*. While romance illuminates some of the key turning points of the plot, its application requires the use of generalizations and loose definitions, and some comparisons require the acceptance of contradictions. Elements from romance character types are used loosely and often applied to more than one character. It can be argued that *all* the characters have war wounds, perhaps like the fisher king's, and are on personal quests for healing. This problem

is inherent in Ondaatje's mythic method, which derives its strength from its allusions, its allusiveness, and the anthropological drive to discover similarities in human behaviour patterns. Ondaatje purposefully suggests similarities in various passages, such as one passage in which he writes of the "naive Catholic images from those hillside shrines. . . . Perhaps this villa is a similar tableau, the four of them in private movement, momentarily lit up, flung ironically against this war" (278). This passage suggests all four are either saints or Christ-figures.

Frazer's anthropological method, especially as developed by followers such as Weston, C. G. Jung and even Joseph Campbell, interprets selected similarities in myth as keys to understanding the human psyche, and this is the tradition that ultimately casts the most light on the reasons for Ondaatje's use of grail romance. Witness his depictions of healing in the novel, which each suggest a psychological truth embodied in the idea of a return to childhood: Hana tends the patient because he offers her a place "where she could turn away from being an adult" (52); she plays hopscotch (15) and she experiences a womb-like feeling under heavy blankets (49). The patient has a similar womb-like experience under the blankets of the Bedouin (6), and perhaps his cave of swimmers may be considered a womb image (e.g., the reference to the placenta and the parachute as a sort of amniotic sac, 248-49). Caravaggio remembers emerging from water after the bridge he is on explodes (60), and joins Hana in a dance involving steps chalked on the floor (107). Kip hides in the well (222) and recalls childhood experiences (203). These kinds of recurrent images and experiences are essential to romance and to the aesthetics of myth, anthropology, and archetype which so influence Ondaatje's own aesthetic. Another example is the use of the Candaulus-Gyges-wife triangle as an archetype for other love triangles. This mythic aspect of Ondaatje's writing seems modernist in not questioning the applicability of these psychological universals to all his main characters. It exhibits a flight from the local territoriality/labelling that cause wars, into a vision of a universally similar, mutually sympathetic humanity.

The method has led to a common psychology among the main characters, which is both a weakness and a strength. Gary Krist, for example, disapproves of the overlapping: "There is an unfortunate sameness to the quality of consciousness displayed by all four of

the characters . . . their interior lives are remarkably similar in texture — as if all four merely represented different quadrants of the author's own psychological map" (246). Ondaatje's intent is perhaps suggested by some of his own comments on his appreciation for a movie in which "a character falls in love four times and the director had [the same actress] play all four women. I can't think of many novels that show this psychological truth" (Bush 91). In *The English Patient* each parallel and similarity points to a universal significance, in the same way that mythological recurrence has been interpreted by anthropologists to suggest that universal truths about the human spirit and psychology do exist, and thus ultimately make historical appeals to an Indo-European source culture, in a sense, irrelevant.

Finding personal meaning in structures that are shared by many is perhaps suggested by the symbolic figure of death which comes to the patient (298), perhaps reminiscent of the black hand of the perilous chapel. Death comes to the patient as a composite of all the characters who have helped in his spiritual healing: his paramour Katharine ("a swimming figure"), his nurse Hana ("A man with plumes"), his confessor Caravaggio ("a night shadow") and his successor Kip ("slight brown figure. . . A poplar"). The images are personal to the patient, yet the collapsing of all the characters into a single form suggests a kind of universally shared experience.

The use of recurrence in Ondaatje's narrative is of course also common to Arthurian romance, which features multiple character typing and doubled characters such as Perceval and Gawain, Morgause and Morgan, Pelles and Pellam, Galahad and Lancelot, and the various fisher kings and their various attendants. As Weston notes, "in certain closely connected versions the two ideas [wounding and ageing] are combined, and we have a wounded Fisher King, and an aged father, or grandfather . . . [and] in the latest cyclic texts, we have three Kings" (118-19). Such doubling is generally accepted by non-anthropological critics to be the result of borrowed plots and conventional symbolism.

Ondaatje's reuse of characters from *In the Skin of a Lion* in *The English Patient* also has much in common with the practices of grail-romance writers. While the narrator's admission (301) to a sort of personal affection for his characters has been echoed by

Ondaatje himself in several interviews, the carry-over can also be justified under the postmodern rubrics of highlighting the artifice of the novel or of the constructedness of identity. A judgement based on strict realism (e.g., that of Seligman) finds the carry-over "bewildering . . . unlikely . . . [and] jarring . . . requiring such a powerful fiat that you end up wondering why he bothered to use the same characters at all" (38). But a more informed and sensitive aesthetic judgement needs to see the work in the context of magic realism, romance, and imagism.

The function of Ondaatje's use of identity doubling or blurring, such as those he effects with the name David and with lion imagery, are best appreciated in these unrealistic aesthetic contexts. By comparing Hana to Abishag (94), the narrator makes the patient a King David figure. Hana is also a nurse or healer of sorts for Caravaggio, whose first name is David, while the patient identifies Kip with King David in a painting (116). The blurring between Caravaggio and the patient may function as a sign that they share the wounds of the fisher king, while the idea that Kip too is a David relates to his role as their potential successor. Another identity chain is suggested by the "sentinel" white lion statue in Pisa (40-41) associated with the death of Hana's stepfather, whose association in turn with the patient could make the lion a premonitory figure of the patient. The association of a lion with the fisher king has a precedent in *Perlesvaus*, in which the king appears as a lion (see Cavendish, 162). In the novel, the lion may also be related to Caravaggio and the loss of his thumbs, since there is a lion in the "perilous bed" episode of *Parzival* and other romances which gets its hands cut off in a manner symbolizing the overcoming of greediness and passion. Ondaatje's allusive writing encourages this kind of speculation: witness also that Kip's surname *Singh*, a name adopted by many fervent Sikhs, means "lion."

From a postmodern vantage point, one may note that these various linking techniques (i.e., archetypal behaviour patterns and chains of significance) are used to create a non-linear, non-chronological narrative. In an interview, Ondaatje confirms that image recurrence interests him as an organizing structure: "In one mural, [Mexican artist Diega] Rivera shows a factory worker holding a wrench in a certain way. Across the room in a linked mural, we see a foreman holding a pencil in a certain way. [Likewise] a story

can be knit together by images. This seems to me a less didactic method of building a theme" (Slopen 49). The blurring of individual identities in the novel is in keeping with another postmodern concern, the decentring of the self. Hana's experience of being labelled by others is an example, though the patient is a better one, since the identity or essence assumed to be at his centre and labelled onto him, could actually be the opposite and ultimately is not pinned down. Yet another postmodern concern, the rejection of metanarratives, may be seen in the divergences from the most well-known quest plots (i.e., the grail metanarrative as summarized either in Chrétien and directly-related continuations or else, if you will, in Malory). It is also an example of a postmodern misuse of documentary sources.

Ondaatje's novel also moves further in the secularizing tradition of romance and, rejecting Weston's paganism in favour of Frazer's anthropological syncretism, avoids any "nationalistic" religious truth in favour of "universal" psychological truth. The original romances were decidedly secular for their time period, but they often used Christian and pre-Christian religious symbolism and allegory in a mystical way. Weston's entire theory opposes the obvious readings of this symbolism and attempts to minimize what she sees as the Christian gloss on the legends as a minor accretion, although it requires her to drastically rearrange the historical development of Arthurian romance to make Chrétien into a late-comer. ("[B]y Chrétien," she writes, "the mystic elements [of the grail-romance symbols] have been forgotten," 161.) Ondaatje's novel avoids almost entirely any spiritual or theological content in its use of religious symbols. This avoidance is perhaps why the story of Perceval is used rather than the story of the more "Christian" Galahad. Kip's description as a religious individual (he has "his own faith," 80) is typically postmodern in that his spirituality is too private to be described or discussed. His religiosity is mainly important on the symbolic level. While the quasi-religious fertility cycle influences the novel's structure, overall the novel devotes more detailed attention to visceral depictions that insist on an immanent reality, not on transcendent religious import — even in depictions of Christian statues in churches (280, 291) and the Marian fest of Gabicce mare (78-80).<sup>10</sup> This focus on the physical present, a focus in keeping with the materialist-sociological ap-

proach to religion of anthropology, is brought home by the idea of having bombs hidden all around (75): what can one do but look closely at everything? And the novel encourages looking, not for possible socio-historical meanings, which are contextual, but for the physicality of things and their role in the physical world and individual lives of the characters. Meaning is not inherited but imputed by individuals constructing private mythologies. The sensuality and personal meaning assembly that are the main components of this world view are typically postmodern in terms of Fredric Jameson's definition, especially in terms of "depthlessness . . . and consequent weakening of historicity" (6) and effecting a euphoric appreciation of the here and now as opposed to typical modernist affects such as anxiety and alienation (29).

Nonetheless, the immediacy of the physical and of the present moment are also characterized by brief human community. This focus on small, intense community can be traced back to the family and friends of Ondaatje's early lyrics. The community in the villa functions as a way of experiencing individual transcendence from the here and now, though the transcendence, like the community, is temporary.<sup>11</sup> The use of myth to characterize and structure offers a different transcendence, into historical repetition and cyclicity, but this transcendence is not so much religious as anthropological.

The other method of transcendence Ondaatje examines using grail romance materials is heroism. Heroism is as important to romance as the god's characters were to myth, and in fact heroes tend to replace gods in the literary transition from myth to romance. Ondaatje's romance thus appropriately portrays the gods as statues (280), even blindfolded ones (291). The heroism of the novel, albeit a version of the ancient quest heroism found in the fisher-king scenario, is updated to illustrate the dominant spiritual worldview of the postmodern era. In ancient times the solace offered to heroism was the good of the community, and the tragedy of it was managed with the idea of historical cyclicity and inevitability.

More recently, in modern times, the quest has been rewritten in many ways. To take a popular example, one may think of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, in which the questing Frodo fails just in sight of his goal, only to have Gollum, the enemy he had pre-

viously spared out of compassion, appear. Gollum, in his struggle to steal the all-powerful ring, accidentally falls with it into the cracks of doom, thus achieving the goal and saving all. Tolkien's Christian version of the quest fused the theological concepts of human depravity and divine grace and sovereignty with the sense of human failure that characterized the West as a result of the world wars. (Tolkien had personal experience of trench warfare.) That 1930s and 1940s sense of failure carried into a profound sense in the 1950s, among spiritually-aware thinkers, that the world was only spared from atomic destruction through divine grace (the same grace experienced in what was then known as "the brotherhood of man"). In *The English Patient* the quest is updated once again, not to some Christian quest like Tolkien's, and not even to some existentialist anti-quest or postmodern un-quest, but to a quest characterized by a profound mistrust of established or imperial powers, and their manipulation of ethno-cultural differences, with a salvation or enlightenment found only in a rejection of the quests ordained by these powers in favour of personal inner quests and the fragile grace experienced by hopelessly compromised or complicit individuals in temporary, multicultural community.

Ondaatje's use of the Arthurian grail quest and the more ancient narrative structures on which it is based — and ultimately most of the novel's basic elements — set themselves between modernism and postmodernism, exhibiting elements of both (e.g., its secularity and non-linear structure are postmodern, while its use of anthropology to suggest universal truths and its direct, un-ironic ties to some of its mythological source materials are modern). In the final analysis the novel's rooting in the received character forms and narrative structures of Arthurian romance is ambiguous and can be seen from two angles. If one sees the novel as rooted in the mainstream fisher-king structure, then one can conclude that the narrative, in a characteristically postmodern action, abandons and deconstructs the modernist mythic method through Kip's action. This parallel makes sense if Arthurian romance is seen as a typical metanarrative of Western culture (in the Lyotardian sense), like the "Arthurian castles" (241) to which Madox returns. However, one may also read the novel in relation to later and more marginal grail quests, in which case the novel appears to follow

existing variants of the basic plot to the end. What may at first glance appear to be a rewriting of mainstream Arthurian source material may be seen instead to be a more simple (modernist) fidelity to the marginal in a convoluted body of sources (although, admittedly, incorporation of the marginal is generally considered postmodern). Ondaatje's use of these sources as archetypes is both modern in its attempt to reveal universal psychological truths and postmodern in its blurring and recreating of identity.

Ondaatje seems to have been successful, in seeking a post-modern escape from tribalisms of various kinds, to have thrown himself part-way into the arms of a modern totalizing or universalist system, namely the early Cambridge school of anthropology, but also to have held back from a full embrace enough to avoid some of its major flaws. Regardless of debates as to the novel's aesthetic classification (further discussion about the extent to which the sources are followed, subverted, ironized, or used as a collage or a pastiche is welcome), the Arthurian metanarrative should not be overlooked in future in-depth examinations of *The English Patient*.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Herodotus is cited by book and section number, and Frazer by book and page. Arthurian tropes are referenced to Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* more than to Frazer and the original romances for simplicity and because of the near certainty that *From Ritual to Romance* was an important early influence. Barbour, a student with Ondaatje in the sixties, admits that Weston's "was certainly one of the books we were being encouraged to read at the time" (Barbour, personal communication).

<sup>2</sup> See Darrah for a more respected work on the pagan roots of the romances. Weston's contemporaries A. E. Waite and W. A. Nitze, also under the influence of Frazer, came independently to similar conclusions as hers. See Lacy for more on Waite and Nitze.

<sup>3</sup> Ondaatje's use of pop-myth figures, and now Arthurian romance, may be seen as part of a more general trend in his and in postmodern writing to incorporate popular influences, such as detective fiction. (A comparison with Ellis Peters's medieval whodunnit *An Excellent Mystery* would show the importance of the fisher king scenario to this genre as well.) Ondaatje's movies (not including Minghella's



adaptation) have been singled out for being “vulgar” in the sense of fitting into a pop-culture tradition that includes spaghetti westerns, Hollywood musicals, and thrillers (see Testa). Some critics (e.g., Seligman) may argue that Weston and Arthurian romance are not serious literature and that Ondaatje’s use of them brings his novel down from a serious literary accomplishment to a popular one. But on the other hand Ondaatje also seems to be making the highly literary suggestion that important continuities exist between (post)modern concerns and Arthurian romance.

<sup>4</sup> The glimpses of what happens to the characters after the main plot ends, provided at the novel’s end in a rather nineteenth-century style, suggest the existence of additional stories, though not as forcefully as the ending of *In the Skin of a Lion* which, Gamlin has suggested, “invites a retelling in which Ondaatje can follow previously neglected strands of the story” (70). This idea of retelling fits not only with oral narrative, but also with the great many rewritings of Arthurian legends.

<sup>5</sup> The reference is to Tullio Lombardo’s 1531 sculpture on the tomb of Guidarello Guidarelli, one of the most popular sculptures of the Italian renaissance due to its magnificent pathos and idealism, and to a romantic aura now associated with it. The novel’s candle-lit scenes are also reminiscent of the paintings of Caravaggio’s Italian namesake (1570-1610).

<sup>6</sup> The style of Herodotus’ *History* (c. 420 BCE) is in fact much like Ondaatje’s: international, colourful, exotic, episodic (see *The English Patient*, 119, which quotes a description of these attributes of the Herodotus from the Everyman introduction), fragmentary, various, and vivid in its depictions. For the reference in *The English Patient* to Cambyses (140) see iii, 26, and for the passage on the Psylli who attacked the wind (17) see iv, 173. Herodotus writes in ii, 32 of five Nasamonian explorers who travel through the Siwa oasis (where Almásy was finally handed over to Europeans) and who are captured in the manner that Almásy was finally captured (in the Everyman edition this passage is linked by a reference to the previously cited one). The chain of references in *The English Patient* to the Bosphorus hug and neck notch (e.g., 236) may be informed by the bridge Darius had built there, described in iv, 87. Significantly, this bridge was part of his attempt to be the first great king to cross into Europe from Asia and conquer parts of it, which relates to other East-West links employed in Weston and *The English Patient*.

<sup>7</sup> The phrase recalls Patrick’s actions in *In the Skin of a Lion*, which in Gamlin’s words is “power to free the river’s flow” (70). For the worship of Adonis in India see Frazer v, 239-243.

<sup>8</sup> Minghella’s 1996 film version highlights these simplistic female roles, as Margaret Wente has pointed out, and her comments also apply to some extent to the novel: Katharine’s job “is to look ravishing, be ravished, and pay the awful price for her illicit desires. She’s like Helen of Troy. All she has to do is show up, and wreak devastation on . . . the men’s [Egyptology] club. . . . In terms of women’s roles, *The English Patient* [the film] is deeply, hopelessly, irrevocably reactionary. It could have been made in 1930. . . . (The other main woman is a nurse—what else? . . .)’ (D7). Letter responses in the paper defended the portrayal of women in the film by reminding readers of Hana’s valuable nurturing role.

<sup>9</sup> Scobie argues for another non-realist rubric, imagism: he writes that readers should find it obvious that "the logic of the imagery will take precedence over any strict adherence to the conventions of realism" (94).

<sup>10</sup> The emphasis on enduring cultural customs, even in time of war (e.g., the festival), is entirely in keeping with Frazer, Weston, and their followers. In fact the Gabicce ritual sounds exactly like something out of *The Golden Bough* in which, for example, Frazer compares a number of midsummer Mediterranean marine festivals (Sardinian, Sicilian) with ancient Babylonian and Alexandrian ones, postulating that Tammuz-Adonis has been replaced by St. John (v, 246).

<sup>11</sup> As Lorna Sage notes, "Isolated together, they invent for a brief while an improbable and delightful and fearful civilization of their own, a zone of fragile intimacy that can't—of course—survive, but which is offered to us, nonetheless, as a possible reality. A world without nations, for instance, one where skin colour doesn't divide people. . . . With Ondaatje, togetherness is a momentary, present-tense phenomenon; as soon as people start developing pasts and futures, everything becomes fissile and flies apart" (23).

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