Running in the Family

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL ONDAATJE

Michael Ondaatje was born in Colombo in 1943 to parents Mervyn and Doris, the youngest of four children. Ondaatje's parents divorced when he was young, and he rarely saw his father as a child. Although he began his education in Ceylon, Ondaatje moved to England with his mother when he was 11. As a young adult he relocated to Canada, where he earned his undergraduate degree from the University of Toronto and then his M.A. from Queen's University in Ontario. During Ondaatje's collegiate studies, he met famed poet D.G. Jones, who appreciated Ondaatje's potential as a poet and later became his mentor. Although Ondaatje also worked as a college professor, his poetry initiated his literary career in 1967 when he published his first volume, *The Dainty Monsters*, following with the critically-lauded *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in 1970. Ondaatje continued writing poetry, but in 1976 also published his first novel, *Coming Through the Slaughter*. In an effort to understand his own family history, Ondaatje made two long journeys to Ceylon in 1978 and 1980 to meet old friends and relatives and listen to their memories about his family's lives, especially about his father. The stories he gathered on both trips became the subject of his 1982 fictionalized memoir, *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje won numerous Canadian literature awards for *In the Skin of a Lion* in 1987, but his greatest critical success came from his 1992 novel, *The English Patient*, which won the Booker Prize among many others, and whose film adaptation won the Academy Award for Best Picture. Today, Ondaatje continues to write poetry, fiction, and edit others' work. His most recent novel, *The Warlight*, was published in 2018. He lives in Canada.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Ondaatje's memoir takes place almost entirely in Ceylon and frequently mentions the country's colonial history, its involvement in World War II, and the Insurgency in 1971. Ceylon has a long colonial history—European nations desired its fruit and spices—beginning with its capture by the Portuguese in the early 16th century. Ownership later transferred to the Dutch Empire and eventually to the British in 1815, who still held colonial rule when Ondaatje was born. During World War II, the British operated a military base from Ceylon to defend against Japan's incursions across Asia, which Ondaatje's father participated in as a member of Ceylon's local military. In 1942, Japan bombed the city of Colombo. Shortly after World War II, in 1948, Ceylon won its independence from Britain. The government declared Sinhalese, rather than English, to be the national language in 1956, prompting the exit of most remaining Europeans from the country. Although many celebrated this move, the transition offended many Tamils, a rival ethnic group, who felt excluded from their country's social movements. Large riots erupted in 1958 in Colombo as a result, and tensions continued to fester for the next 15 years. In 1971, a leftist coalition launched the Insurgency, a military uprising of young, untrained militias that attempted to overthrow the Sinhalese government. Although most fighters were young and poor, the movement proved to have an exceptional organizational capacity and they successfully captured and held several major cities and critical areas. However, they were eventually overrun by the national military and police forces, captured, and executed. Over 15,000 young men died.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Running in the Family is often referred to as a postmodern memoir. The meat of the story is true, but various aspects are fictionalized, and the narration points out its own subjective nature and unreliability. Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War memoir, *The Things They Carried*, takes a similarly postmodern approach, using fictionalized accounts of the author's real experiences in Vietnam to relate the horror and confusion of war. Ondaatje's memoir also fits into the postmodern literary tradition with its use of shifting genres and intertextuality (sampling a variety of texts and genres by different authors to prove a broader point). Such styles build on the work of early postmodern authors such as Kurt Vonnegut, author of *Slaughterhouse-Five* in which a World War II veteran reminisces on his shaky memories as a prisoner-of-war (based on Vonnegut's own experience) and alien abductee, all while commenting on religion, philosophy, and dancing between war memoir and science fiction novel. Ondaatje's memoir is also markedly self-aware, pointing out its inconsistencies and feeling of incompleteness, bearing much in common with Dave Eggers's memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which chronicles his and his siblings' pain at the loss of their parents while maintaining a critically ironic and self-aware tone.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Running in the Family
- **When Written:** 1978-1982
- **Where Written:** Ceylon; Canada
- **When Published:** 1982
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Memoir

- **Setting:** Ceylon in the mid-20th century
- **Climax:** Ondaatje reflects on Mervyn's final years, marked by alcoholism and depression.
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Avant Garde. Ondaatje describes his method of changing perspectives and skipping between timelines as literary "cubism," referencing the artistic movement defined by Matisse and Picasso for their multi-perspective paintings.

The Boring 20s. Although Ondaatje's memoir spans the Great Depression, his focus on the wealthy families of Ceylon means that his characters were largely unaffected. The only mention of the economic catastrophe is an ironic note that its worst consequence was making it difficult for individuals to board race horses, so the task fell to the military instead.

PLOT SUMMARY

Michael Ondaatje's memoir is divided into seven sections organized by subject, rather than chronologically.

The memoir begins with a nightmare that Ondaatje has while living in Canada about his father, Mervyn. In the dream, Mervyn is surrounded by vicious, thrashing **dogs** in the jungle. When Ondaatje wakes, he realizes that he does not know who his father truly was, or much about his family history at all. As an adult, Ondaatje feels as if he skipped past his own childhood, and does not understand the world or the people he came from. This prompts him to make two journeys back to Ceylon, accompanied by his sister Gillian. Gillian and Ondaatje meet with old relatives like Aunt Phyllis, who reminisce about memories and stories of the past, particularly about Ondaatje's parents.

In the second section, Ondaatje recalls his parents' early years in the 1920s and 1930s. When Mervyn is 18, his wealthy parents send him to Cambridge for university. Mervyn lies to them for two years, claiming that he is enrolled in college though he's actually been spending the tuition money on lavish rooms and parties. When Mervyn's family travels to England to personally and furiously confront him, he deflected their anger by quickly becoming engaged to a respectable English woman. However, two weeks later, after returning to Ceylon, Mervyn asks Doris Gratiaen to marry him instead, to the shock and fury of his parents. They marry one year later. Like all of their wealthy friends at the time, Mervyn and Doris spend most of their early adulthood drinking, partying, gambling, and having affairs, remaining "wild and spoiled." The parties wind down after Mervyn's close friend Francis drowns to death while intoxicated. However, Mervyn keeps drinking for the rest of his life and squanders his father, Philip's fortune until Mervyn's death.

In the third section, Ondaatje speaks of the history of colonialism and invading foreigners in Ceylon, which includes his own Dutch ancestors in 1600. Gillian and Ondaatje visit an ancient church and find the tombs of many of their ancestors, who were nationally important figures in their day. Despite his Dutch ancestry, Ondaatje is critical of the Europeans who came to rob the country of its national resources and beauty. He includes poems and writings by English and Ceylonese writers that give a damning view of the colonizers. As a Sri Lankan Canadian, Ondaatje feels both that he himself is now a "foreigner" but also the "prodigal who hates the foreigner."

In the fourth section, Ondaatje visits his Aunt Dolly, who revisits the past and tells him about Mervyn, and especially about Ondaatje's grandmother Lalla. Lalla marries Willie Gratiaen, a man who is kind but also incredibly strong-willed. After Willie dies, Lalla is able to flourish as an individual, running her own dairy farm and making a name for herself as an eccentric socialite. People in the community love Lalla, who loves being the center of attention in turn, but her own children seem to have a strained and distant relationship with her. When her children are grown, Lalla spends much of her time with her brother Vere. When the dairy farm goes broke and Lalla is forced to sell it, she becomes a transient, living with other people for days or weeks at a time, still partying, stealing flowers, and having affairs even into her 60s. When she is 68, Lalla happens upon some money, she and Vere drive up into the mountains and spend days drinking and playing cards. Lalla knows that her life will end soon. After days of drinking, Lalla steps out the door and into a flash flood, which carries her down the mountain and drowns her.

In the fifth section, Ondaatje describes the sensory details of Ceylon's nature and wild animals. He relays the sounds and smells and makes recording of the jungle's bird calls. Accompanied by his wife and children, he drives into the jungle and camps for several days in a bungalow. He takes his family to Rock Hill, a garden estate he and his siblings used to live on. While they are traveling around Ceylon together, Ondaatje describes Mervyn's middle years, when Ondaatje's siblings were very young and Ondaatje himself not yet born. Mervyn forms the habit of taking long trips and getting wildly drunk, which prompts increasingly erratic and delusional behavior. He steals a fellow military officer's gun and hijacks trains several times, causing hours of delays. On one occasion, he is convinced that the Japanese have hidden bombs on the train, so he orders the train to stop, again armed with a pistol, and throws 25 pots of curd into the river, imagining that he's just thwarted a massive military plot. In one episode, Mervyn strips naked, jumps off the train, and runs into the tunnel ahead of it, hoping to be struck dead. He waits there for hours until Doris, now his wife of six years, marches into the darkness after him and convinces him to come back home.

In the sixth section, Ondaatje visits his half-sister Susan and relays details about Mervyn and Doris in their later years. Mervyn is private and reserved while Doris is loud and dramatic, but when Mervyn is sober they share a very close bond and a mutual dark sense of humor. However, Mervyn's drunken bouts are an inevitable source of conflict and Doris often enlists her three older children in trying to convince Mervyn to quit. After 14 years of marriage, Doris takes the children and leaves with no money and no help. She supports herself and her children by working at a hotel. One of the siblings later recalls their childhood as "a nightmare." Ondaatje was only an infant when the family was still together, and the absence of his father through most of his life has left him with a sense of loss he only truly recognizes as an adult.

In the final section, Ondaatje writes about Mervyn's later years. At one point, Mervyn sits all day in the hotel where Doris works, hoping she'll come speak to him so they can make amends. She doesn't, however, and Mervyn goes home to drink, reflecting on all that he's lost in his life. Ondaatje records various memories of Mervyn in the latter years of his life. Jennifer, a daughter from Mervyn's second marriage, remembers the days when the chicken farm was successful. Mervyn was a kind, gentle, and loving father when he was sober. He was monstrous when drunk, however, so Jennifer learned to simply disappear during those days. Mervyn's two closest friends remember that even in old age, Mervyn had an active mind and founded The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society, but he occasionally sank into such deep depression during his last year that he wouldn't even speak to them. Shortly before dying of a cerebral hemorrhage, Mervyn confessed to his friends that he'd long suffered from crippling fear and anxiety, which played a large part in his alcoholism.

At the end of his writing, Ondaatje reflects that he still does not truly know his father, but he does love him. He recognizes the pain that Mervyn was in and decides that whatever substance or measures Mervyn took to ease that pain are ultimately forgivable. On his last morning in Ceylon, Ondaatje listens to the sounds and smells of native Ceylon, committing them to memory. They are the sensations of his childhood, the world to which his family belongs.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Michael Ondaatje – Michael Ondaatje is the author and narrator of the memoir. Ondaatje is born in Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) to Doris and Mervyn, but leaves the country with his mother when he is 11 years old. Since Doris divorces Mervyn while Ondaatje is quite young, Ondaatje only has a few memorable interactions with his father as a young boy and never really knows him. After Ondaatje leaves Ceylon for England and later Canada, he largely forgets about his father until his mid-30s, when he begins to be haunted by the fact that he never had a proper father figure. Ondaatje's lack of knowledge about his father or his family history leaves him uncertain of his own identity as a Sri Lankan man living in Canada, so he embarks on two extended trips back to Ceylon to uncover and record his family's history. Through numerous conversations with family members about their distant memories, Ondaatje pieces together a partial history of the generations of his family, focusing especially on Mervyn's life and the reasons for his absence. Although Ondaatje narrates, he is often invisible in his own story aside from notes about where he travels and to whom he speaks. Instead, Ondaatje dwells on the stories about his ancestors and the sensory details of Ceylon. By the end of the memoir, Ondaatje understands the events of his father's life and knows that he loves his father now, seeing him as a flawed but well-meaning man. Even so, Ondaatje feels that it is only a partial knowledge, and that the absence of his father is a wound that will never entirely heal.

Mervyn Ondaatje – Mervyn is the father of Michael Ondaatje, Gillian, and Ondaatje's other siblings, and is Doris's husband for 14 years. Mervyn is born to a wealthy, respectable upper-class family in Ceylon. However, despite his family's prestige, Mervyn comes of age in the 1920s and embodies the decade's brash and irresponsible behavior. Most of Mervyn's energy as a young man is dedicated to avoiding responsibility, and he often tries to "solve one problem by creating another." Two weeks after announcing his engagement to a respectable English girl in Cambridge, Mervyn leaves her to return to Ceylon and becomes engaged to Doris Gratiaen instead. Mervyn and Doris marry, but Mervyn's irresponsible behavior continues. Even after the parties of the 1920s are largely over, Mervyn maintains a heavy drinking habit, developing dipsomania, or alcoholism. Although an officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry, Mervyn constantly gets so drunk in public that family members or friends must come rescue him, including Doris. Mervyn even tries to commit suicide while drunk. Mervyn and Doris have four children, but Mervyn continues to suffer from dipsomania, remaining sober for one or two months at a time and then binge drinking for days. Although Mervyn is a gentle father and husband when sober, he is monstrous when drunk. After 14 years of marriage, when Ondaatje is only a small child, Doris leaves Mervyn, taking Ondaatje and his siblings with her. Mervyn is heartbroken, though he eventually marries a woman named Maureen with two daughters, Susan and Jennifer. He starts and operates a chicken farm for some years, but it eventually fails. In his later years, Mervyn also reveals that he has struggled with lifelong depression and anxiety about the world, which seems to contribute heavily to his drinking. In his mid-sixties, Mervyn lapses into severe depression, and eventually dies of a cerebral hemorrhage, a common complication of alcoholism. Although childish and irresponsible,

Mervyn is ultimately depicted as a tragic figure, crushed under the weight of his psychological pain and addiction.

Doris Gratiaen – Doris is the mother of Ondaatje, Gillian, and Ondaatje's other siblings. She is Mervyn's first wife. Like Mervyn, Doris is born to a wealthy upper-class family in Ceylon. As a young woman, she loves theatre and dance and often performs publicly. Although Doris maintains her penchant for drama throughout her life, after she marries Mervyn much of her energy shifts to combating his alcoholism. Doris deeply loves Mervyn in spite of his addiction, and she spends 14 years trying to cure Mervyn of his condition, first by rescuing him when he gets himself into trouble and later by trying to manipulate him by using their children to make him feel guilty. After 14 years of marriage, Doris finally gives up on Mervyn, takes her four young children, and leaves. She is stubborn and prideful and refuses to ask for any alimony, taking a job in a hotel to support their family instead. When Ondaatje is 11, Doris takes him to England for the rest of his childhood, leaving his father permanently behind. Although Doris is unable to rescue Mervyn from his drinking, Ondaatje depicts her as the real strength within their family.

Lalla Gratiaen – Lalla is Ondaatje's maternal grandmother and Doris's mother, though they have a strained relationship and never speak. When Lalla's husband, Willie, dies, Lalla becomes a larger-than-life figure, single-handedly running a dairy farm while maintaining a colorful social life, drinking, partying, and having affairs. In the midst of all this, she raises her children alone, though the narrative suggests that she is a poor and inattentive mother and her children resent her wild eccentricity. Once her children are grown, the dairy farm fails and Lalla is forced to sell everything. She becomes a transient, roaming the countryside, staying with people she knows, and continuing to heavily drink and have affairs into her 60s. She spends much of her time with her bachelor brother Vere. When Lalla feels that her end is near, she goes with Vere into the hills and spends several days drinking. In the middle of the night, she drunkenly rises, walks out the door, and steps into a flash flood which carries her down the hillside into the ocean and drowns her. Although Lalla and Mervyn have different dispositions, their mischievous antics and heavy drinking make them parallel characters to each other, especially since they both die alcohol-induced deaths.

Aunt Phyllis – Aunt Phyllis is Ondaatje's aunt, whom he visits with Gillian. Aunt Phyllis was close to Mervyn's and spends days sharing memories and family history with Ondaatje. She often tells a story, moves to another, and then an hour later revisits the first to tell it differently or make a new comment on it.

Francis de Saram – Francis de Saram is one of Mervyn and Doris's friends in the 1920s and 1930s. Francis is the first to drink himself to death in 1935, drowning himself in 12 inches of water. His death, which seems a waste of a good life, reveals to Mervyn and Doris's circle of friends their own nihilism and brings an end to their constant revelry.

Susan – Susan is Ondaatje's half-sister and Mervyn's stepdaughter from his second marriage to Maureen. Ondaatje visits with Susan during his time in Ceylon. Compared to the children in Mervyn's first family, Susan and her sister Jennifer remember Mervyn as a good father, so long as they weren't around when he drank.

Archer Jayawardene – Archer is one of Mervyn's closest friends in his later years, and often visits Mervyn when he is in the depths of his depression. In the year that he dies, Mervyn tells Archer and his wife the full truth of his depression and anxiety, which is the only time Mervyn admits his psychological pain to anyone at all.

Philip Ondaatje – Philip is Ondaatje's paternal grandfather and Mervyn's father. Philip is studious and aloof, and amasses a fortune through real estate deals. He uses his money to build the family estate at Rock Hill. Despite his seriousness, Philip seems to enable Mervyn's recklessness and is unable to reign in his son's behavior. Mervyn's alcoholism and rash actions ultimately destroy the empire that Philip spends his life building.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gillian – Gillian is Ondaatje's sister and closest sibling, who accompanies him on much of his travel's through Ceylon. Although Gillian is often listed as being present, like Ondaatje she is mostly invisible throughout the narrative, since it focuses almost entirely on past generations.

Rene de Saram – Rene de Saram is Lalla's neighbor and friend. Rene's husband commits suicide not long after Willie dies, and she and Lalla bond over their shared experience of being widowed mothers. Rene also owns a dairy farm, and joins Lalla in many of her antics while they are middle-aged.

Sir John Kotelawala – Sir John is an officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry who serves alongside Mervyn, though he outlives Mervyn and eventually becomes the prime minister.

Jennifer – Jennifer is Ondaatje's half-sister and Mervyn's stepdaughter from his second marriage to Maureen. Compared to the children in Mervyn's first family, Jennifer and her sister Susan remember Mervyn as a good father, and Jennifer surmises that she was the closest with Mervyn of any of his children.

Noel Gratiaen – Noel is Ondaatje's uncle, Mervyn's friend and Doris's brother. Like Doris, Noel detests his mother Lalla. Although Noel parties with Mervyn in his youth, he emerges from the 1920s and 1930s intact, and goes on to become a lawyer.

V.C. de Silva – V.C. de Silva is a doctor and one of Mervyn's closest friends in his later years. After Doris leaves Mervyn in

1947, de Silva moves in with Mervyn to keep him company. As Mervyn sinks further into depression, de Silva often sits with him.

Aelian Ondaatje – Aelian is Mervyn's uncle and Philip's brother. Aelian is good-natured and generous compared to Philip's aloofness.

Maureen – Maureen is Jennifer and Susan's mother and Mervyn's second wife, who is married to him until he dies.

Aunt Dolly – Aunt Dolly is one of Ondaatje's ancient aunts. Although she is old, half-blind, and half-death, she has a powerful memory of the past.

Vere Gratiaen – Vere is Lalla's brother and drinking partner in their later years. Vere is with Lalla, asleep on the couch, when she walks into the flash flood and drowns to death.

Willie Gratiaen – Willie is Ondaatje's maternal grandfather, Doris's father, and Lalla's husband. Willie dies a few years after he marries Lalla, leaving her a widow with several children.

TERMS

Dipsomania – An antiquated term for alcoholism, and particularly a form of addiction in which a person has sudden-onset, overwhelming cravings for alcohol. In **Mervyn**'s case, he manages to stay sober for one or two months at a time before suddenly binge-drinking for days on end, after which he gets sober and the process repeats.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

MEMORY, HISTORY, AND STORY

Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* is often categorized as a post-modern memoir, though it relays much more of Ondaatje's parents' lives than his own. The narrative intersperses personal memories, contradicting accounts, and magical realism to convey as much of Ondaatje's familial history in Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) as Ondaatje can piece together, especially regarding his father, Mervyn, whom he barely knew. Although Ondaatje's stated goal is to rediscover his Ceylonese ancestry and understand who his father truly was, the author openly admits that his memoir is "not a history but a portrait or 'gesture,'" and takes many creative liberties to communicate what he believes is the truth. To uncover the past, Ondaatje's memoir blurs the lines between memory, history, and story. Ultimately, the book suggests that "history"—in the Western sense of a single, authoritative record of the past—is subjective and unreliable, ignoring others' perspectives. Instead, the past is preserved in personal stories and memories, both true and untrue.

Ondaatje intersperses his memoir with various outdated historical observations that have since proven to be inaccurate. By including these details, Ondaatje suggests that Western "history" is unreliable as a singular record of the past, since it often romanticizes colonial actions and ignores the grievances of colonized peoples. For example, Ondaatje's brother hangs various "**false maps**" of Ceylon in his home, drawn by venerated European explorers and cartographers before the country was colonized. Each map was drawn after seeing Ceylon at a distance from a passing ship, without a complete understanding of Ceylon's geography. The maps' creators variously describe the island's shoreline as an "amoeba," a "stout rectangle," and other shapes until successive attempts draw closer and closer to its true form. The succession of false maps that developed over time symbolize how the past cannot be accurately understood through a single account from a fixed perspective, which is as likely to be wrong as the mapmakers were about Ceylon's geography. Although many European explorers viewed Ceylon as a wonderful "paradise," romanticizing their experiences on the island, Ondaatje includes a Ceylonese poem that reads, "Don't talk to me about Matisse [...] / where the nude woman reclines forever / on a sheet of blood [...] / To our / remote villages the painters came, and our white-washed / mud-huts were splattered with gunfire." The native population's memory of violence contradicts the romanticized tale that Europeans told of their arrival. This contradiction demonstrates the manner in which "history" as told by the Europeans is unreliable, one-sided, and incomplete.

Rather than lean on historical records, Ondaatje shapes his understanding of his family's past from friends and relatives' memories which, though imperfect, build a rich and multifaceted record of the past. This suggests that rather than a singular authoritative history, the past is better preserved through the various memories and personal accounts of individual people. Ondaatje spends much of the narrative recording dialogues with family members and old friends of his father, and their conversations loop and swirl around various events, often contradicting one another but always revealing something new. He recounts, "No story is ever told just once [...] we return to it an hour later and retell the story with additions and this time a few judgments thrown in." Later, describing the way that his aunts' stories create the past, Ondaatje states, "They knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong." The manner in which Ondaatje uncovers his family's past through numerous personal memories suggests that the past is better preserved through collective remembrance, rather than a single account written down by an authoritative figure. Although many of the

memories contradict each other and thus cannot all be true, by listening to so many, Ondaatje is able to circle closer and closer toward the truth. Just as the iterations of false European maps gradually reflect the true geography of Ceylon (after seeing the island from many angles), the many perspectives of his family's history give him a dynamic, many-sided understanding of his forebears. Although this approach depends on unreliable, subjective memories, the author's earlier criticism of a fixed, authoritative view of history suggests that memory is no less reliable than officially-recognized history.

Along with memories, Ondaatje intersperses his narrative with nonfactual stories (the author admits this in his "Acknowledgments") which still provide insight into the past despite being fictional. The value of these tales suggests that even fanciful stories can help to preserve and reveal the past better than a reductionist historical narrative could. One particular story unsettles Ondaatje while also giving him insight into his father's depression and anxiety. Ondaatje has already heard the story of his father drunkenly diving headfirst off a train, but another family member tells it differently. In this alternative account, Mervyn instead dives into the jungle and emerges hours later, stripped naked, holding a handful of stray **dogs** in front of him at arm's length, hanging them by their leashes. The dogs are powerful, and Mervyn is holding them to protect himself from them, as if "he had captured all the evil in the regions he passed through and was holding it." Even after a friend cuts the hounds free, Mervyn holds his arm out straight, holding the ends of the leashes. Although the story is told to Ondaatje as fact, he "cannot come to terms with" it and doubts its veracity. Even so, the image of his father emerging dazed from the jungle, focused only on holding evil at bay from the world and himself, reveals to Ondaatje a yet-unseen element of the severe anxiety Mervyn struggled with throughout his life. This revelation demonstrates how even stories that are not factual may still be useful for understanding the truth of the past. Ondaatje's memoir presents a concept of history that spurns a single, authoritative voice in favor of a complex interweaving of memories and stories, most of which are only partially true, but together form a dynamic, many-sided understanding of the past.

ALCOHOLISM

Alcohol plays a constant and dominating role in Ondaatje's memoir. Although the author and his friends all drink—in the opening passage of the story, Ondaatje is drunk at a party—the effects of alcohol are primarily explored through the author's father, Mervyn. Mervyn is a lifelong alcoholic suffering from "dipsomania," the sudden overwhelming craving for vast amounts of alcohol punctuated by weeks of sobriety. Although Mervyn is gentle by nature, his drunkenness unleashes all manner of destruction in his own life and the lives of his family members, causing immense pain that is still felt decades later. The sad account of Mervyn's life explores the destructive havoc that alcoholism can wreak on one's self and one's family.

Mervyn's alcoholism causes him to engage in dangerous and self-destructive behaviors, demonstrating the risk that alcohol abuse poses to one's own safety. Throughout his life, Mervyn's addiction inspires dangerous and potentially fatal actions. For several years, he habitually gets drunk on the train and acts erratically, pulling pistols on soldiers and even diving headfirst off of the train while it is moving at high speeds—which he somehow survives. Such heedless actions while drunk demonstrate how alcoholism can make a person heedless of physical danger. On top of his reckless behavior, Mervyn tries to actively kill himself on a drunken whim, again suggesting that alcoholism eliminates a person's instinct for self-preservation. At one point during Marvin's years of getting drunk on the train, he strips naked and marches into a train tunnel, hoping for an oncoming train to strike him dead. He waits there for several hours until his young wife, Doris, marches in after him and talks him out of the idea. After several decades of drunken near-misses, Mervyn's alcoholism finally kills him via cerebral hemorrhage. Although Mervyn's survival for so long seems nearly miraculous, his death demonstrates that alcoholism is an ultimately fatal condition, regardless of how much good fortune one possesses.

Although Mervyn is the one getting drunk, the pain that his alcoholism inflicts on his family suggests that such an addiction hurts not only the addict, but also the family members and friends who love him or her. Mervyn's drunken antics often endanger his family. For example, on a pleasant (though intoxicated) afternoon drive, Mervyn decides to race their car at high speed along a cliff with his family inside. He passes out at the wheel, terrifying Doris and the children as the car teeters precariously on the cliff's edge while Mervyn sleeps in the front seat, unaware of the danger he's put his family in. In addition to physical danger, Mervyn's drunkenness inflicts emotional pain on his family as well. Although his friends remember him as charming and most of his children remember him as a "gentle" father while sober, he is monstrous while drunk. In a fit of dipsomania, Mervyn aims a rifle at his second wife Maureen and threatens to kill her because he believes she hid his stash of alcohol. One of his children anonymously describes their childhood as "a nightmare." Mervyn's conduct toward his own family suggests that alcoholism can turn even a kind-hearted person into someone hurtful and hateful who emotionally scars their loved ones. For Ondaatje, the greatest pain that Mervyn's alcoholism inflicts is the fact that Ondaatje never has the chance to truly know his father. Although Mervyn is alive for the early years of Ondaatje's life, Ondaatje's mother, Doris, takes the children and leaves Mervyn before Ondaatje is old enough to know him. By the time that Ondaatje is an adult and wishes to know who his father was, Mervyn's drinking has

already killed him. Ondaatje writes, "I never knew what my father felt […] My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult." The author's loss implies that the absence of his father is a wound that will not heal, suggesting that the greatest damage one's alcoholism inflicts upon their families is that it essentially removes the addict from family life, denying them the opportunity to be a proper father, mother, sibling, or partner.

Although the reader may look down on Mervyn for his addiction, the narrative reveals that alcoholism is endemic to Mervyn's family and community and is exacerbated by personal pain. This suggests that for alcoholics such as Mervyn, addiction isn't a personal failing—their environment, family history, and psychological struggles may predispose them toward such a condition. Ondaatje's grandmother Lalla is herself a heavy drinker who kills herself by drunkenly stepping into a flash flood, suggesting that alcoholism runs in Mervyn and Ondaatje's family. Similarly, alcohol plays a major role in Ceylon's social culture. Mervyn's close friend Francis is the "first to drink himself into the grave" by drowning himself in 12 inches of water. The prevalence of alcoholism in Mervyn's family history and social circle suggests that his environment predisposes him toward alcoholism. Late in the story, the narrative reveals that Mervyn suffers from crippling fear and depression, and implies that this mental illness contributes to his heavy drinking. As far as Ondaatje can understand, drinking helps Mervyn to "keep [his pain] within so the fear would not hurt others." Thinking of his father's ruinous alcoholism, Ondaatje quotes Goethe: "Oh, who will heal the sufferings / Of the man whose balm turned poison?" suggesting that Mervyn's addiction is in part an attempt to soothe his own psychological pain. The image that the author ultimately creates of his father is more sympathetic than critical. Though Mervyn's behavior is often selfish and destructive, Ondaatje's narrative recognizes that as ruinous as his father's alcoholism is, it is a product of both Mervyn's environment and his own inner torment. Regarding both Mervyn and anyone suffering alcoholism and dipsomania, this suggests that alcoholism is often a symptom of a toxic environment and deep emotional pain. Mervyn's addiction to alcohol costs him his family, his life, and steals Michael Ondaatje's chance of knowing his father, demonstrating that such a condition is extremely destructive not only to the addict, but to the people around them as well.

ANCESTRY, HOMELAND, AND IDENTITY

Although Ondaatje was born in Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) and his ancestors lived and died there, he himself left family and country behind when he was 11. As a Sri Lankan adult who now lives in Canada, Ondaatje's alienation from his native culture leaves him feeling that he does not understand who he truly is, especially since he also knows nothing about his father, Mervyn. This "uncertainty […] regarding my own identity" inspires two investigative journeys back to his homeland and extended family to rediscover his own sense of identity and determine his place in the world, eventually providing the subject matter for his memoir. Ondaatje's quest to know his ancestry and his homeland suggests that one's personal identity develops from understanding their place both amidst their family legacy and in the world at large.

Ondaatje's lack of knowledge about his own family or the country he left behind leaves him unsure of his own identity, suggesting that it is difficult for an individual to know who they are without the context of their family's past. While staying at a friend's house in Canada, Ondaatje has a nightmare about Mervyn surrounded by vicious **dogs**. As Ondaatje wakes, he realizes that he does not know who his father truly was or what the dream means, but only that Ondaatje has long felt a sense of "malice towards him due to the scarce, negative information I knew about him." This epiphany makes Ondaatje further realize he knows little about his family history at all: "In my mid-thirties I realized that I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood." He states that this lack of knowledge leaves him with "uncertainty […] regarding my own identity." Ondaatje's feeling of not knowing himself due to not knowing his family suggests that one's sense of identity is deeply tied to the family legacy into which they are born. Ondaatje confirms this when he writes, "At certain years in our lives, we see ourselves as remnants from the earlier generations that were destroyed. […] So our job becomes to […] with 'the mercy of distance' write the histories." His statement suggests that his family history, and particularly the absence of his father, influences his own life as an adult in significant but unseen ways, and thus understanding that history is key to understanding himself.

Ondaatje dwells heavily on the sensory details of Ceylon and the ways they recall his childhood, which suggests that along with family, the environment one is born into shapes one's identity as well. The first environment that Ondaatje describes is Canada's brutal winter,—during which he wraps himself in a quilt to keep warm—in contrast with Ceylon's "delicious heat," indicating that despite living in Canada, Ondaatje's body is not suited to the cold climate. He notes, "It was a new winter and I was already dreaming of Asia," indicating that the environment Ondaatje currently lives in is not the one that he naturally belongs to, adding to his conflicted sense of identity. In Ceylon, Ondaatje meticulously records sensory details and describes them at length in the narrative. He makes long audio recordings of the jungle sounds and bird calls. He lists the smells. In his last morning in Ceylon, Ondaatje says, "My body must remember everything, this brief insect bite, the smell of wet fruit, the slow snail light, rain, rain." The sensory details remind him of his childhood, of the land from which he came from and in which his mother and father lived their lives. Ondaatje's meticulous focus on the sensory details of his homeland suggests that, like

family history, the environment one is born in plays a significant role in shaping their identity.

By uncovering and recording stories about his family and home country, Ondaatje is able to see himself as a part of a long and complex family legacy rather than a lone Sri Lankan living in Canada. This ultimately suggests that knowing one's place in the context of one's family and homeland is central to understanding one's own identity. After days of conversations, memories, and stories about his family members in Ceylon, Ondaatje sees a recurring vision in his mind: "I see my own straining body which stands shaped like a star and realize gradually I am part of a **human pyramid**. Below me are other bodies that I am standing on and above me are several more, though I am quite near the top." In the vision, the pyramid lumbers slowly about the room while all of the people in it "chatter" to one another. Ondaatje's vision suggests that he now recognizes himself as simply one member in a long family legacy, standing upon the shoulders of those relatives who went before him just as his children stand on his. This sense of belonging to a larger group of people suggests that for any individual, finding and recognizing their place in their familial and cultural legacies defines their own identity as a person who is influenced by the past and who will contribute to the future of their lineage.

IRRESPONSIBILITY IN THE 1920S

Ondaatje's memoir is in large part an attempt to reconstruct his parents' early lives and understand who they were in their youth and as adults. The stories he pieces together are revealing, but unflattering. As young adults, Ondaatje's parents and their friends exemplify the spirit of the 1920s era in which they come of age: wealthy, irresponsible, and with little awareness of any real consequences in life. Ondaatje's recounting of his parents' generation suggests that, especially for the wealthy, the 1920s were a time of debauchery, irresponsibility, and nihilism with consequences that echoed through future generations.

Ondaatje describes his parents' early adult years as an era of wild partying and rash decisions, suggesting that for those coming of age in the 1920s, life seems to have little weight or consequence. Both Mervyn and Doris are born to wealthy Ceylonese families and spend their twenties drinking, partying, and gambling. Mervyn spends two years in England, pretending to be enrolled at Cambridge but actually spending the tuition money his parents gave him on expensive rooms, parties, and several brief engagements to foreign women. Doris spends all of her time drinking and practicing exotic dances with her sister. When Mervyn returns to Ceylon and marries Doris in 1932, he buys her an expensive engagement ring and charges it to his father, Philip, then threatens to kill himself when his father refuses to pay for it. By Ondaatje's description, such behavior is obviously childish and rash, but not unique to his parents, suggesting that the 1920s and early 1930s were the defined by erratic, irresponsible behavior. Ondaatje recounts that his parents and relatives' social circles at the time were rife with affairs and cheating spouses: "Love affairs rainbowed over marriages and lasted forever—so it often seemed that marriage was the greater infidelity." Along with irresponsibility, the prevalence of cheating spouses suggests that the era was also defined by widespread adultery. Ondaatje is critical of this time in his parents' lives, saying, "From the twenties until the war nobody really had to grow up. They remained wild and spoiled." He later calls this period of wild partying "the waste of youth. Burned purposeless," suggesting that in spite of the fun, the generation that came of age in the 1920s was nihilistic, wasting their most vital years on shallow pleasures.

With the onset of World War II in the 1940s, Ondaatje's parents and their wealthy friends are forced to grow up and reckon with a serious, dangerous world, indicating that the threat of global conflict put an end to the frivolity of the 1920s and early 1930s. Ondaatje credits the end of this irresponsible period to the threat of global war and regional fighting. He states, "It was only during the second half of my parents' generation that they suddenly turned to the real world." For instance, Ondaatje's Uncle Noel, a lawyer, suddenly finds himself defending his former partying friends' lives in court after they take part in a local insurgency. The sudden seriousness facing Mervyn and Doris's generation suggests that life-and-death consequences of war force them to recognize the reality and responsibility of adulthood that they've formerly avoided. Things also change for Ondaatje's parents on a more personal level: although Mervyn continues drinking as a middle-aged man, as his children are born he ceases partying and the drinking takes on a sullener tone. Rather than drinking socially, he often drinks alone to quell his depression and even attempts suicide while drunk. Mervyn's slow downfall, even in the midst of raising a family, suggests that for some people in his generation failed to effectively from habitual irresponsibility to actual adulthood.

Even after Ondaatje's parents mature and set aside their partying and rashness, their children and grandchildren feel the impact of their irresponsibility, suggesting that the consequences of such brash living echo into future generations. The greatest impact of Mervyn and Doris's long refusal to grow up is arguably Mervyn's dependence on alcohol—initiated during his partying years—which ultimately splits the family up after Doris takes her children and leaves Mervyn. The consequences of Mervyn's irresponsible behavior are what ultimately deny Ondaatje the chance to truly know his father. In addition to familial instability, both Mervyn and Doris squander the wealth they inherited from their studious, hard-working parents on parties, alcohol, and unsuccessful business ventures. Ondaatje reflects on the great heights from which both his parents fell, saying, "They had come a long way in

fourteen years from being the products of two of the best known and wealthiest families in Ceylon: my father now owning only a chicken farm at Rock Hill, my mother working in a hotel." Both Mervyn and Doris's fall from wealth to near-destitution impacts not only themselves, but their children, since there is little to leave to them. This further demonstrates how the irresponsibility and nihilism of those who came of age in the 1920s created consequences that echo through subsequent generations. Ondaatje's depiction of his parents' generation suggests that they and their friends fail to grow up until very late in their lives, to the detriment of their children and grandchildren.

COLONIALISM

Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) has a long history of colonialism. Between 1505 and 1948, the Portuguese, Dutch, and English Empires each ruled the country in turn, and Ondaatje regards these nations as "invaders who stepped ashore and claimed everything with the power of their sword or bible or language." Although the various European powers reigned over Ceylon and although some of their citizens married Ceylonese people—Ondaatje's family has some Dutch heritage—Ondaatje argues that none of them truly understood Ceylon or appreciated it for anything more than its aesthetic beauty and exportable resources. Both through English writings and family dialogue, Ondaatje exposes the shallowness of the colonialists' love for Ceylon and suggests that a country can only truly belong to the people who were born there, since only they recognize its true value.

Ondaatje intersperses his personal narrative with snippets written by European artists and explorers espousing Ceylon's natural beauty while reviling its people, suggesting that the colonialists' love for Ceylon is shallow, concerned only with aesthetic beauty and goods that can be traded for profit. Ondaatje states that Ceylon's beauty "seduced all of Europe," particularly the Dutch, Portuguese, and English empires. He includes writings from the English artist Edward Lear stating, "The roads are intensely picturesque. Animals, apes, hornbill, squirrel, and figurative dirt," suggesting that the Europeans saw Ceylon's value primarily in its exotic aesthetic appeal. However, in the same breath, Lear calls the native people "odiously inquisitive and bothery-idiotic" and "savages," demonstrating that despite their love of the country's scenery, the colonizers had no appreciation for its people or their culture. Similarly, Ondaatje states that European traders saw Ceylon as a "paradise to be sacked. Every conceivable thing was collected and sent back to Europe." The colonizers' main concern seemed to be stripping the resources out of Ceylon to send back to Europe, suggesting that their infatuation with the country was primarily for the beauty or resources they could remove from it.

Despite the Europeans' love for Ceylon's beauty and resources, they never learned to live within the country's harsh climate or respect the ways of the culture, suggesting that the Europeans never actually understood the land they tried to rule. Ondaatje notes that the heat "drove Englishmen crazy," such as the English writer D.H. Lawrence, who wrote "Ceylon is an experience—but never a permanence." Although Ceylon may have *looked* like paradise, it seemed unlivable to Lawrence as an Englishman. Ondaatje further notes that as the Europeans encroached into his country, "the island hid its knowledge [… its] arts and customs and religious ceremonies." Instead, the country "pretended to reflect each European power until newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities." Aside from one sailor held captive in the Ceylon for 20 years, "very few foreigners truly knew where they were." This further suggests that although various European powers tried to rule over Ceylon, they never understood what it was they were ruling or how to thrive there, but rather "stepped in and admired the landscape, disliked the 'inquisitive natives' and left."

Ondaatje's critical description of the colonizers and their unwillingness or inability to see Ceylon as more than scenery or profit suggests that a country belongs only to those born and who've lived there all their lives, who can appreciate the nation for all it offers and endure its environment. Reflecting on the flow of colonial powers and foreigners through Ceylon's past, Ondaatje decides, "We own the country we grow up in or we are aliens and invaders," suggesting that the only people with any right to live in Ceylon or enjoy its beauty are those who understand its culture and traditions, and who can endure its harsh environment. Beyond Ceylon, Ondaatje's pronouncement seems an indictment of all such colonial pursuits or people who seek to exploit a place's beauty without understanding and respecting it completely. However, this does place Ondaatje himself in an odd position. Having moved to England at age 11 and lived in Canada for most of his life, he finds that he himself partially feels like a foreigner in his own home: "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates foreigners." However, Ondaatje's childhood in Ceylon and his commitment to understanding its past and the minutiae of its environment—as illustrated by his detailed sensory descriptions—distinguishes him from the foreign colonizers who simply wanted to exploit Ceylon's resources and steal away the country's beauty for themselves.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HUMAN PYRAMID

The human pyramid represents the Ondaatje family legacy and Michael Ondaatje's place in it.

After spending a day with his Aunt Phyllis, listening to her memories of their family history, Ondaatje envisions himself stretched out like a star, standing on the shoulders of his relatives in the midst of a human pyramid. He stands near the top of the pyramid, though a few people stand on his shoulders as well. Ondaatje's position amidst the pyramid of relatives suggests that he recognizes himself not just as an individual, but in the broader context of his family ancestry—one person amidst hundreds. His position near the top of the pyramid, standing on others' shoulders symbolizes how his life is built on the legacies of those who've gone before him. Likewise, the people standing on his shoulders represent his own children, whose lives will similarly be built on the legacy Ondaatje himself leaves behind.

FALSE MAPS

The false maps of Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka) that Ondaatje's brother hangs on his wall represent the unreliability of a singular, Western historical narrative while also demonstrating the way that many personal memories of the same event will gradually draw one closer to the truth. As European explorers first caught glimpses of Ceylon—usually only seeing it from a single angle—they drew maps variously describing its shape as an "amoeba," a "squat rectangle," and various other misinterpretations, symbolizing the way that "history," when told from a single perspective, is most likely to be biased and leave out other perspectives or opinions. However, as the Europeans drew more and more maps that built on each other's knowledge, their description of Ceylon's shape gradually drew closer to the truth, symbolizing the way that many memories and perspectives of the same event will form a more reliable picture of the past.

DOGS

The dogs represent Mervyn's fears and anxieties which seems to stem from the presence of evil in the world. Before Ondaatje learns about his father's life, he has a nightmare of Mervyn surrounded by terrible dogs. Later, Ondaatje hears a story—that he suspects is untrue—where Mervyn disappears drunk into the forest and emerges, naked and holding several powerful dogs by their leashes out in front of him. Mervyn seems in a trance, and holds the dogs in the air to protect himself and the world at large from them. Ondaatje states that it seems Mervyn gathered up all the evil in the places he visited, symbolized by the dogs, but is unable now to let go of it for fear of what it would do to him. Even after a friend cuts the dogs loose, Mervyn keeps his arm outstretched in front of him for hours, representing his preoccupation with his own fear of evil and inability to relax and let his guard down. This anecdote, though likely fictionalized, is a clear representation of Mervyn's ongoing struggle with anxiety, an aspect of his mental health issues that he admits contributed to his alcoholism.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Running in the Family* published in 2003.

Asia Quotes

❝ In my mid-thirties I realized I had slipped past a childhood I had ignored and not understood.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

As an adult living in Canada with a family and a career, Ondaatje prepares to make his first return journey to his home country, Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka), which he left when he was 11. As Ondaatje hints at here and slowly reveals throughout the memoir, his lack of knowledge about his ancestry and his homeland leaves him feeling uncertain about his own identity. His sense that he has "ignored and not understood" his childhood suggests that childhood and the place one spends their early upbringing play a significant role in shaping one's sense of identity as an adult. Without that knowledge, then, it's understandable that Ondaatje feels disconnected from his past and therefore lost and unsure of himself. For Ondaatje, knowing where he came from seems to be essential to knowing who he is now and where he will go from here. This opening thus sets the trajectory of the entire memoir, establishing it as a quest for Michael Ondaatje to understand the family that he came from and the world to which he belongs.

Jaffna Afternoons Quotes

❝ I see my own straining body which stands shaped like a star and realize gradually that I am part of a human pyramid. Below me there are other bodies that I am standing on and above me there are several more, though I am quite near the top. With cumbersome slowness we are walking from one end of the huge living room to another.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Aunt Phyllis, Gillian

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje sits with his sister Gillian and his Aunt Phyllis in Ceylon, as Aunt Phyllis reminisces about past generations of the Ondaatje family. At night, Ondaatje has a vision of himself as part of a human pyramid made up of his family members. The image of the pyramid represents Ondaatje's newly realized place in his family ancestry. While Ondaatje may have seen himself as a lone individual as an adult in Canada without any knowledge of his ancestry, in Ceylon he is surrounded by the past, by the lives of the other Ondaatjes who comprise the pyramid. Ondaatje's position near the top, standing on others' shoulders, reflects that he is one of the most recent generations and thus stands on the shoulders of all those who've lived before him. In this sense, he is supported by and enters into their stories. Likewise, those people standing on his shoulders represent the next generation—his and his siblings' children. Because they are balanced on Ondaatje's shoulders, he must recognize that the actions he takes in life affect not only him, but those who come after him as well. Finally, the cumbersome slowness with which the pyramid moves suggests that, as one member in a long line of ancestors, Ondaatje can only do so much to change the trajectory or legacy of the Ondaatje family. While this may seem limiting to some, it also means that Ondaatje has a place to belong within his family's story, an identity to derive for himself.

The Courtship Quotes

[Mervyn] bought Doris a huge emerald engagement ring which he charged to his father's account. His father refused to pay and my father threatened to shoot himself. Eventually, it was paid for by the family.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Philip Ondaatje, Doris Gratiaen, Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

After Mervyn breaks his engagement to the daughter of a wealthy Englishman and gets engaged to Doris Gratiaen instead, he demands that his father, Philip, pay for a lavish ring, despite the fact that Philip opposes the engagement altogether. This early episode establishes Mervyn's character as young man, demonstrating his altogether reckless and childish nature. Although his demeanor tempers as he grows older, whenever he gets drunk such recklessness emerges once again, apparently reawakening his youthful immaturity. At the same time, the fact that Mervyn is able to convince Philip to pay for the ring suggests that his childish behavior is enabled by his wealthy parents. This further suggests that Mervyn's generation's garish irresponsibility in the 1920s may have been fueled by the older generation's wealth and inability to reign in their own spoiled children.

Flaming Youth Quotes

The waste of youth. Burned purposeless. They forgave that and understood that before everything else. After Francis died there was really nowhere to go.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Doris Gratiaen, Mervyn Ondaatje, Francis de Saram

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In the 1920s, during the early adult years of Mervyn and Doris's generation, their beloved friend Francis "drinks himself into the grave," drowning himself in 12 inches of water. Upon learning of this tragedy, Ondaatje's reflection suggests that Francis's death took the sheen off the parties and the drinking and the all-night dancing, revealing the nihilism of their lifestyle to Mervyn and Doris and their friends. The "waste of youth" and "burned purposeless" implies that, rather than spending their twenties accomplishing something or working toward some greater goal, Mervyn and Doris's generation wastes it on thrill-seeking. This seems to typify the attitude of the 1920s, especially for the young and rich, ultimately suggesting that this generation wasted the first half of their lives when they could have been following in their parents' footsteps and establishing their own empires. Francis's futile, meaningless death—he didn't die for any cause or commitment, but from a foolish drunken episode—thus lays bare the frivolity of their whole lifestyle.

Tropical Gossip Quotes

Love affairs rainbowed over marriages and lasted forever—so it often seemed that marriage was the greater infidelity. From the twenties until the war nobody really had to grow up. The remained wild and spoiled.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Doris Gratiaen, Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje reflects on the state of his parents' generation and the social circles his family ran in through the 1920s and 1930s. Along with the drunken parties, Ondaatje asserts that infidelity was rampant, even commonplace among his parents' generation. While this may not immediately seem critical, but rather an expression of sexual freedom, Ondaatje's statement that his parents remained "wild and spoiled" suggests that in retrospect, such a lifestyle still seems immensely childish. While his parents' generation could have been raising families and building a stabile society, they whittled away their time with flings and soured relationships. For Ondaatje, recognizing that this is a major part of his family's history, especially through the 1920s, helps to put his own parents' broken marriage into context. Although Mervyn's and Doris's marriage fell apart due to alcoholism rather than infidelity, their divorce amidst a culture of failed marriages makes them appear more like casualties of their social environment than failed parents. In this way, although Ondaatje recognizes the pain their failed marriage caused him and his siblings, he avoids taking a moralistic or condemning tone toward his parents, and views them rather as people who were influenced by the environment in which they grew up.

Kegalle (i) Quotes

Humorous and gentle when sober, [Mervyn] changed utterly and would do anything to get alcohol. He couldn't eat, had to have a bottle on him at all times. If his new wife Maureen had hidden a bottle, he would bring out his rifle and threaten to kill her.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Maureen, Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In his later years, even after he stops getting drunk publicly, Ondaatje reflects on his father's "dipsomania" (alcoholism) behind closed doors, and the way this addiction created an entirely different version of Mervyn than when he was when sober. Mervyn's alcoholism, which drives him to binge drink for days on end, demonstrates the horrid effects that such an addiction can have on both the addict and their loved ones. For Mervyn, alcohol seems to create a desperation that even leads to violence, suggesting that addiction can make a monster out of an otherwise kind and gentle person. Additionally, although Maureen is not the one who drinks, she suffers from Mervyn's alcoholism at least as much as he does, which demonstrates alcoholism's destructive impact on a person's family as well, unleashing a side of the addict that otherwise might never emerge.

Tabula Asiae Quotes

On my brother's wall in Toronto are the false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The results of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations [...] growing from mythic shapes to eventual accuracy.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

As Ondaatje reflects on the relationship of foreigners and colonizers to Ceylon, he remembers the inaccurate maps drawn by famed European explorers, which Ondaatje's brother has hung on his wall in Toronto. The false maps symbolize the unreliability of "history" in the Westernized, authoritative sense of the word, and the way that collective memories form a more complete picture of the past. As is later touched on in the memoir, "history" is written from a single fixed perspective, just as many maps were drawn from a single perspective as a ship sailed past one of Ceylon's many coastlines. Because of this limited perspective, anything that lies out of sight is pure guesswork, and likely to be wrong. Thus, instead of relying on historical record to trace his family's past, Ondaatje

collects many personalized accounts of memories and rumors, most of which contradict one another in some way, to eventually gather a sense of the truth about what happened in the past. Although the memories are unreliable as well, by gathering many versions of the same story from different angles, Ondaatje develops an understanding of the past that is more dynamic and nuanced, closer to the actual truth. Just as successive iterations of false maps draw closer and closer to Ceylon's actual shape, successive memories of the same event build on each other and gather together to reveal the true shape of the past.

Monsoon Notebook (i) Quotes

❝ I witnessed everything. One morning I would wake and just smell things for the whole day, it was so rich I had to select senses.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70-71

Explanation and Analysis

In several chapters such as this one, Ondaatje records sensory details and images as a stream of consciousness, offering no context or connection among them. However, since his main goal in making the journeys to Ceylon is to understand the culture and family he came from, it appears that Ondaatje regards not only Ceylon's people but its environment as critical to forming his own identity. His statement, "I witnessed everything," suggests that he is forming his own record of Ceylon for future generations to absorb and understand, even the everyday sensory details such as smells and sounds. By punctuating his narration with images of ordinary life, Ondaatje helps the reader not only understand his family ancestry and the people who produced him, but also develop a sense of the world he was born into through its sounds, smells, and colors.

The Karapothas Quotes

❝ I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

As Ondaatje reflects on Ceylon's history of colonialism, he recognizes that his own identity as a Ceylonese man is conflicted, being one who both resents the history of colonization and yet lives in the colonizer's world in the West. Though born in Ceylon, Ondaatje has lived two-thirds of his life in England and Canada, and returns to Ceylon only to visit, to see and understand its cultural past. Although Ondaatje hates the history of Europeans who came to Ceylon to sample its beauty or to rob it, he himself feels like a foreigner stepping briefly into a country to which he feels he both does and doesn't belong. This complicates his own understanding of his identity as a Ceylonese man, since he has one foot in both the colonized and colonizers' worlds. Ondaatje makes this observation and leaves it to the reader to decide, choosing not to defend his own brief presence in Ceylon. However, Ondaatje later criticizes the European colonists for having only a shallow appreciation of Ceylon's aesthetic beauty without regard for its culture or complex past. Ondaatje, by contrast, revels in the minutiae of Ceylon's natural environment, its past, and its people. Because of this, though he lives in the colonizers' world, Ondaatje does not steal Ceylon's beauty for himself but celebrates it. This distinguishes him from being a mere foreigner to being a true prodigal son, returning to his homeland to discover who he is.

❝ Ceylon always did have too many foreigners…the "Karapothas" as my niece calls them—the beetles with white spots who never grew ancient here, who stepped in, admired the landscape, dislike the "inquisitive natives" and left.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

As Ondaatje reflects on Ceylon's colonial history, he remarks that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the "foreigners," the colonizers, is that they tend to only stay for short periods rather than making Ceylon their true home. In addition to Ondaatje's argument that none of the Europeans truly understood Ceylon beyond its aesthetic beauty, this statement suggests that Ceylon only belongs to the people who endure its heat and environment, and who

embrace its native people to make the island their home. Since all of Ceylon's ethnic groups have European blood mixed in—the Ondaatje family has Dutch heritage, for example—there is no purely indigenous ethnic group to claim Ceylon entirely as their own. However, Ondaatje's argument suggests that those who live their whole lives in Ceylon, who can trace their ancestry alongside the country's past, have the right to be Ceylonese and enjoy its natural beauty, regardless of their ethnic heritage. However, this again complicates Ondaatje's own identity as a Ceylonese man, since although his family lived in Ceylon for generations, he himself has spent most of his life in England and Canada.

❝ Don't talk to me about Matisse
[...]
Talk to me instead of the culture generally—
How the murderers were sustained
by the beauty robbed of savages: to our remote
villages the painters came, and our white-washed
mud-huts were splattered with gunfire.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85-86

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje includes a poem by Ceylonese writer Lakdasa Wikkramasinha, which contests the European historical account of the colonizers' interactions with Ceylon. The reference to Matisse seems to refer specifically to his painting *L'Asie*, which depicts an Asian woman and celebrates her as an "exotic beauty" of sorts. The painting thus represents the colonizers' view of countries like Ceylon, since European writers and artists like Matisse tended to romanticize the exotic, aesthetic qualities of conquered countries without honestly assessing the violence inflicted on them. The poem criticizes such a romanticized view of colonial history while suggesting that there is another perspective to Europe's presence in Ceylon, one which recognizes the death and violence the native peoples suffered. These two conflicting accounts of the same period of Ceylon's history emphasizes the unreliability of Western authoritative "history," which Ondaatje prods at throughout the memoir, by suggesting that the ruling power writes such histories to benefit themselves and praise their own experiences. The oppressed people's experiences are likewise ignored, excluded from "history."

Aunts Quotes

❝ How I have used them ... [Aunts] knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje reflects on how much of his memoir is provided to him by his various aunts, whose stories weave together. The image of threads in a sarong (a Sri Lankan fabric garment wrapped around the waist) aptly symbolizes the way memories, though unreliable on their own, interweave to create a clearer story of the past. Although a single memory of an event likely has missing or incorrect details in it and only provides one perspective, when many memories of the same event are shared and combined, they form a stronger, clearer picture of that event. This method of preserving the past through collective memories even has an advantage over the singular authoritative voice of Western "history," since it provides many different angles and perspectives on the same event. Rather than only preserving one view of a complex interaction, collective memories woven together preserve many different opinions, giving a far more nuanced, multifaceted understanding of that event.

❝ Memory invades the present in those who are old, the way gardens invade houses here, the way [Aunt Dolly's] tiny body steps into mine as intimate as anything I have witnessed and I have to force myself to be gentle with this frailty in the midst of my embrace.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Aunt Dolly

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje visits with his elderly Aunt Dolly, who is half-deaf and half-blind but remembers the past clearly. His deep appreciation of Aunt Dolly and her power to remember

suggests that the elderly are immensely valuable to society for their ability to bring the past into the present, to share their own lived experiences with those who were not alive at the time. The intimacy that Ondaatje feels in the moment suggests another way in which memory holds more value than "history." Whereas Western "history" claims to be an objective record of the past—even if it's not—memory is pointedly subjective, a record of personal experiences. Memory has a sense of human intimacy, of sharing one's life with another, that adds value and weight to any given record of the past. Rather than listing the past as a series of disconnected names and dates, memory preserves the past as series of relationships and connections—people who meant something different to each person and events that were significant because they changed people's lives and made them feel a certain way. Although memory is a supposedly less objective way to preserve the past than "history," it maintains the human element in historical stories and records.

The Passions of Lalla Quotes

Eccentrics can be the most irritating people to live with. My mother, for instance, strangely *never* spoke of Lalla to me. Lalla was loved by people who saw her arriving from the distance like a storm.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Mervyn Ondaatje, Doris Gratiaen, Lalla Gratiaen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje spends a long chapter describing his maternal grandmother Lalla's life, which was wild and free especially in her later years. Although Lalla is not blood-related to Ondaatje's father, Mervyn, and although their demeanors are quite different, Ondaatje recognizes several times that they are very alike—both, at times, live to the extremes, both have their own eccentricities, both struggle to take responsibility for the people around them. Although Lalla is vivacious and her life is filled with humor and excitement, Doris's lack of relationship with her implies that Lalla makes a very poor mother; her wild living and lack of fiscal sense prevent her from offering her children any real stability or support in their lives. Since Lalla and Mervyn are presented as parallel figures, this criticism of Lalla also applies to Mervyn. Although Mervyn is well-remembered by most, his drinking, antics, and inability to comprehend the true impact his lifestyle has on his family make him a poor father figure, even for Ondaatje's older siblings who had the chance to know him.

Travels in Ceylon Quotes

Ceylon falls on a map and its outline is the shape of a tear. After the spaces of India and Canada it is so small. A miniature. Drive ten miles and you are in a landscape so different that by rights it should belong to another country.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

As Ondaatje and his family travel around the country, he reflects on how small it now feels compared to the wider world he has experienced. Ondaatje's reflection suggests that, although Ceylon is his homeland, his country of origin, it would be difficult for him to make it home again; that after experiencing the wider world, Ceylon and its past now seem only a small part of human history. In much the same way that Ondaatje recognizes himself as one member of a vast human pyramid that symbolizes his family lineage, Ceylon's smallness suggests that it appears to him as one piece of a vast global community, one small relic of the past. Just as Ondaatje finds his small place in the story of his family ancestry, Ceylon sits in its small place in the history of the world.

[Mervyn and Doris] were both from gracious, genteel families, but my father went down a path unknown to his parents and wife. She followed him and coped with him for fourteen years, surrounding his behavior like a tough and demure breeze.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Doris Gratiaen, Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

After Doris talks Mervyn out of suicide—Mervyn marches drunken into a train tunnel hoping to be run over, until Doris coaxes him back out—Ondaatje observes that his father's behavior seems inexplicable to everyone around him. From this point onward, Ondaatje depicts his parents' relationship as a tragedy, a failure in spite of Doris's best attempts to hold the family together. Doris's decision to follow Mervyn down his "path unknown" and "cope" for 14 years suggests that she tries her hardest to keep the family together and help Mervyn struggle through whatever it is that causes him to drink in such excess and act so recklessly. Although Ondaatje pities his father and loves him, his description of his mother as the "tough and demure breeze" suggests that Doris is the true strength behind the family, offering what little stability she can in light of Mervyn's unpredictable and destructive behavior.

Photograph Quotes

❝ Everything is there, of course. Their good looks behind the tortured faces, their mutual humor, and the fact that both them are hams of a very superior sort. The evidence I wanted that they were absolutely perfect for each other. My father's tanned skin, my mother's milk paleness, and this theatre of their own making.

It is the only photograph I have found of them together.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Doris Gratiaen, Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

One of Ondaatje's aunts shows him a picture of his parents together on their honeymoon captioned, "What we think of married life." They are both well-dressed, attractive, and making "hideous faces" for the camera. Ondaatje's description of their portrait makes several suggestions about his parents' relationship together. Their "good looks behind tortured faces, their mutual humor" suggests that they bond over their refusal to take the world too seriously, as is typical of their generation in the 1920s and 1930s. This is likely because doing so would mean recognizing their own pain—Mervyn from his psychological torment and Doris from her broken relationship with Lalla. Additionally, their dark and light skin suggests that their differing natures complement each other: Mervyn is quiet, Doris is loud, but both share their mutual wicked humor. Although Ondaatje never states it elsewhere, his conviction that "they were absolutely perfect for each other" suggests that he wishes they'd saved their marriage and all remained together as a family, since they both seemed better together.

"What We Think of Married Life" Quotes

❝ "[Doris] belonged to a type of Ceylonese family whose women would take the minutest reaction from another and blow it up into a tremendously exciting tale, then later use it as an example of someone's strain of character. If anything kept their generation alive, it was this recording by exaggeration.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Doris Gratiaen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje states that Doris's family line is known for blowing stories out of factual proportion, but surmises that this helped them to hold onto the past. Building on the theme of memory, history, and story, Ondaatje here suggests that exaggeration can also be a way of preserving the past. Although a moment in reality may seem mundane, this method of exaggerating a story beyond what actually happened makes that moment more memorable, implanted in the listener's mind. Ondaatje suggests that although an exaggerated memory is not necessarily as factual as it could be, it is more likely to be remembered, and thus the past is more likely to be preserved. This method of upholding and reinvigorating the past through exaggerated stories again contradicts the Western concept of a factual, objective "history." Even so, such exaggerated storytelling preserves the past in its essence—if not in its specific details—for future generations to learn from and understand their own identities through.

❝ [Mervyn and Doris] had come a long way in fourteen years from being the products of two of the best known and wealthiest families in Ceylon: my father now owning only a chicken farm at Rock Hill, my mother working in a hotel.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Doris Gratiaen, Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After Doris takes the children and leaves Mervyn, she supports their family by working in a hotel while Mervyn lives alone on his chicken farm, having drunk the rest of his money away. At the end of his parents' marriage, Ondaatje reflects on what they parents lost—Mervyn's downfall inevitably results in Doris's downfall as well, pulling them both from Ceylon's upper class into near-poverty. Such a tragic outcome for both individuals again demonstrates the destructive impact alcoholism can have—not only on the addicted person, but on their family as well. Although Mervyn loses everything to alcohol, Doris's tragedy is arguably worse, as she is left with no money to support her four children with and no husband to help her do it. This suggests that the destructive effects of alcoholism are not only wide-reaching, but even generational, since Doris's children will certainly be affected by their new destitution as a family, especially when such wealth was once available to them.

Blind Faith Quotes

❝ Words such as *love*, *passion*, *duty*, are so continually used they grow to have no meaning—except as coins or weapons [...] I never knew what my father felt of these "things." My loss was that I never spoke to him as an adult. Was he locked in the ceremony of being "a father"? He died before I even thought of such things [...] I am now part of an adult's ceremony, but I want to say I am writing book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179-180

Explanation and Analysis

Ondaatje reflects on his father's absence in his life, stating that his greatest loss is not ever knowing who Mervyn was as an adult, as a man. In this instance, Ondaatje's reflection on Mervyn's absence revolves around the role of fatherhood. His posed questions about "the ceremony of being a father" suggests that the absence of his own father makes him unsure of how to be a father to his children in turn. This further suggests that, at least for men, their sense of identity and understanding of how to be fathers is derived from the way their own fathers treat them and guide them through the world. Since Mervyn is absent from Ondaatje's life because of his alcoholism, this makes the damage alcoholism inflicts two-fold. Not only does Mervyn's alcoholism wound Ondaatje by denying him his opportunity to truly know his father, it also removes the man who should be Ondaatje's model for how to be a father himself. This again demonstrates how alcoholism not only affects the user, but can echo through subsequent generations, as even Ondaatje's relationship to his own children will likely be affected.

The Bone Quotes

❝ The dogs were too powerful to be in danger of being strangled. The danger was to the naked man [Mervyn] who held them at arm's length, towards whom they swung like large dark magnets. [...] He had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In one version of the story of Mervyn's dive off the moving train, he disappears into the jungle. He emerges naked, almost in a trance, holding five snarling dogs dangling in the air from ropes. Even after Mervyn's friend cuts the dog's loose, Mervyn keeps his arm outstretched, holding the ropes away from himself. Ondaatje admits that he does not understand this story and seems to doubt its authenticity. Even so, he presumably includes the story for what it reveals about his father's psychological state. Mervyn is later revealed to suffer from overwhelming anxiety and fear, and the image of Mervyn holding snarling dogs away from himself seems to represent his attempt to hold the "evil" of the world at bay, to protect his naked and vulnerable self from it. His outstretched arm, even when the dogs are no longer present, suggests that keeping such evil away from himself—and perhaps away from others—is a preoccupation, even an obsession, the pressure of which could possibly fuel his dependence on alcohol.

Although this story's authenticity is doubtful, Ondaatje uses it to provide a window into Mervyn's tortured psyche, which gives some answer to why Mervyn behaves the way he

does. Within the theme of memory, history, and story, Ondaatje's use of this anecdote demonstrates that even stories that aren't true themselves may still help to reveal the underlying reality of a person's character or inner pain.

Final Days Father Tongue Quotes

❝ [Mervyn] would swing wildly, in those last years—not so much from sobriety to drink but from calmness to depression. But he was shy, he didn't want anyone else troubled by it, so he would keep quiet most of the time. That was his only defense. To keep it within so the fear would not hurt others.

I keep thinking of the lines from Goethe… "Oh, who will heal the sufferings / Of the man whose balm turned poison?"

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

After hinting at it throughout the memoir, Ondaatje finally confirms that Mervyn suffered from lifelong depression and severe anxiety, which at least partially fueled his alcoholism. The memoir's depiction of Mervyn transforms over the course of the narrative in a manner that parallels Ondaatje's developing perception of his father. In the early sections, Mervyn appears in negative light, as a childish and mischievous drunk, often at the expense of his family and friends. This reflects the negative feelings Ondaatje elsewhere admits to having toward his father throughout most of his life, when he did not understand him. This late revelation of Mervyn's mental illness changes Mervyn's depiction from a destructive alcoholic to a tragic figure, a man suffering psychological torment that slowly pulls his life apart. This seems to reflect Ondaatje's own changed understanding of his father, now that he knows the pain Mervyn felt and tried to keep at bay through drinking. For both Ondaatje and the reader, Mervyn becomes someone to sympathize with, a tragic figure who drinks to ease his pain until the drinking becomes a source of that pain as well.

❝ "You must get this book right," my brother tells me, "You can only write it once." But the book is again incomplete. In the end, all your children move among the scattered acts and memories with no more clues. Not that we ever thought we would be able to fully understand you. Love is often enough, towards your stadium of small things. Whatever brought you solace we would have applauded. Whatever controlled the fear we all share we would have embraced.

Related Characters: Michael Ondaatje (speaker), Mervyn Ondaatje

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

In his closing remarks on his father's life, Ondaatje reflects that he will never truly know who Mervyn was, but he knows enough to love him. This confirms Ondaatje's shifted perception about his father, from someone who was merely absent when he should've been present to a flawed, but deeply human, man overcome by his own fears. Significantly, Ondaatje calls his father's anxiety "the fear we all share," suggesting that he identifies with Mervyn's fear and accepts it as an understandable human response to a chaotic world. Ondaatje's declaration that they would have "applauded" and "embraced" whatever eased his father Mervyn's pain suggests that, while he does not excuse Mervyn's alcoholism, he does forgive it. He recognizes Mervyn's alcoholism as a symptom of deep, long-suffered pain rather than mere selfishness. Although Ondaatje's loss of a father figure is permanent and unfixable, he at least understands Mervyn well enough to regard him as a person with his own fears and triumphs, which is enough for Ondaatje to love.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ASIA

Michael Ondaatje states that "what began it all" is a nightmare about his father standing in a jungle, surrounded by angry wild **dogs**. He wakes from the dream and finds himself sleeping on his friend's couch during the beginning of the Canadian winter.

This opening immediately establishes Ondaatje's relationship to his father as a central tension. The contrast between the dream's jungle and Canada's winter suggests that Ondaatje's current environment is dramatically different from his father's home.

A friend once told Ondaatje that when he drinks, he knows exactly what he wants. Two months later, Ondaatje is dancing drunk at his own farewell party before making his journey to Ceylon, he realizes that he is returning to the family and childhood he left behind. He wants to "touch them into words." He wants to understand his family and his childhood home. Until now, he has made it all the way into his mid-thirties without understanding what it all meant.

Ondaatje's sense that he does not know his own family or understand his own childhood suggests that he is unsure of who he is as an adult. His desire to understand his family's past provides the first hint at how critical understanding one's ancestry and environment is to forming one's sense of identity.

JAFFNA AFTERNOONS

In the early afternoon, Ondaatje sits in an old Dutch-built governor's home in Jaffna, Ceylon. The rooms are massive, the doorways 20 feet tall. He's spending the afternoon with his sister Gillian and his Aunt Phyllis as Phyllis tries to explain the confusing web of relationships in their extended family. They first sit in one of the bedrooms, but the bedroom feels haunted, so they move to the dining room instead. Ondaatje loves Aunt Phyllis because she remembers the past. She was a close companion to his father. They spend the afternoon swapping "anecdotes and faint memories," circling back to stories already told to add new details or a firm opinion. Aunt Phyllis tells him about the various "good and bad Ondaatjes."

The bedroom's haunted quality suggests that the past lingers so heavily, Ondaatje can almost feel it, indicating that the exploration of the past will be a primary theme in the book. Aunt Phyllis's method of recalling the past—telling a story, moving on, then circling back to it later to different details, or a new judgment of the events—demonstrates the way that memory can provide greater insight than a single, authoritative voice of historical record, since new details and perspectives furnish the original story.

Ondaatje observes, "There are so many ghosts here." A governor's daughter, prevented from being with her lover, killed herself in that house in 1734 and her ghost "lives" in one of the mansion's wings. She regularly haunts visitors, appearing to them in a red dress. Nobody sleeps in that wing.

The house's haunting and visitors' active efforts to avoid the haunted areas suggests that the past is so significant to the present that it has an actual impact on people's lives—they choose to sleep in other rooms, rather than disrupt the past.

At night, Ondaatje has a vision of himself standing amidst a great **human pyramid** of his ancestors. He is near the top, though a few stand above him. The pyramid chatters together and lumbers slowly through the mansion's massive rooms.

The pyramid symbolizes Ondaatje's place in his own ancestry. His position above many of his family members suggests that he figuratively stands on their shoulders, on their legacies—both good and bad. The people above him represent his own children, who in turn stand on his shoulders and are impacted by his own actions and choices.

THE COURTSHIP

When Ondaatje's father, Mervyn is a young man, after he finishes school, his parents send him to England to study in university. Mervyn sends word to his parents that he's been accepted into Cambridge University, and for two and a half years they fund his academic career. However, they eventually discover that he was never enrolled at the university at all, but used their tuition money to rent expensive rooms, party, and make a name for himself as a Cambridge socialite. Mervyn was "briefly engaged to a Russian countess." His parents are furious to discover his lie, and travel to England to confront Mervyn in person.

Ondaatje's memoir establishes itself as a piece of postmodern literature through its constant switching of perspectives and timelines; he often narrates events that he was not present for as if he were, so as to bring the reader deeper into the story and characters. Mervyn is immediately established as a childish and irresponsible person, enabled by his parents' wealth and the general frivolity of the 1920s.

Mervyn responds to his parents' rage as he always does—by silently retreating into himself. He steps out for a couple hours at dinner and returns announcing that he has just gotten engaged to Kaye Roseleap, an English girl from a distinguished upper-class family. This news defuses the anger against him. The family spends the following week with the Roseleaps to make arrangements, where Mervyn is on his best behavior. The Ondaatje family returns to Ceylon to wait the four months until the marriage.

Mervyn's spontaneous engagement to avoid a fight with his parents suggests that he is prone to rash actions and does not consider the future consequences. Although one fight has been avoided, Mervyn does not seem to recognize that a marriage is potentially permanent, far weightier than his parents' painful but temporary rage.

Two weeks after returning to Ceylon, Mervyn comes home one evening and announces that he is now engaged to Doris Gratiaen instead. He has no intentions of even informing the Roseleaps. Another fight erupts between Mervyn and his father, and Mervyn falls back on his habit of "trying to solve one problem by creating another." The next day, he announces that he's enlisted in the Ceylon Light Infantry.

Again, Mervyn's decision to end one engagement by creating another, and then try to avoid that fight by enlisting in the military, suggests that he is irresponsible and flippant toward his actions' consequences, even though those consequences affect others, like his snubbed fiancé.

Mervyn has long been close friends with Noel, Doris's brother, who has recently been kicked out out of Oxford for setting his room on fire and sinking three rowing boats. Mervyn spends his first two weeks back in Ceylon with Noel, watching Doris and her friend practice dancing. For the engagement, Mervyn buys Doris a massive emerald ring and charges it to his father, Philip's, account. When Philip refuses to pay for it, Mervyn threatens to shoot himself until his father gives in. Doris briefly and mysteriously breaks off their engagement, and Mervyn again drunkenly decides that he must shoot himself until his uncle Aelian stops him from doing so. The engagement is restored the next day, and Mervyn and Doris marry one year later.

Mervyn's insistence that his father pay for the ring and his threat of suicide is rash and melodramatic, again depicting Mervyn as irresponsible and childish. However, Noel's banishment from Oxford over his destructive behavior suggests that such such irresponsibility is not unique to Mervyn, but typical amongst their wealthy social circle. Mervyn's drunken second threat of suicide demonstrates alcohol's propensity to eliminate one's sense of self-preservation, and foreshadows Mervyn's ongoing alcohol-fueled self-destruction.

APRIL 11, 1932

An anonymous person recalls the trip to Doris and Mervyn's wedding. On the way to Colombo, where the wedding is taking place, they find the bishop who is to conduct the marriage with his car stuck in the ditch. They give him a lift, but the car is so packed that everyone is sitting on each other's laps. They have to let the bishop drive, since no one is allowed to sit on him.

Ondaatje includes several anecdotes like this, which are humorous but do not add to the story in a significant way. Such inclusions emphasize that the memoir is a collection of varied memories and stories, rather than an official historical record, and reflect the moments that stood out to the people involved, either because they were important or merely silly.

HONEYMOON

Ondaatje lists various headlines from the local papers. A tennis championship ends in Colombo; Fred's Astaire's sister marries; a Russian man assassinates the French President; American women try to steal Valentino's corpse from his grave; Charlie Chaplin is in Ceylon, studying dance.

In several chapters, Ondaatje presents events or sensory details as a stream of consciousness without explanation or context. Rather than explain a situation, these passages provide the reader with an overall sense of the time or place. In this case, these headlines situate the upcoming action of the story in the 1920s.

HISTORICAL RELATIONS

Ondaatje remarks that the early 1920s were a "busy and expensive time" for his grandparents. During this period, they live mostly in Colombo, but in the hot months take their family up to the highlands in Nuwara Eliya for a month or so of parties, horse races, tennis, and golf. All the wealthy families while away the months here. There is the occasional "casual tragedy" such as someone dying in a hunting accident, but no one takes much notice. This goes on through the 1920s and 1930s.

Not only Ondaatje's parents, but even his grandparents, live in a state of constant partying, celebration, and leisure. This suggests that the irresponsibility and frivolity of the 1920s is fostered in Mervyn and Doris's generation by their well-off parents, and they are spurred on to such behavior by the general wealth and luxury around them.

The families at Nuwara Eliya are a mix of Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch, British, and Burgher ancestry. There is a rift between these families and the white Europeans, who keep themselves separate and whom everyone assumes are "snobs and racists." Ondaatje's grandfather Philip has a famous collection of wine glasses. His other grandfather, Willie Gratiaen, dreams of snakes. Ondaatje's grandmother Lalla once told the family that the 1920s were so "whimsical" that everyone was "always tired."

The general belief that Europeans are racists indicates that tension exists between the foreigners and the native population, even though the native population is full of mixed heritage. This mixture of European and Ceylonese ancestry will resurface as a point of conflict in Ondaatje's understanding of his own identity.

THE WAR BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

When Lalla is older, almost a grandmother, she boards a cramped bus. The man next to her puts his arm behind her shoulder to make more room. After a few minutes, other passengers look shocked and ashamed. Lalla looks down and realizes that the man next to her has moved his hand down and is smugly groping her breast. Lalla smiles to herself. That breast had been removed years ago—the man is groping a sponge.

Lalla's dark humor at what could be taken as a grotesque, assaulting action suggests that she is a woman who prefers to laugh at misfortune rather than dwell on it. Lalla's reaction gives the sense that in this era, the dark reality of the world is largely ignored.

FLAMING YOUTH

Francis De Saram was the worst alcoholic of Mervyn's generation, though everybody loved him. He was the first of them to "drink himself into the grave" after he intentionally drowned himself in 12 inches of lake water. One of Francis's friends consoles Francis's wife and makes a pass at her. Francis and his friends had lived to drink, and often snuck onto ships in the harbor where they could buy their drinks duty-free. He'd hosted parties at the rubber estate where he worked and lived on "gin, tonic-water, and canned meat." People danced into the night. The rubber estate parties ran until the end of the 1920s when Francis lost his job. He killed himself in 1935. Francis was the most loved among all his friends, and his early death and "waste of youth" puts an end to the revelry. After this, people marry themselves off.

Although Francis only briefly appears in the story, his short life and early death demonstrates the consequences of such a frivolous lifestyle. Although his friends love him and his drunken antics, it is impossible to deny that Francis's alcohol abuse kills him, cutting short a life that should have lasted much longer. Francis's foolish death and "waste of youth" suggests a general sense of nihilism among Mervyn and Doris's generation—they drink, party, and avoid real life without having any real goals or accomplishments.

THE BABYLON STAKES

In Ceylon, everyone gambles. The country's leaders believe it's good for productivity, since men have to work in order to have money with which to gamble. The wealthy and the poor bet on horse races. Those who can't make it to the races place bets on which crow among a group will be the first to fly off his perch. In August, businesses close down for the entire month and the military even abandons its posts to watch the races. Many of Ondaatje's relatives own horses, though they rarely win. People often pool their money together to own just a portion of a horse so that they can participate in the "ceremonial trappings."

Gambling in Ceylon seems to transcend social classes, suggesting that much of the frivolity and irresponsibility of the 1920s is ubiquitous across the entire population. The government's encouragement of gambling further suggests that such behavior is culturally and socially ingrained, a national pastime. Although Mervyn and Doris embody the irresponsibility of the 1920s, Ceylon's gambling culture suggests that this attitude is not unique to them alone.

Everyone reads the local tabloid *The Searchlight* religiously, though nobody wants to be featured in it themselves. Francis and Mervyn's crew travel around Ceylon, watching not just the August races but all the others which cycle year round. When the races are over, they find women and go dancing into the night and drink champagne on the beach. Deeper inland, people perform "devil dances" to cure illness or disability. The partiers swim drunkenly at night and drive home in drunken convoys, crashing into fields, ditches, or trees.

There is both a parallel and a contrast between Mervyn and Francis's dancing and the people performing "devil dances." On one hand, the parallel suggests that Ceylon's culture is generally expressive, vibrant, and celebratory in this era. The contrast, however, suggests that while the devil dancers are seeking to cure illness and benefit others, Francis and Mervyn and company are mainly looking for simple debauchery.

TROPICAL GOSSIP

Ondaatje reflects that many of his family members were attracted to people they shouldn't have been. Affairs often last longer than marriages, he observes, and almost seem more permanent and respectable. Through the 1920s and 1930s until "the war," Ondaatje recounts that "nobody really had to grow up" and so they "remained wild and spoiled." In the second half of his relatives' lives, the world would seem more serious, with life and death consequences. "But in their youth, passions formed complex attractions and relationships, of which only gossip remains." Ondaatje cannot find any personal details about people amidst the rumors of affairs, only the place each person had within the "swirling social tides." But he wants to know about it all.

Once again, the prevalence of affairs amidst Mervyn and Doris's generation and their refusal to grow up suggests that, for the wealthy classes, the 1920s are an era of recklessness, passion, and a general ignorance of any real consequences to life. The wealth of gossip and lack of personal information from that time suggests that no one did anything of particular importance. The war that Ondaatje refers to is World War II.

KEGALLE (I)

Unlike Philip's brother Aelian, who is kind and generous, Philip, Ondaatje's paternal grandfather, is "strict" and "aloof." Both brothers are lawyers, though Philip becomes immensely wealthy through real estate investments and retires when he is 40. He builds the family estate, Rock Hill, on a prime piece of property in the town of Kegalle. Although he loves his family, his family fears his powerful will. Philip is determined to dress and present himself like an Englishman, which his family grates against. Sometimes, on afternoon walks, he dresses in a traditional sarong and finally seems to fit "the landscape around him." Philip dies before World War II and a massive argument erupts at his funeral about how much to pay the pallbearers, prematurely ending the ceremony. Aelian dies four years later.

Philip's seriousness contrasts with Mervyn's childish recklessness, which hints at Mervyn's eventual downfall from the heights of high-society. Philip's desire to dress and compose himself like an Englishman suggests that he sees the European foreigners as somehow superior, to the ire of his family. Much like Ondaatje's identity crisis as a Sri Lankan living in Canada, Philip seems conflicted about his own identity as a Ceylonese man who desires to be English, rather than accept his place in his family legacy.

Rock Hill sits mostly empty for the next decade until Mervyn returns there alone in the late 1940s. Gillian and Ondaatje spend some holidays with him. Mervyn remarries in 1950; his second wife Maureen and two new children Jennifer and Susan live at Rock Hill with him. Mervyn takes up chicken farming and separates himself from his old friends, though he suffers dipsomania and continues to drink. He stays sober for two months at a time, then binge drinks for days on end. Although he is gentle when sober, he is monstrous when drunk, and even points a rifle at Maureen and threatens to kill her if she won't give him alcohol. Mervyn eventually dies, which Maureen announces with a dispassionate note.

Ondaatje organizes his narrative by subject, rather than chronologically, and thus he moves backward and forward through time, skimming over events and then returning later to flesh them out in detail. This method of storytelling parallels the way Aunt Phyllis and other relatives recount their memories of the family, giving the memoir the air of a personal story rather than a precise historical record. Mervyn's drunken threats of violence demonstrate how alcoholism can turn a gentle-hearted man into a monstrous destructive figure.

Ondaatje and his half-sister Susan revisit Rock Hill as adults with their own families. The once large house now seems small and overgrown. The only thing familiar is the polecat which Mervyn was fond of, since it was his only company one drunken afternoon. When Mervyn first found the polecat, he was out of alcohol, so he drank the kerosene out of the lamp instead. Ondaatje reflects, "Whatever 'empire' my grandfather had fought for had to all purposes disappeared."

Nature's overgrowth of Rock Hill reflects the manner in which time and alcohol overtake Mervyn's once wealthy and abundant life, wasting the fortune that Philip labored for. The image of Mervyn drinking kerosene as a substitute for alcohol is particularly tragic and suggests that his alcoholism and dipsomania are so fierce that the illness drives him to desperation.

TABULA ASIAE

In Toronto, Ondaatje's brother has hung a series of "**false maps**" on his walls, drawn by European explorers and traders when they had only caught glimpses of Ceylon and didn't yet know its topography or nature. The maps portray the island's shape as an "amoeba," a "squat rectangle," and various other misinterpretations until after many iterations, the proper pendant-shape begins to form. The maps reflect "routes for invasion and trade" by various countries. Ceylon "seduced all of Europe" and the Portuguese, Dutch, and English each took their turn trying to rule over it. Ceylon simply "pretended to reflect each European power till newer ships arrived and spilled their nationalities." One of Ondaatje's Dutch ancestors arrived in 1600, which is why the family name bears a Dutch spelling.

The false maps symbolize the manner in which "history," in the Western authoritative sense of the word, is often woefully inaccurate, limited by its single perspective. Just as many of the maps were drawn with only one perspective of Ceylon's shoreline, much of "history" is told from the perspective of a single individual or group and does not account for other people's experiences. This demonstrates the weakness of "history" as a method of preserving the past, suggesting that collective memory, with its many perspectives, is a better alternative.

ST. THOMAS' CHURCH

Ondaatje, Gillian, and their families visit a church in Colombo built in 1650, where they find the gravestones of many early Ondaatjes. Seeing his own surname etched in ancient stone makes Ondaatje feel "the excitement of smallness." They find pages of legers recording the many different Ondaatjes. They look for Jurgen, an ancestor who was once a chaplain, and find that his son Simon is buried there as well. Simon was one of four sons, each an expert in their own field and each so strong-willed that they could not bear to be together. Ondaatje returns home for the night and transcribes notes about his ancestors from a leger to a notebook. When he washes his hands, he sees the "eerie" gray of "old paper dust" swirling down the drain.

Ondaatje's felt "excitement of smallness" suggests that he feels a reverence for the past, seeing himself as one member in the long legacy of the Ondaatje family. Both his excitement to discover long-dead relatives and his care in recording their stories suggests that he values such information about his ancestry, as it speaks to his parents' families as well—such as the prevalence of strong-willed individuals throughout generations. The gray paper dust running down the drain represents the passage of time, as Ondaatje returns his mind and self to the present.

MONSOON NOTEBOOK (I)

Ondaatje records the sensory details of his day without narrating the actual events. He makes notes of being at the beach, reading old newspaper clippings, driving through the city, watching people butcher an animal, seeing old girlfriends now with their own families, dining with friends, a thunderstorm and monsoon, a spider crawling across his toilet. "I witnessed everything," he states. Ondaatje spends the whole next day simply smelling things, focusing on this individual sense.

Like the long list of newspaper headlines, Ondaatje presents his experiences as a stream of consciousness without context or explanation. The passing images give the reader an overall sense of his environment. The statement, "I witnessed everything," suggests that witnessing the world, forming memories, and remembering sensations are the primary ways to preserve a moment through time.

TONGUE

As Ondaatje walks along the beach with his children, they find the body of a large reptile, eight feet long. The beast looks like a crocodile, but with a short, rounded snout. Ondaatje recognizes it as a kabaragoya. Local belief states that if a child eats the tongue of the kabaragoya's smaller relative, the thalagoya, they will someday become a brilliant speaker. The tongue must be swallowed whole, sandwiched between two slices of banana. Uncle Noel did this when he was young, though he choked and spat half of it out. What he did swallow made him so sick he almost died. Thalagoya is also used to treat vomiting and morning sickness, and as a child Ondaatje used to steal these animals' eggs and throw them at rivals.

Once again, Ondaatje includes such anecdotes not to impart a critical element of the story, but to give the reader a sense of Ceylon's culture and everyday practices, since it is the world he comes from. In this instance, Ondaatje relates some of Ceylon's local superstition to the reader, even held by wealthy aristocratic families like his. At the same time, since Uncle Noel becomes a lawyer as an adult, Ondaatje wryly and implicitly suggests that their may be some element of truth to superstition. This playful, flimsy attitude toward truth and fact marks the memoir as postmodern.

SWEET LIKE A CROW

A poem, signed, "for Hetti Corea, 8 years old," enumerates how awful the subject's voice is to listen to. It is "like a scorpion pushed through a glass tube / like someone has just trod on a peacock."

Ondaatje's memoir includes various poems and writing by other people, letting their works mingle with and comment on his own. This motif is often called "intertextualism" and is a hallmark of postmodern writing.

THE KARAPOTHAS

Ondaatje includes writings from famous English authors and artists. Edward Lear writes that Ceylon is gorgeous, but its people are "bothery-idiotic." D.H. Lawrence writes that Ceylon is nice to see but ultimately unlivable. Leonard Woolf states, "All jungles are evil." Ondaatje writes, "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner." He sits in the heat of midday and reflects that this same heat "drove Englishmen crazy," such as D.H. Lawrence, who apparently hated the six weeks he spent in Ceylon in 1922. The day before, Ondaatje's own children grew grouchy and vicious toward each other because of the heat.

Ondaatje lets the racism and prejudice of the Englishmen's writing form its own condemnation of colonial interference in Ceylon. At the same time, Ondaatje's status as a Ceylonese man who's lived the majority of his life in Canada complicates his identity—his return to Ceylon is both a return home as well as a kind of an invasion by a Canadian foreigner. This is reinforced by Ondaatje's children's intolerance of the heat, which he claims is the mark of the foreigner.

Ondaatje reflects that Ceylon has always had too many foreigners, particularly the Europeans who came and robbed the island of its cinnamon. Ship captains used to spread cinnamon on their decks so that passengers could "smell Ceylon" even when they were miles offshore. They saw Ceylon as a "paradise to be sacked." Amidst the paradise, there are also multitudes of deadly plants, though this remained hidden from most Europeans' view. As the Europeans encroached, the "island hid its knowledge" and the Ceylon's native people fled the cities with their rituals and ceremonies, hiding themselves deep inland. Ondaatje thinks that the sailor Robert Knox, imprisoned by a local king for 20 years in the 1600s, was one of the few foreigners who truly understood Ceylon.

The Europeans' shallow knowledge of Ceylon (knowing its spices, but not its poisons) suggests that their appreciation of the country was itself shallow—they were interested in its aesthetic beauty and natural resources, but not its long history, culture, or complex ecosystem. Although Ondaatje admits to feeling rather like a foreigner, his desire to understand Ceylon in every dimension and to embrace its memories distinguishes him from the colonizers, who came to Ceylon only to gratify themselves.

Ondaatje muses that the Sinhalese created the most beautiful alphabet in all the world. It resembles Sanskrit but is composed of curving lines rather than straight, since straight pen strokes sliced through the brittle leaves used as parchment. Ondaatje loves learning to write when he is five, but as a teenager writing becomes a punishment for rebellious actions, and literature becomes a torment rather than a freedom. In the 5th century BCE, folk poems celebrating real and mythological women were scratched on the walls of an evil king's fortress. In 1971, captured insurgents secretly wrote revolutionary poems on the walls of their university-turned-prison-camp.

Despite his disdain for writing as a young man, Ondaatje's recollection of folk poems and insurgent writings suggests that he sees the value of writing as a way to remember the past. Furthermore, both the folk poems and the revolutionary poems are acts of resistance against the ruling power, who will write the authoritative "history" themselves. Thus, writing is not only a way to mark the past, but to challenge the singular perspective of "history," written by an oppressive authority.

Ondaatje spends hours with a historical librarian who compiled a book of Insurgency writings and photographs of charcoal drawings down by a young insurgent. Most of the insurgents were teenagers, and thousands were killed by the police and military and thrown into the river. The librarian's book is the only record of much of their work. The librarian tells Ondaatje about his friend, a "powerful and angry poet," who wrote, "Don't talk to me about Matisse [...] talk to me instead about the culture generally— / how the murderers were sustained by the beauty robbed of savages [.]"

Both the insurgents' drawings and writing and the poet's words provide an alternative account to the official "history" written by an oppressive power. This again suggests that writing is a critical way of honestly remembering the past, especially as it was experienced by those who suffered under such powers as the Ceylonese government or the British colonizers.

HIGH FLOWERS

A poem speaks of "the woman my ancestors ignored," a lower class woman and her husband making their living chopping coconuts and cleaning rice. A man taps trees to collect toddy to sell to the taverns.

Ondaatje's inclusion of a poem about poor people suggests that he recognizes his own family's privileged vanity as part of Ceylon's high society.

TO COLOMBO

A poem describes the sensory details of driving from the high Sigiriya hills down to Colombo, passing alongside men, bulls, and terraced rice paddies.

Again, Ondaatje draws the reader into his world by describing what it is to experience Ceylon directly, rather than only narrating events or history.

WOMEN LIKE YOU

The poem is one of the previously mentioned folk poems inscribed on the king's fortress in the 5th century. The poem describes a man's desire for the "ladies of the mountain," who remain aloof toward their admirers.

By including a folk poem that is thousands of years old, Ondaatje anchors his account of Ceylon in the millennia of the past, demonstrating the country's ancient legacy.

THE CINNAMON PEELER

A poem states that if the speaker were a cinnamon peeler, after he made love to his subject she would reek of cinnamon and all would know what they've done together. Because of this, the man cannot touch the woman until they are married since her mother and brothers would know. After the woman becomes the cinnamon peeler's wife, the unshakable smell becomes a bold and public mark of their love: "I am the cinnamon / peeler's wife. Smell me."

By tying the romance to the scent of cinnamon, Ondaatje merges his sensory descriptions of Ceylon with the whimsy of his parents' early adult lives, again providing the reader with a sense of Ceylon rather than an objective description of it. Such emphasis on the sensory details of his environment suggests that they, too, form a part of the identity he is trying to rediscover.

KEGALLE (II)

Mervyn's chicken farm in Rock Hill is constantly invaded by cobras looking for eggs. Often they make their way into the house and Mervyn or Maureen find them sitting on radiators, countertops, or tables. Whenever they find one, they blow it to pieces with a shotgun. After Mervyn dies, a strange gray cobra appears in Rock Hill. Maureen tries many times to shoot it, but misses at point blank range every time. The gray cobra isn't aggressive and doesn't hunt, just wanders around the property or follows one of the daughters. The other snakes seem to fear it and keep away from the farm. Maureen and her daughters realize that the gray cobra is Mervyn, back from the dead to look after them.

Ondaatje admits that his memoir is fictionalized at various points, and this seems to be one of them. Here, Ondaatje uses magical realism to give the reader a sense of the way Maureen and her daughter feel Mervyn's presence in their lives, even after his death. The cobra's protective role suggests that the family's memories of Mervyn are pleasant enough that they are some comfort even after he is gone—although he is flawed, his legacy to his second family is still ultimately positive.

In 1971, the year of the Insurgency and the year before Maureen sells Rock Hill, teenage insurgents comb through the countryside, demanding every family's firearms so the fighters can use them to overthrow the government. They've stolen a registry from a government office and know which families owned which weapons. The insurgents are courteous toward Maureen, and while the leader takes the shotgun and an air rifle, the others start up a game of cricket with Susan and "play[] for most of the afternoon."

The insurgents' mixture of threatening actions (forcibly confiscating everyone's firearms) conflicts with their good-natured, youthful behavior. This combination of pleasant and threatening behavior reflects Mervyn's own conflicted character as a kind and gentle father with a monstrous alcohol addiction.

LUNCH CONVERSATION

Ondaatje relays a dialogue among himself, Gillian, and several others. The statements are recorded without attributing who said what, and the conversation overlaps, contradicts, and repeats. They are all talking together about two men who loved Lalla, though in one instance of the story she is nine years old and in another she is 65, and the conversation jumps through the elapsed time between those periods as well. The listeners (presumably Ondaatje and Gillian) are confused and struggle to track the different threads of story. In the story, Lalla sees a man drown, but tells the man's wife that he is just out having tea.

Ondaatje's included dialogues demonstrate how history is preserved through memory, even though those memories are unreliable and often contradict themselves. Since the memoir is based upon such memories, Ondaatje points out that his own memoir is an unreliable record of the past—which is another mark of postmodern literature. Despite being unreliable, the many memories provide different perspectives on the same story, which creates a richer understanding of the past, even if some details may not be accurate.

AUNTS

Ondaatje describes how his aunts "knit the story together, each memory a wild thread in the sarong." He visits Aunt Dolly, who, along with her husband, was one of Mervyn's closest friends all his life. Dolly is tiny, half-deaf, and half-blind, but her mind is sharp, and she is excited to see Ondaatje again. She tells him about the past and he feels the whole journey was worth it just for this meeting.

The image of the past being knitted together by various threads of memory suggests that the past is preserved through the collective memories of a family or people. Although one story on its own may be unreliable, many memories knitted together form a more complete picture, like a strong fabric composed of many threads.

Before Ondaatje leaves, Aunt Dolly shows him a photograph of her and her friends at a "fancy dress party." Though she can no longer see it clearly, she's stared at the photograph for so long she has it memorized, knows each person's exact location and everything that happened in their lives. Ondaatje reflects that "memory invades the present in those who are old" and finds this moment "as intimate as anything I have witnessed."

Aunt Dolly "invades the present" with her memories, suggesting that elderly people are incredibly valuable to society because they provide memories of the past, which thus shapes the present—lending people like Ondaatje his own sense of identity.

THE PASSIONS OF LALLA

Ondaatje's maternal grandmother, Lalla, "could read thunder" and claimed she was born outdoors. Ondaatje knows nothing of her childhood up until she is 20, living in Colombo, where she is engaged to a selfish man who leaves her for a richer woman. Lalla, heartbroken, goes into a fit of rage and then immediately marries Willie Gratiaen "on the rebound." Willie is a broker, but together they buy a house in Colombo and start a dairy farm. However, Willie falls ill within a few years and dies, leaving Lalla to raise their two children alone.

Although Lalla is not blood-related to Mervyn, much of her brash and reactionary behavior—such as marrying Willie "on the rebound"—foreshadows his own. As Ondaatje later recognizes, wild behavior and excessive drinking seem to run in the family, which suggests that some of Mervyn's own misbehavior is not the result of poor character, but traits absorbed from his social environment.

Lalla befriends her neighbor Rene de Saram, whose husband went mad and committed suicide, also leaving her to raise her children alone. Both women, coming from wealth and "high living," fall on hard times. Both have several affairs with married men, but neither marry ever again. Rene owns a dairy farm as well, and the two look out for each other by legal or illegal means. When one of Lalla's employees stabs a foreigner to death for harassing a young woman, Lalla hides him in another one of her neighbor's houses for two days. When Lala is called to court to testify, she knows the judge and charms her way out of it. On top of all of this, Lalla frequently attends parties and gatherings in addition to raising her children.

Lalla is described as a woman who goes to many extremes, again foreshadowing Mervyn's own reckless behavior. Her fall from wealth to poverty similarly reflects Mervyn's own downfall which will occur many years later, making them effectively parallel characters. Lalla's life provides context for the raucous years of Ondaatje's parents' generation, since she herself exhibits many of the same qualities which were likely passed down to her children Doris and Noel.

Lalla constantly has a score of children around her, since she makes a very oblivious chaperone and allows them to get away with nearly anything. She constantly gives gifts and takes people out for meals until restaurants begin turning her away for never paying her bills. When Doris is a teenager, Lalla designs elaborate costume dresses for her to wear, though they are so elaborate it is often difficult for Doris to dance or find suitors. Although Lalla was vivacious, Ondaatje notes that her eccentricity was not always welcome. Doris never spoke of her mother, and Lalla always wanted a crowd around her but hated feeling "pinned down" or "contained" by others' needs—even by breastfeeding her children, since it delayed her going to parties.

Lalla's eccentricity and restless energy, which make her many people love her, also seem to make her irresponsible. Her irritation that such pursuits as motherhood pin her down suggests that, like Mervyn and Doris's generation, Lalla struggles to face the realities and responsibilities of life. Doris's failure to ever speak about Lalla suggests that, in spite of being such a vibrant character, she makes a poor and unsupportive mother.

After her children are grown and leave the house, Lalla turns her attention to her brother Vere. Although Vere intends to remain a bachelor his whole life, Lalla engineers his marriage to an ugly woman with a large dowry—a priest's sister. Lalla and Vere have "expensive drinking sessions" and need the money this union would provide. But after Vere spurns his new bride, the priest refuses Lalla mass, and she in turn refuses church for the rest of her life. Lalla and Vere drink together constantly, but Vere never finds a stable career for himself. Lalla occasionally sends whatever money she can to her other brother Evan—now, no one in the family remembers where Evan went or what he did.

Lalla's heavy drinking again foreshadows Mervyn's own, making them parallel characters to each other. Lalla's own heavy drinking likely plays a role in the subsequent generation's alcoholism, which suggests that Mervyn's own struggle with drinking is exacerbated by a family history of alcoholism and an environment where heavy drinking has long been a habitual practice. In light of this, Mervyn's alcoholism seems the tragic consequence of a grim family legacy, rather than his own individual moral failure.

By the mid-1930s, both Lalla and Rene's dairies shut down. When Lalla's poverty forces her to sell her property and possessions, she hits her prime, floating transiently around the country to visit and scheme and party, living out of a suitcase. Lalla loves flowers but can't be bothered to grow them, so wherever she goes she steals them, pulling them up by their roots, gazing at them or gifting them to friends, and then casting them aside. She does the same with any property, especially toys, which she loves to steal from the market and give to children—a "lyrical socialist." She drinks heavily, sees "old flames" constantly, and often loses her foam breast after she becomes the "first woman in Ceylon to have a mastectomy."

Lalla's ripping up flowers so she can admire them for a moment suggests that though she lives fully, she loves destructively. She consumes something and destroys it, then casts it aside. This again depicts her as a vibrant character with no real concept of consequence or reality, and ultimately makes her seem more narcissistic than loving. For Ondaatje, Lalla's place in his own ancestry explains some of the rash and irresponsible behavior of his parents, even as adults.

Ondaatje knows that some of Lalla's children despised her brash behavior, particularly her son Noel. Even so, Lalla was proud of her children, even if she was never content to "be just a mother." Ondaatje doesn't know what Doris thought of her, but imagines that his mother inherited some of her theatricality from Lalla. Lalla was always the center of whatever places she inhabited, an "overbearing charmed flower" who was freest after her husband's death.

The notion that Doris has inherited her theatricality from Lalla points to the role of ancestry in one's identity. Rather than see himself as an oddly dramatic person, Ondaatje's new understanding of his family's past allows him to trace his own dramatic streak from Lalla to Doris to himself, offering him new insight into why he is the way that he is.

As Lalla grows older, she continues traveling around but feels ready to die. In 1947, when she is 68, she comes into a small amount of money, so she and Vere drive up to Nuwara Eliya on his motorcycle. They move into an abandoned boarding house and spend the next several days eating, drinking, and playing cards. A storm gathers and Lalla thinks that she will die soon. She and Vere spend more days together, drinking and speaking about their lives more intimately than they ever have.

Lalla's first reaction to coming into money is to spend it all on alcohol, which suggests that after so many years of drinking and partying, alcohol has a strong grip on her life. Notably, Lalla doesn't spend her last days surrounded by friends and family, but rather drinking with her brother, suggesting that the consequence of such a transient, rambunctious lifestyle is the loss of many key relationships, such as her relationships with her children.

In the middle of the night, while Vere sleeps on the couch, Lalla drunkenly stumbles out of the building and directly into a flash flood. The flood carries her away down the hillside, slamming her into objects and carrying her through town. Lalla, drunk, observes it all but doesn't think she is in any danger. She rides the flood all the way to the ocean and dies when she reaches it.

Again, Lalla's alcoholism-related death foreshadows Mervyn's own struggles. Here, it becomes clear that the heavy drinking in Ondaatje's family can ultimately have a lethal impact, either through clouding one's good judgment or destroying one's body.

HARBOUR

Ondaatje reflects on his love for the harbor and the way the waters from a million different seas intermingle there. He takes a boat out into the dark harbor and weaves around the flotsam while a memory involving a harbor tugs at his brain. He finds the harbor to be "sincere."

Ondaatje's weaving through the harbor and its various seas reflects the way he weaves through stories and memories of the past, exploring the various characters and eras of his family's history.

MONSOON NOTEBOOK (II)

Ondaatje describes the animals surrounding the house he stays in. Bats fly in through the windows; snakes slither through the doorways. Even in the middle of the night he can hear the sounds of them in the surrounding jungle. One night he makes a recording of all the jungle sounds at night, playing it back to himself months later as he sits in his kitchen in Canada, writing.

Once again, Ondaatje focuses on not only the stories of his home but also the sensory details of his environment, suggesting that such details play a role in shaping his identity alongside the stories. In the same way that he records the sounds and plays them back in his kitchen in Canada, the reader imagines the same sensory experience, transporting them briefly into Ceylon, the world in which he grew up.

HOW I WAS BATHED

At a formal dinner, Gillian tells the story of how Ondaatje was bathed when he was five, attending Catholic school. As Gillian tells it, the prefect in charge of the young boys ruthlessly dragged them into the bathroom, ordered them to strip, and violently threw water at them. She scrubbed each down in turn with a fury, holding them by the hair, before throwing them toward the wall to dry. The dinner guests laugh with delight at the story, which is almost certainly exaggerated. At night, Ondaatje wonders he doesn't remember such a traumatic incident himself, or why no one ever spoke to him of it before this.

Ondaatje uses Gillian's story to explore the use of exaggeration to preserve the past. Although Ondaatje seems to suspect that Gillian's story is exaggerated—which demonstrates memory's unreliability—the story that Gillian tells is vastly more memorable than Ondaatje simply being bathed by a prefect. By embellishing the story, Gillian helps it stay in the listeners' minds, thus preserving the past better than if she had told the story dryly and factually.

WILPATTU

April 8th: Ondaatje and his family drive into the Wilpattu jungle to stay in a remote bungalow. The jungle is thick, full of life warm air. He feels as if they are all "drunk" with the magic of the place. Heavy rain falls. Although none of them speak, they all emerge from the jeep and begin soaping themselves down with a communal bar of soap, letting the rain clean them. A massive wild boar emerges from the trees, watching them wearily. Ondaatje thinks that if the boar kills him, it will be a happy way to die: clean and surrounded by friends.

Ondaatje's sense that they are all "drunk" with the feel of the jungle suggests that it is an enchanting place. Once again, his focus on the sensory details of his environment and how it makes him feel suggests that that environment he was born into plays a significant role in shaping his identity and describing the world that he came from.

April 11th: Ondaatje and company pack their belongings to leave. When he can't find his scented bar of soap, and the cook and tracker tell him the boar must have taken it from the porch railing. After some conversation, Ondaatje agrees that they must be right. He is irritated, since that soap made him feel "aristocratic"—it was a small taste of civilization. He imagines the boar and its friends soaping themselves in the rain, mocking the humans. As the jeeps drive out of the jungle, Ondaatje searches the brush for the boar with its frothy mouth, holding the soap in its tusks.

The image of the boar and his friends soaping themselves with Ondaatje's "aristocratic" soap is obviously fanciful, though it suggests that the Ceylonese jungle is so overpowering as to make a mockery of his attempt to import some element of modern civilization. This further suggests that Ceylon seems a whole different world, especially compared to Ondaatje's regular life in Canada.

KUTTAPITIYA

As children, the last estate that Ondaatje and his siblings live on is a well-known garden called Kuttapitiya. Lalla often visits to steal flowers. In his irritation, Mervyn starts growing cactuses and succulents instead, dissuading Lalla's thievery and her visits. Mervyn's passion for cactus grows and he founds The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society. Ondaatje calls Kuttapitiya "the most beautiful place in the world." When he visits with his and Gillian's families, his daughter tells him, "If we lived here it would be perfect."

Mervyn and Lalla's rivalry is ironic, since they are alike in many ways, though it suggests that each cannot handle their own eccentricity mirrored in another person. Mervyn's passion for cactus and succulents grows from his simple desire to irritate Lalla, suggesting that much of his personality is reactionary, formed in response to the people and things around him.

TRAVELS IN CEYLON

Ondaatje thinks that Ceylon feels miniscule after the grandeur of Canada and India. The country is crisscrossed with railroad tracks, which Mervyn had a fraught relationship with. Trains are common places to drink in the 1920s and 1930s, and as an officer in the Ceylon Light Infantry, Mervyn can ride for free. He frequently gets drunk while riding and acted recklessly. In his 20s, Mervyn gets drunk and pulls out a gun, threatening to kill the driver unless he stops the train so that Mervyn's friend can join him; the train is held up for two hours. After several such episodes, Mervyn becomes notorious on the railways. Noel often has to come retrieve him from his drunken antics.

This section describes Mervyn's alcoholic behavior, demonstrating the various destructive effects alcoholism can have on a person's life as well as the lives of the people around them. Mervyn's threats of violence are particularly poignant since they contrast with his normally gentle behavior, suggesting that severe drunkenness can make a person violently impulsive, even when it disrupts and threatens innocent people's lives.

On a different occasion, Mervyn strips naked and jumps from the train, running into a tunnel. The Navy won't let Noel go retrieve him, so Doris has to instead, marching into the pitch black with a suit of clothing for Mervyn to wear. When she finds him, they argue for an hour and a half until Doris coaxes Mervyn away from suicide. At this point, they've been married six years. Doris lasts 14 years with Mervyn, though she realizes on this day that Mervyn is different from most. Ondaatje notes that Doris seemed to lose some of her ability to write during the 1930s, as if she'd forgotten and had to relearn.

Doris's mission to talk her husband out of suicide demonstrates the way that Mervyn's alcoholism has ruinous effects not only on his own life, but also on Doris's. Doris's loss of writing ability isn't clearly explained. However, it seems to suggest that Mervyn's alcoholism has a permanent negative effect on her own mental wellbeing and ability to function, again demonstrating alcoholism's destructive capacity.

Resthouses are common in Ceylon, appearing every 15 miles or so on each road with a restaurant, bar, and place for travelers to sleep. At Mervyn's favorite resthouse, a spiteful man named Sammy leaves a long list of complaints about him in the visitors' book. Mervyn, in turn, leaves a snide comment about Sammy. This triggers a "literary war" between the two where each man writes a half page of insults and vitriol about the other and their family in every resthouse visitors' book they can find. The offending pages are torn out of most visitors' books, destroying a "good archival history of two semi-prominent Ceylon families."

In spite of Mervyn's alcoholism, Ondaatje includes anecdotes such as this to demonstrate that his father is more than just a drunk. When he is sober, Mervyn possesses his own dark wit. By including humorous episodes, Ondaatje helps the reader to not only appreciate Mervyn's character—which makes his alcoholism all the more tragic—but also to see how Doris could fall in love with such a man.

Mervyn is finally banned from trains after an event in 1943. As fears of Japanese attacks fester, Mervyn takes to getting drunk and ordering whole battalions to set up along various coastlines, sure that Japanese boats are approaching. On his last day on the train, Mervyn knocks another officer, John Kotelawala—who later becomes Prime Minister—unconscious. Mervyn steals Kotelawala's gun and takes over the train, ordering it to drive back and then forward again for hours. He strips mostly naked and finishes a bottle of gin every hour. At some point, Mervyn becomes convinced that the Japanese have hidden bombs on the train, so he orders all military personnel off and starts breaking all the lights, believing they are heating the bombs. Mervyn searches all the luggage and finds what he thinks are 25 bombs—which are actually curd pots—and finally gets off the train so he can drop them all into the river.

The absurdity of Mervyn knocking out the future prime minister and holding a train hostage mixes both his own dark humor and the tragedy of his alcoholism. This makes Mervyn a sympathetic figure. One the one hand, the situation is somewhat humorous and entertaining, endearing Mervyn to the reader. On the other, Mervyn's antics obviously terrify many people, threaten lives, and completely disrupt the running of the train, again demonstrating the destructive impact of alcoholism not only on the addict's life, but the lives of those around him as well.

SIR JOHN

Gillian and Ondaatje visit Sir John Kotelawala at his massive estate, explaining that they are Mervyn's children. Sir John thinks it an odd connection, since he was not close to Mervyn, but with enough prodding cheerfully recounts various episodes about their father, including the bombs on the train and another where he dove off the train into a paddy field. As they talk, Sir John leads them into the garden with a basketful of scones, which Ondaatje assumes to be breakfast. However, Sir John feeds them to his peacocks and deer.

Sir John represents the peak of wealth and luxury in Ceylon, the height of the social circles that Ondaatje's ancestors engaged with. The image of Sir John feeding scones to his peacocks has an air of surrealism to it, which reflects the disconnected reality that people at his level of wealth and privilege live in, unburdened by worries about money or food as most people in Ceylon are.

Sir John tells them of another episode where Mervyn held a man hostage on the beach for hours, convinced he is Japanese. They go back to Sir John's house for a lavish breakfast, and John loses track of Mervyn and begins a rambling story about someone else entirely. He speaks of his political tribulations and opposition efforts to create scandals. All the while, animals wander in and out of the house. A theatre troupe takes photographs on the ornate lawn.

Again, Sir John's estate holds so much luxury, it sounds almost like a fairytale. Compared with the poor people Ondaatje describes in the poem "High Flowers," the world that Sir John lives in seems nearly unreal, giving the reader and Ondaatje a small taste of the Ondaatje family's wealth in generations past.

PHOTOGRAPH

Ondaatje's aunt shows him the photograph he's longed to see: the only photograph he's seen of his parents together. They are on their honeymoon in 1932. Both are fashionably dressed and attractive, but making "hideous faces" as if they are mad. They'd made the photograph into a postcard and mailed it to various friends, captioned, "What we think of married life." Ondaatje thinks they were "absolutely perfect for each other."

The contrast between Mervyn and Doris's fashionable dress and absurd, even grotesque faces suggests that they find their own lives darkly humorous, absurd in themselves. This seems to reflect the nihilism of the 1920s and reveal a mutual dark wit over which they bond.

TEA COUNTRY

Ondaatje drives up into the hills, into tea country, to visit his half-sister Susan and her husband Sunil. They meet in town to buy groceries and then drive up to the estate, but the car breaks down a mile out and they must walk the rest of the way. An hour after arriving, lightning strikes the house and blows a fuse box. They spend their evening playing Scrabble, shouting over the sound of the rain. The next day Ondaatje wakes to perfect silence. Even nature seems still. He thinks, "this is the silence, that surrounded my parents' marriage."

Ondaatje's statement about "the silence" he wakes to suggests that he is about to explore his parents' failing marriage. The sharp transition from chaos to silence seems to foreshadow the sharp transitions between steady peace and open conflict Ondaatje will describe between Mervyn and Doris.

"WHAT WE THINK OF MARRIED LIFE"

While Ondaatje sits with Susan and her husband, he reflects on the varying natures of his parents. Despite Mervyn's drunken antics, he could be somber and private, even reclusive. While Mervyn and Doris are married, they both love books, but Mervyn reads them to himself while Doris makes plays of them or reads the poetry out loud. Doris comes from a long line of theatrical women, while Mervyn's actions tend to be more subdued. He detests Lalla, even though they seem the most alike of anyone, at least by their stories. Whenever the dog steals Lalla's false breast, Mervyn closes himself in his office, apparently embarrassed, though his children wonder if he did not secretly train the dog to do this.

Mervyn and Doris's mutual love of literature but different reactions to it suggest that they share much in common, but handle their feelings and emotions differently. Mervyn's dislike of Lalla is ironic, since Ondaatje recognizes that they seem rather alike despite their differing natures. As a character, Lalla represents what Mervyn, in his mischievous antics, might be if he were unrestrained by his own sense of dignity during his sober days.

Mervyn has a secretive sense of humor, sharing wicked jokes just between Doris and himself. Doris loves this about him, even after they divorce. Doris is, by contrast, theatrical and public to the core, even to a fault. When Mervyn takes to drinking, she teaches her three older children—Ondaatje is too young—to sing "Daddy, don't drink, if you love us, don't drink." Such moments shame Ondaatje's older siblings, though Doris sees it as a necessary action to cure Mervyn of his alcoholism—an act of "total war" on his addiction. When Mervyn is sober, there is humor and love between Doris and him. But when Mervyn is drunk, Doris uses her theatricality to embarrass him as much as he does her, knowing that his private, gentle self will be horrified when he sobers up.

Doris's use of her own children to psychologically manipulate Mervyn to stop drinking seems horrific, almost abusive from a distance. Even so, her love for Mervyn when he is sober suggests that although Doris's methods are questionable, she is simply desperate to hold onto the man she loves. However, the shame that Ondaatje's siblings feel over the performances confirms that they are damaging experiences for them. The complex interactions and wounds within Ondaatje's family demonstrate that family relationships are complex, messy affairs.

Doris and Mervyn make their peace when Mervyn is sober and clear-minded. For Mervyn's month or so of sobriety they are "wonderful parents," but he once he drinks everything becomes a battle between them again. When Doris finally divorces Mervyn, she asks for no alimony or money. She takes their children away and starts working in a hotel. Ondaatje reflects that they'd fallen far in life: once both children of wealthy socialite families, now they were only a chicken farmer and a hotel worker. Doris leaves for England in 1949 and never sees all of her children together again. Each of them drift among Ceylon, England, Canada, and America. Mervyn never sees any of them, "always separate until he died."

Although Ondaatje is careful to depict Mervyn as a sympathetic character, there is no avoiding the fact that his alcoholism breaks their family apart. Although it is only Mervyn who drinks, his addiction has a ruinous effect on the lives of each family member, including Ondaatje, who is still an infant at the time. This demonstrates alcoholism's woefully destructive effects on individuals and families, which can last for decades.

DIALOGUES

Ondaatje records brief, anonymous memories of Mervyn from family and friends. One speaks of the day Mervyn almost killed his family while driving drunk, nearly careening over a cliff. Another tells how Mervyn as so drunk that Doris couldn't see her children off to England properly, since she had to return to his bedside and make sure he didn't hurt himself. Another person remembers how Mervyn was always gracious and charming toward them, although they knew there was trouble at home and Mervyn's servant kept buying him more alcohol.

Ondaatje pointedly contrasts Mervyn's dangerous drunken behavior, such as threatening his family's lives by driving drunk on a cliff, with memories of him as a gracious and gentle man. This contrasts depicts Mervyn as a complex individual, conflicted between the reckless, even violent nature that emerges during his drunkenness and his naturally kind and charming self.

One of the siblings recalls hearing their parents shout at each other all night. Another sibling recalls believing that everyone in Colombo must think their family a disgrace because of Mervyn, but realizes everyone still has fond memories of the Ondaatje family. A friend remembers how sad and pained Mervyn's face was in his later years, how subdued. A sibling recalls their childhood as "a nightmare." A friend recalls how Mervyn tried to make right with Doris one day, and how Doris nearly went to see him.

Ondaatje's siblings' memories reiterate the pain and trauma Mervyn's drunkenness caused them as children, again suggesting that alcoholism has a ruinous effect on a person's entire family. This seems especially true if the addicted person is a parent, responsible for fostering the lives of their children as well as their own. However, Mervyn's attempt to make amends with Doris suggests that he wanted things to be better.

BLIND FAITH

Ondaatje reflects that at certain points in life, he feels like "the remnants from earlier generations that were destroyed," and feels the only thing left for him to do is "write the histories." He feels the absence of his father is a great loss, but by the time he wished to know his father as an adult, Mervyn was already dead. Ondaatje never got to know what his father thought of "love, passion, duty." Ondaatje thinks, "I am the son you have made hazardous, who still loves you," and feels that his own uncertainty about how to parent his children stems from his own lack of father figure.

Although short, this section reveals the heart of Ondaatje's return to Ceylon and quest to understand his family's story: he wants to know who his father truly was. This tragically suggests that the greatest pain Mervyn's alcoholism inflicts on his son is that it took Mervyn out of the world, denying Ondaatje the opportunity to have a real father figure.

THE BONE

Ondaatje states that there is one story about Mervyn that he "cannot come to terms with." In a different version of "his train escapade," Mervyn jumps naked off the train and disappears into the jungle. When his friend Arthur goes to fetch him, he sees Mervyn emerge, naked, with his arm outstretched and his hand clutching five ropes, a black **dog** hanging from each of them. There are terrible noises coming from the dogs and from Mervyn, and he holds them away from himself to protect himself. Mervyn holds the dogs as if "he had captured all the evil in the regions he had passed through and was holding it." Even after Arthur cuts the dogs loose and puts Mervyn in his car to drive him home, Mervyn remains with his arm outstretched, holding the five severed ropes as if in a trance.

Although Ondaatje seems to doubt this story's truth, it provides a greater insight into Mervyn's mind. As Ondaatje recognizes, the dogs Mervyn holds seems to represent the evil in the world, and Mervyn is obsessed by holding that evil at bay, away from himself. This use of a possibly nonfactual story ultimately gives the reader a greater understanding of the truth of Mervyn's mental illness, suggesting that even a fictionalized story can be used to preserve and illuminate the truth of the past.

"THANIKAMA"

In 1947, Mervyn drives to Colombo and sits all afternoon on the terrace of the hotel where Doris works. He hopes she'll see him and come speak to him. He waits and thinks about old friends, gone now, and drinks. When Doris does not come down all afternoon, Mervyn gets in his car and drives away, stopping at a bar to chat with journalists until they go home to their wives. He stops at a restaurant briefly and then drives into the night. He briefly considers sleeping in the post office, which is always unlocked, but drives on.

Ondaatje relays this anecdote with more detail than he could possibly know, such as what Mervyn is thinking about as he drives or drinks, making this an admittedly fictionalized memoir. However, by stepping into a direct, intimate space, Ondaatje makes his father's pain seem as real to the reader as it feels to him, making it both more memorable and relatable. This method again demonstrates how the past may be preserved through storytelling, even when the story is embellished beyond strict fact.

Mervyn arrives at Rock Hill and just sits in the car, "aware that the car [i]s empty but for his body, his corpse." He rises, leaving the car door open, and staggers into the empty house with a case of alcohol under his arm. He sits on his bed sheet, bottle in his mouth, and looks like "a lost ship on a white sea." Mervyn searches for his book until he finds it next to the toilet. Ants are busy taking it apart, carrying an entire page across the floor. Mervyn decides not to disturb them, only watch, even though the page they've taken is not one that he's read yet. He sits on the floor, leaning against the wall, and drinks.

Mervyn's reflection that the car is empty except for "his corpse" suggests that he does not even regard himself as a living thing. Along with the loss of his family and his wealth, this tragically suggests that Mervyn's alcoholism ultimately costs him his own sense of self. This is reiterated by the way Mervyn watches the ants slowly tear his book apart, even though he is not finished with it. He passively watches his own ruin.

MONSOON NOTEBOOK (III)

Ondaatje records sensory details as he sits at a desk, staring into the black night. It feels like *thanikama*, or "aloneness." He thinks of "devils," feels the sweat running down his back. Outside in the garden, rain pours down.

Ondaatje's feeling of isolation in the middle of a dark night parallels Mervyn's existential loneliness as he sank deeper into depression.

FINAL DAYS FATHER TONGUE

Jennifer remembers Mervyn in the days when his chicken farm was successful. When Jennifer is young, she helps Mervyn design posters and come up with marketing slogans. Mervyn always invents jobs for her and Susan to do that he can pay them a small wage for, such as catching beetles to feed the chickens. Mervyn has a way with children, keeping them in line by keeping them engaged. Jennifer is close with him, perhaps the closest of any of the children, and he is loving and protective of her. She knows Mervyn misses the children of his first marriage painfully. Whenever he drinks, Jennifer just disappears for a few days until he sobers up again. In Mervyn's last days, Jennifer spends evenings on the verandah with him while he smokes cigarettes.

Once again, Mervyn is depicted as a loving father and gentle man, in spite of his alcoholism and dipsomania. This again establishes Mervyn as a complex character caught between two natures. Significantly, though Mervyn's alcoholism broke their family apart, Ondaatje is careful to remember his father as much more than simply an alcoholic, but also a good human being. This seems to be Ondaatje's way of redeeming his own perception of his father.

V.C. de Silva recalls that Mervyn was excellent at selling chickens, almost unnaturally good. After Doris leaves Mervyn in 1947, V.C. de Silva lives with Mervyn for a month. De Silva, Archer, and Mervyn become close friends, but Archer and de Silva never drink with him. In the end, Mervyn dies of a brain hemorrhage.

Mervyn dies by cerebral hemorrhage—a common complication of alcoholism. Such an end ultimately suggests that alcoholism is a lethal addiction, gradually destroying everything in a person's world until it takes their life.

Archer Jayawardene remembers that Mervyn loved organizing things, even in his old age. Before his death, Mervyn decides that all the old people should start dancing again and sets up dancing lessons. However, Mervyn spends most of his time reading or listening to the radio. A year before he dies, Mervyn sinks into a depression so severe that when Archer and de Silva visit, Mervyn doesn't even speak to them. Mervyn is so fat when he dies that there is difficulty getting him into the coffin or the coffin through the doorway. The ordeal feels like a "tragicomedy." But two days before Mervyn's death, Archer sits with him in silence, both of them happy and content that nothing needs to be said.

Archer's testimony confirms what Ondaatje has so far only hinted at: Mervyn suffers from severe mental illness, including depression. Although Mervyn is still responsible for his own actions, his depressions seems to be part of the reason for his alcoholism, suggesting that many people may be driven to such an addiction by psychological pain. This again paints Mervyn as a tragic and sympathetic figure.

Ondaatje resumes narrating. In his last two years, Mervyn bounces between "calmness and depression," but is so private that he just keeps it inside himself. He suffers severe bouts of paranoia, but manages to hide it from his friends and children. When it overwhelms him, he drinks. In his last year, he completely breaks down and goes mostly silent. Mervyn's friends are sad because it seems he does not trust them. Mervyn's children visit when he stays in a temporary nursing home, but he believes they are only "imitations."

Ondaatje confirms that Mervyn's alcoholism is driven in part by his mental illness, again suggesting that one feeds the other. Tragically, between his alcoholism and paranoia, Mervyn's silence and his suspicion result in him seeming more alone than ever, even though he has friends and family around, suggesting that such ailments are extremely isolating.

After Mervyn leaves the nursing home and returns to Rock Hill, he finally explains his mental state to Archer and his wife. Mervyn imagines that he sees poison gas surrounding Archer. Archer walks through it unscathed, but if Mervyn tells him about it, the gas will kill Archer. Ondaatje reflects that "there is so much to know and so much we can only guess." In the end of his life, few things mattered to Mervyn, but they mattered immensely, and there is little for Ondaatje to go on. Ondaatje's brother tells him he must do this story properly, but Ondaatje feels it will always be "incomplete." They will never truly understand Mervyn, but they will love him. Whatever eased his pain, they will celebrate.

Ondaatje's description of Mervyn's overwhelming fear and his decision that he will accept whatever brought his father comfort suggests that he forgives Mervyn for his alcoholism and his absence from Ondaatje's life. Although he will never truly get to know his father—again reiterating the destructive costs of alcoholism—he is at least able to remember him and love him as a complex, though deeply flawed, human being.

LAST MORNING

Ondaatje rises before the sun, listening to the rain. He focuses on every detail. "My body must remember everything." Every smell and feel and sound speaks of the world Ondaatje left when he was 11, of the world his mother and father lived in. All before his other life, before he "dreamed of getting married, having children, wanting to write."

Ondaatje ends his memoir by soaking in every sensory detail, absorbing the environment. This once again suggests that the details of Ceylon and the environment he was born into, and that his parents lived their lives in, are important elements of his own identity.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Homstad, Levi. "*Running in the Family.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 22 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Homstad, Levi. "*Running in the Family.*" LitCharts LLC, November 22, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/running-in-the-family.

To cite any of the quotes from *Running in the Family* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Ondaatje, Michael. Running in the Family. Vintage. 2003.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Ondaatje, Michael. Running in the Family. New York: Vintage. 2003.