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Postnationalism and the Myth of England in Ondaatje's *Warlight*

Abstract:

This paper argues that the effects of World War II and the debunking of the myth of England are critical themes in Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*, a novel of formation set in post-war London in 1945. As England's notion of *Pax Britannia* dismantles, *Warlight* is a novel that undermines the very concept of nationhood in an era where the United Kingdom's fervent quest for globalization and international representation is questioned. Moreover, this paper includes an analysis of the British *bildungsroman* and reviews the commonalities and differences between the European and British novels of formation. Both the British identity and postnational identity of the adolescent protagonist, Nathaniel Williams, are scrutinized. The primary source for this study is the 2018 novel, *Warlight*, by Michael Ondaatje, a Sri Lankan national who was educated in England and is now a Canadian citizen. Secondary sources include articles by *bildungsroman* scholars such as Tobias Boes, Jerome Hamilton Buckley, Bridget Chalk, Victoria Clarke, Mike Marais, and Franco Moretti. Sources on nationalism, postnationalism, imperialism and colonialism are used in this paper as well in order to prove the argument further.

Keywords: Ondaatje, *Warlight*, nationalism, postnationalism, colonialism, imperialism, identity

"People who enjoy waving flags don't deserve to have one." — Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 2006

Introduction

Dating back to the eighteenth century, German authors such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Herman Hesse and Christoph Martin Wieland wrote coming-of-age stories or novels of formation and culture known as *bildungsroman*, a literary term first used by Karl Morgenstern in his lectures at the University of Dorpat between 1810 and 1820 (Swales 38). The *bildungsroman* is read and understood in the context of the German literary tradition, idealist philosophy, and nationalism, yet other nations have developed modern versions of the novel of formation within their own literary traditions. Despite the deviation from its German roots, the coming-of-age novel is widely popular in the twenty-first century. Exhibiting many of the traits of the conventional *bildungsroman*, Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight* (2018) cleverly portrays the myth of England via the post-World War II journey of the abandoned adolescent protagonist, Nathaniel Williams. The theme of postnationalism is also prevalent in *Warlight*, which is far different from the customary European coming-of-age novel. Tey Marianna Nunn argues, "postnational discourse takes culture, society, government, politics, and the economics of an individual nation and inserts these components into an increased regional, continental, hemispheric, and global perspective narrative" (10). Moreover, William A. Darity, Jr. claims that, "in a postnational context it becomes necessary to move beyond the idea that a homogeneous national identity is the natural integrating factor of modern political community" (397). Donald Pease's view, which is the definition that best correlates with this paper's thesis, is that postnationalism can be defined as somewhat of a "resistance nationalism," where "the temporal dimension of the postnational sits in uneasy tension with a critical dimension that would activate a process of disengagement from the whole nationalist syndrome" (Pease qtd. in Nunn 11).

This paper argues the degree to which the effects of war and the debunking of the myth of England are integral themes in the novel of formation that is *Warlight*, an important work in Ondaatje's oeuvre where the author undermines the very concept of nationhood as an impetus towards representing globalization.

The British *Bildungsroman*

The *bildungsroman* in Great Britain became popular in the nineteenth century with novels by Charles Dickens such as *Oliver Twist* (1839), *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861). Other English authors that wrote coming-of-age tales include Jane Austen, Arnold Bennett, Charlotte Brontë, Thomas Hardy and D.H. Lawrence. Franco Moretti argues that, "the vapid protagonists of the English *bildungsroman* reflect a more democratic and therefore presumably more modern national ethos than is manifest in continental examples of the form" (189-190). *Warlight's* protagonist is certainly democratic; however, the novel, unlike previous English coming-of-age stories, features the imploding of the British Empire. This sheds a light on the political ideology of postnationalism in the United Kingdom. Tobias Boes argues that, "realist novels provide an imaginative space into which collective dreams and fantasies may be projected. Such projections, in turn, strengthen identity-based projects to build organic communities, such as those envisioned by the nationalist imagination" ("Beyond" 116). Although Nathaniel Williams, *Warlight's* protagonist, grows up quickly, he never really obtains a goal of making it to the next station in life and, as an adult, seems content with being a bureaucrat. Conversely, Boes proffers that, "the *bildungsroman* always produced cosmopolitan remainders and that the logic of the genre does not serve to stabilize nationalist ideologies so much as gesture towards the possibility of world literature" (*Formative Fictions* 3). In essence, Nathaniel's journey is filled with reminders of globalization and cosmopolitanism that do not necessarily align with the ideology of the British nation-state. Moreover, the formation of the young protagonist is often far different than the perfect identity of the traditional Englishness, formed more in line with British imperialism. *Warlight* shows the post-war atmosphere of London as the British Empire begins to implode. Ondaatje uses the agency of the newly arrived immigrants in London and the metaphor of the greyhounds being smuggled into the country as strong visual representations of postnationalism in the United Kingdom. As Nathaniel bonds with the newly arrived immigrants, he sees the turning of the tide from an imperialistic Great Britain to its imploding and decolonization that leads to strong sentiments of postnationalism.

Nathaniel's British Identity

Nathaniel's sense of English nationalism and his British identity are instilled in him by his grandfather and his mother with their service to the British government. However, he never seems to embrace his legacy fully, nor does he take this opportunity to improve his station in life, as Ondaatje carefully unravels the myth of the British Empire. While the German *bildungsroman* emphasizes internal conflicts within the main character, *Warlight* uses the outside world to threaten Nathaniel's quest for identity. *Warlight* is a *bildungsroman* that uses reality, recollection, and imagination to mold and shape the moral and psychological growth of Nathaniel from his abandoned adolescence in London to adulthood in Suffolk. In this novel of social formation, Nathaniel's adolescence in *Warlight* is akin to the absent childhood of Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, as both protagonists are forced to become adults at a young age. While, Becky Sharp is penniless and is determined to make her way into the world of high society, Nathaniel's ambitions are far different, if even recognizable, as he is from a solid, slightly above middle-class background.

Nathaniel's Formal Education

One aspect of Nathaniel's coming-of-age is his formal education, which begins at Dulwich College, a public boarding school in London that Michael Ondaatje attended. Nathaniel chooses, with the aid of his guardian, to discontinue being a boarder and becomes a day student who often cuts class and

does poorly in math. Nathaniel reflects on both his sister, Rachel, and him being boarders with, "we were also nervous about our escape from the school and how it would be taken by our untested guardian" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 18). The English boarding school is a social apparatus created by the nation-state of England that is a stepping stone to a proper university such as Oxford or Cambridge. This is an ironic situation as most countries rely on their prestigious educational institutions to produce their best thinkers and most accomplished citizens, not those that were educated at the Criterion Banquet Halls in London. People from all over the world are willing to make sacrifices in order to attend these prestigious universities and they are an integral part of the fabric and identity of Britishness.

Post-War Technology

Another component in Nathaniel's formation in post-war Britain is technology, which is a part of Nathaniel's British identity as it has an effect on the culture, language, and identity of a country. Nathaniel discusses his father's description of the British airplane that will take him and Nathaniel's mother to Singapore from London by saying, "We stared at our father who was expanding on the details on their flight on the new Avro Tudor I, a descendant of the Lancaster bomber, which could cruise at more than three hundred miles an hour" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 5). Moreover, The Darter's automobile, a blue Morris, is an example of both British technology and freedom, as Nathaniel drives it through the streets of London and proudly refers to it by saying, "I had no license, but I had a car" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 90). The Morris was once an icon of the British automobile industry and the British identity. Today, only a couple of car brands are made in the United Kingdom. Agnes Street, Nathaniel and the Criterion workers use the double-decker buses, a strong symbol of British identity, in order to go around the city. Even today, Londoners are very proud of their shiny red buses and they are known globally as an icon of London.

Not all of the technology in Nathaniel's formation is related to mobility, as the imploding British Empire brought about new innovations for the needs of the government and its Commonwealth citizens. Bridget Chalk argues about the "passport effect" that "determines identity for purposes of mobility" and "was a new and major apparatus for the representation of legitimate and illegitimate categories of identity" (55). Both Nathaniel and his parents have passports in the novel, allowing them to leave England as needed, but also providing a physical reminder of their identity. Nathaniel is able to leave England and attend school in America for a brief period. During this era, the British passport is a symbol of the white British identity. Spencer proffers that until 1947, the British High Commission generally only accepted applications throughout the Commonwealth from white people, e.g. Irish citizens, while Indians and Pakistanis in the Sub-Continent were denied passports (25). These foreign experiences detract from Nathaniel's British identity and contribute to Nathaniel's cosmopolitan formation, as they give him a more global formation.

Although Nathaniel has a public-school education, once his parents abandon him to go overseas, he is left with two surrogate fathers and other cockney types who provide him with a lifetime of experiences and memories while entering manhood at an early age. Nathaniel as a parentless protagonist reinforces Ondaatje's use of memories in *Warlight*, as Tara K. Menon argued, "Nathaniel's doubt about both the veracity and the significance of his memories is underscored by a syntax and vocabulary of conjecture—many unanswered questions, recurring adjectives formed with negative prefixes (unconfirmed, incomplete, unknown) and adverbs that emphasize ambiguity (maybe, perhaps)." The painful feeling of the memories of abandonment by his parents leads to Nathaniel's feeling somewhat lost in life. His aimless attitude and his choices in authority figures and mentors find him leaning towards a strong sense of postnationalism as the unraveling of his family is analogous to the imploding of Great Britain. Essentially, Nathaniel has chosen a path that is not traditionally English and is more cosmopolitan and global.

Memories in *Warlight*

Memories are a powerful element in Ondaatje's storytelling style in *Warlight* and other works as the reader sees the novel evolve from Nathaniel's British perspective in London to one that is more global. Aarthi Vadde proffers that, "The globalist sutures collective memory to the universal category of the human, while the localist brings it back into an enclosed narrative of the nation" (267). In Ondaatje's previous works, *Running in the Family* (1982) and *The Cat's Table* (2011), he relies on the memories of his young characters to tell their story, in both the past and the present, and uses similar types of memories in *Warlight*. Ondaatje's eccentric characters often include younger people interacting with adults who guide them from their teenage past to their future as adults, a collaboration found in *Warlight* as well. Nathaniel feels abandoned by his father and holds an angry resentment towards his mother, as she lied about them going to Singapore, where his father would manage the Unilever operations there. These memories of his parents abandoning him as a teenager in London foreshadow an uncertain future for Nathaniel as he rationalizes his parents' decision by saying, "The arrangement appeared strange, but life still was haphazard and confusing during that period after the war, so what had been suggested did not feel unusual" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 6). In effect, this is the beginning of Nathaniel's *bildungsroman*, which will be an extremely independent one where he will have to make many of his own decisions about his future as an adult. As his parents are representatives of the British government in the Foreign Service Office, their lying behavior is emblematic of the many lies being told to the British people by the leaders of the country during this time.

As in most first-person *bildungsromans*, Nathaniel is recollecting the story of his tumultuous adolescence as a twenty-eight-year old adult, by sharing memories about London during the post-war blitz of the city. His memory is tragically flawed, fractured and incomplete. Nathaniel's memories with the various characters that he meets in his adolescence have an impact on his life as an adult and his choice of working in the Foreign Office. For example, Nathaniel remembers his time with Harry Nkoma, an immigrant from St. Lucia, a Commonwealth nation, who worked with Nathaniel at the Criterion Banquet Halls as, "The drawn-out careful lessons of intercourse in all its varieties, described by Mr. Nkoma, a remarkable man who had a scar on his cheek, took the whole lunch break, and I would end up washing dishes and pots for the rest of the afternoon, barely recovering from what I heard" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 41). The stories of passion shared by Harry Nkoma have a significant effect on fourteen-year old Nathaniel as he is curious about women. Part of his formation is related to sex and how it can factor into his development. Nathaniel and other young Britons are rebelling against the paternalistic repression created by Britain's patriarchal political structure.

Love in the *Bildungsroman*

Jerome Hamilton Buckley argues that "ordeal by love" is one of the characteristics of the British novel of formation (18). Traditionally, the male protagonist in the English *bildungsroman* is looking to form a relationship with a woman that is above his station in life and social class so that he can marry up. Nathaniel becomes interested in sex as he listens to Harry Nkoma telling his carnal anecdotes about his affair as a young boy with his piano teacher, Mrs. Rafferty. As part of his anti-hero formation and yearnings towards postnationalism, Nathaniel enters into a relationship with a waitress from the Criterion whom he barely knows and is certainly beneath his social station in life, as she is working class. One of the tenets of the *bildungsroman* is that romantic relationships aid in nurturing the ethical development of the character, as seen with Stephen Daedalus in Joyce's *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1916), whose sexual awakening solidifies his purpose in life as an artist. Patricia Alden argues that "the symbol of reconciliation is often marriage or a sexual relationship within which each partner gains a vivid sense of 'inter-relatedness' while maintaining an equally vivid sense of his individuality" (99).

One of the common supporting characters in a *bildungsroman* is known as the 'The Unrequited Love'. The relationship between Agnes Street, which is not her real name, and Nathaniel begins as a

mild relationship between two co-workers that evolves into a passionate and physical one where they often make love on the hardwood floors in empty London houses. Agnes is more experienced sexually than Nathaniel, but "something else made Agnes different from others" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 72). Like Paul Morel in D.H. Lawrence's *Jude the Obscure*, the initiation of sexual relations is tame in the beginning but becomes exceedingly passionate and troublesome. In one passionate passage, Nathaniel describes the intensity of their passion, "Banging into a wall. It's as if neither of us thinks of anything except to escape this closeness, and it's only closeness that will help us escape. We are on the floor kissing whatever we reach. Her hands beating my shoulders as we fuck. It isn't lovemaking" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 66). Buckley argues that this "aesthetic sensibility" is often found in the *bildungsroman* hero (208). Nathaniel reflects further with, "The Agnes I knew during the summer was not the Agnes she would become later" as they are eventually separated (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 72). This creates a void in Nathaniel's life and differentiates him from traditional coming-of-age heroes as he has not chosen the path to marriage. Alden argues that "by making the sexual experience the avenue to true selfhood, he ignores the trauma of upward mobility; sex affords his characters a way of attaining a full experience of individuality without costly estrangement, guilt, self-betrayal, or disillusionment," making Nathaniel's sexual experiences in *Warlight* an integral part of his identity (99). As Nathaniel begins to mature, his identity is immersed more into the growing post-war sentiment of postnationalism, a prevalent theme in Ondaatje's works.

Uncertainty, Otherness, Breaking with Tradition, Lying and Postnationalism in *Warlight*

The uncertainty of nationalism during wartime London and the emergence of postnationalism can be seen in the portrayal of Nathaniel, whose evolving identity is similar to Thackeray's protagonist, Arthur, in *Pendennis* (1850), who turns his back on a powerful career in journalism in London to write *belle lettres* and poetry. Patrick Parrinder describes Arthur as, "a personification of opportunism and selfishness, not of stern ambition and a noble mission" (218). In *Warlight*, Nathaniel is not necessarily striving for a stage of completion in life but is unquestionably searching for the unknown. His journey is disrupted by a forced maturation into adulthood, which leads Nathaniel into complacency as his family life is shattered, leaving him in a broken or damaged state. Ondaatje is mirroring the fragile nation-state of England to Nathaniel's adolescence as both are damaged and are slipping into an era of postnationalism. This evolution is related to Moretti's notion that in the *bildungsroman*, "the journey is one of the most common metaphors for individual maturation" (93). As Nathaniel copes with the post-war and peacetime reconciled space of London, the relationships he has with these nefarious characters challenge societal norms and lead to his own career choice in the Foreign Office. He reflects on his abandoned adolescence, "as if we were in a time capsule of the war years when blackouts and curfews had been in effect, when there was just warlight" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 81). The title *Warlight* is reflective of the blackouts and curfews that occurred after the London Blitz, where lights were dimmed to hide the city from the German bombers. However, it is also a metaphor for the secret lives of the novel's characters and their hidden agendas and checkered histories. Ondaatje uses many visual metaphors to tell the tale of Nathaniel as an abandoned adolescent who explores the curiosities that are often expressed by teenagers, despite the dysfunctional post-war landscape of London in 1945 and the house full of strangers that become his surrogate family. Ondaatje's ominous shadow imagery exacerbates the feeling of suspense and uncertainty in the novel. As London rebuilds itself in a time of peace, the traditional definition of British nationalism is beginning to reach far beyond the credo of "God, King and Country." The sun begins to set on the British Empire, hiding in the dark shadows of the warlight of London is the impetus of postnationalism. Immigrants from Commonwealth nations arrived in London after World War II seeking a better life and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the United Kingdom such as a university education and better jobs. When the Labor Party took control of Britain in 1945, postnationalism provided many multicultural opportunities for members of the Commonwealth nations, as imperialism and the Empire became obsolete.

These circumstances are what makes *Warlight* unique as a *bildungsroman*, as the protagonist has

parents who are spies, and Nathaniel chooses a career with the British Government in espionage. Another unique aspect about *Warlight*, is that the English *bildungsroman* tends to feature "provincial, lower-middle or working-class youths who aspire to develop themselves. They are distinguished from others around them by their ambition, intelligence, and sensibility" (Alden 11). Nathaniel is the opposite as he is just above middle class. He is the grandson of a British Naval Admiral, his father is an alleged international businessman, his family can afford to send both him and his sister, Rachel, to a boarding school and his family owns a three-story home in Ruvigny Gardens in London.

Otherness in Warlight

While Nathaniel's identity is clearly British, in the traditional sense, and his race is Caucasian, Ondaatje's *Warlight* includes characters that do not fit the traditional identity of Britishness. The acceptance of these foreign people, their customs, languages, religions and rituals is part of the emergence of postnationalism and the globalization of the United Kingdom. The inclusion of these foreign characters, particularly those at the Criterion Banquet Halls, leads to questions about what the national identity of England is and what constitutes Britishness in this post-World War II era? It appears that Nathaniel, in his struggle to obtain an identity, has begun to reject the common traits of the traditional British identity that include religion, culture, a shared history, ethnicity and language. On the basis of citizenship, Nathaniel seems to exhibit postnationalist behavior as he takes on less of an individual identity and has chosen to adhere more to a group identity. Nathaniel reflects on his time bonding with the Criterion workers with, "Why do I still remember those days and nights at the Criterion—that springtime fragment of a boy's youth, a seemingly unimportant time? The men and women I would meet at Ruvigny Gardens were more incendiary, became more significant in the path of my life" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 44). Šárka Bubíková claims that the *bildungsroman* "has the inherent potential for depicting the individual's coming-of-age as interconnected with the development of a community or society. Thus, the emerging protagonist's selfhood is not only interesting in and of itself but gains importance as a representation and personification of the emergence of a particular group" (20). With Nathaniel, the workers at the Criterion are his group of peers, where they share their tales of immigration to London and Mr. Nkoma describes his sexual anecdotes as a young boy with Mrs. Rafferty on the island of Saint Lucia, which was part of the British Commonwealth. On what Nathaniel has learned from his experiences of Scratch Ball and sexual stories with the immigrants, he says, "I hid what I was learning" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 45). As the immigrant workers of the Criterion are finding their way in post-war London, Nathaniel is finding his own way from adolescence into adulthood while Britain sheds its traditional exclusive identity to one that is more inclusive of people from other cultures.

For an adolescent boy that has the middle-class advantages of a public-school education, the trappings of a three-story home in London and a grandfather that was an Admiral in the British Navy, Nathaniel departs from the *status quo* with his surrogate family that is comprised of low-level criminals and spies. This is an unusual path for a teenager with a solid, traditional British identity. His education and formation in *Warlight* are urban as he is a teenager growing up in London who eventually goes to the United States to boarding school for a brief period, making his experience more cosmopolitan. Furthermore, Nathaniel's process of maturation requires discovering his talents, such as languages, and figuring out how to use them. The journey and experiences of the hero provide an opportunity to examine Nathaniel's inner self while clarifying his long-term goals and how he will pursue them. However, much like Saul Bellow's American protagonist in *Augie March*, a modern *Everyman*, Nathaniel rambles through a series of experiences that do not really lead to a clear form of identity, including greyhound smuggling, dishwashing, running a hotel elevator and getting a young girl pregnant. What kind of career do experiences like these prepare a young man for? Nathaniel reflects on his experiences as an urban adolescent with, "When you are uncertain about which way to go as a youth, you end up sometimes as might be expected, but illegal, you find yourself easily invisible, unrecognized in the world" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 98). As part of this self-

discovery, summoned by illegal acts, Nathaniel gains a new perspective on his relationships with other people as he faces the complexities of adulthood. These people that Nathaniel forms life-changing relationships with during his adolescence in post-war London are critical in helping him create some form of identity. Nathaniel accepts this life of anonymity, just as the immigrant workers at the Criterion and the smuggled greyhounds with false papers do. By being anonymous and not trying to stand above others, Nathaniel is shunning his traditional British identity with his newly found anonymity. His independence is a form of rebellion against traditional organizations such as boarding schools, clubs, the church and other patriarchal societies that are representative of English society. Also, Nathaniel accepts his new world with less order and rules, as postnationalism sentiments begin to form in London and other parts of Britain while the Commonwealth implodes. Let us examine more closely how Nathaniel's British identity evolves from being reared in a nationalist setting to a more cosmopolitan and postnationalist identity.

Nathaniel's Postnational Identity

A large part of Nathaniel's postnational identity is influenced and shaped by people who are from a different part of the world that relates to traditional Britishness. Even though these people are colleagues and friends with his parents, they do not share Nathaniel's privileged upbringing and formal education. As Nathaniel has been abandoned by his parents, he is attracted to some father figures during his time in London. Norman Marshall, known as "The Pimlico Darter," or simply as "The Darter," serves as "The Kindly Teacher" to Nathaniel, a popular supporting character in the *bildungsroman*. "The Darter" is introduced as "the best welterweight north of the river," is charming and handsome, smokes cigarettes and attends sporting events at Whitechapel and Wembley, as he detests theater but enjoys cinema (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 18). He drives a pale blue Morris automobile and lives in "a disorganized flat at The Pelican Stairs" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 56). Despite his rough façade and cockney tastes, The Darter manages to attract "highly independent women," such as Olive Lawrence, an ethnographer and geographer who has traveled to many foreign countries and speaks Aramaic, another woman who painted murals and an "argumentative Russian" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 52). The Darter introduces Nathaniel to all of his female companions which allows him to be "closer to women than I had ever been, apart from my mother or sister," as he attended an all-boys school, causing him to be "intrigued by women who were outside my realm, with no blood or sexual motive" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 62–63). Later, Nathaniel reveals that Olive uses her knowledge of the weather and nature to work with British Intelligence in preparation for D-Day. Nathaniel comments on Olive with, "I had benefitted from the clarity of female opinion from this person who had no close connection to me. In the brief time I knew her, I believed Olive Lawrence was on my side" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 264). Olive is clearly an influence on Nathaniel and inspires him to become a part of the Foreign Office. Her cosmopolitan ways with language and travel have an effect on him and his life choices.

In addition to Olive and her adventures, The Darter's criminal activities mold and shape Nathaniel and his own future as an adult, influencing him toward a more postnationalist identity. This behavior is not very becoming of a proper Englishman with a public-school education who is conscious about his social class. Often, The Darter takes Nathaniel's sister, Rachel, and Nathaniel with him to navigate the Thames River and its many estuaries and canals with his contraband cargo. Despite growing up near the Thames, neither Rachel nor Nathaniel know anything about boats, much less smuggling illegal cargo. Nathaniel reflects, "We had not been aware of the existence of such moveable cargo, did not know of the strict laws countering the illegal importing of animals into Britain. But the Darter appeared to know everything" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 76). Clearly, Nathaniel sees The Darter as both a father figure and a teacher. Moreover, The Darter is similar to Magwitch in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* as he serves as a surrogate father to Nathaniel, who could be loosely compared to Pip, and offers him an apprenticeship in a criminal activity to provide him with a better life. Victoria Clarke proffers that, like Magwitch, "'second fathers' attempt to form their young male wards in their own or a misformed ideal image, but fail in practice. Their altruistic uses of resources as

patriarchal paternal provisions are accepted in the hero's development, but ultimately not enough" (3). Looking back on his criminal activities as an adolescent with The Darter in London, Nathaniel reflects, "most of the laws I broke during that period were small" and "the illegal world felt more magical than dangerous to me" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 98-99). Later, in information found in the Foreign Office archives, Nathaniel learns that The Darter was secretly transporting nitroglycerine "when there was just warlight" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 265).

Nathaniel's other surrogate father figure, The Moth, whose real name is Walter, is introduced as a lodger at the Williams's home in London and becomes the guardian for Nathaniel and Rachel when their parents decide to allegedly go to Singapore for a year. The Moth is referred to by Nathaniel's parents as "a colleague" while Rachel "suspected he worked as a criminal" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 6). As a supporting character in a *bildungsroman*, The Moth could be considered "The Wicked Authority Figure." Much like Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Nathaniel has another surrogate father in The Moth, who could be seen as more of a "gentlemen-maker." Another of his character's trait was that, "he spoke so disapprovingly of the advance of capitalism" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 22). It could be construed that The Moth was a Socialist, possibly even a Communist. While Darter and The Moth are drawn as foils in *Warlight*, they also aid in leading Nathaniel to a more postnationalist identity. Despite the fact that The Moth and The Darter, referred to by Nathaniel's mother as "guardian owls," give Nathaniel all of the knowledge they know and share all of the skills they have, it is not enough for Nathaniel to move to a higher place in life. However, the British Government and the Foreign Office can do this for Nathaniel by way of The Silent Correction.

Many of the newly arrived immigrants in London are wearing the mask of nationalism by trying to assimilate with the culture of the United Kingdom forcing many people to be someone they are really not as they are hiding their true beliefs. Postnationalism allowed people to reveal their true selves and rid themselves of their Otherness. Nathaniel and Rachel's surrogate "family of disguises" are similar to the working-class characters found in the *bildungsroman* novels of the Victorian writer, George Gissing, who are written as "the working people of London: ignoble, depraved, ignorant beyond the help of education and, with rare exceptions, beyond redemption" (Alden 17). In *Warlight*, the Williams residence is the perfect ideal of the British family home with a garden in London and serves as a firm expression of English nationalism. With Nathaniel's father in Singapore, "the house felt more like a night zoo, with moles and jackdaws and shambling beasts who happened to be chess players, a gardener, a possible greyhound thief, a slow-moving opera singer" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 46). They were an eclectic group of people who were a strange hybrid of criminals, spies and intellectuals. The Williams home was no longer an urban family villa as Nathaniel observes that "the house seemed to have collided with the outside world" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 36). Nathaniel's boyhood home now became a salon for clever Cockneys, greyhound smugglers, courtiers to the royal family and other cosmopolitan and enigmatic types of Londoners. These are similar to Gissing's characters, who Alden describes as "educated proletarians or petty bourgeois who seek their fortune and/or their identity by moving among the several classes" and are classified as "schemers or idealists" (17). Many of Ondaatje's characters in *Warlight* could be labeled as either schemers or idealists, as the former are trying to survive in post-war London and the latter are looking forward to life in the newly forming Britain of foreigners and immigrants and the opportunities it will provide. The effect of these city people and urban characters on Nathaniel's cosmopolitan formation is essential to his newly formed identity of postnationalism in Britain, as they introduce him to new ways of life beyond the traditional British lifestyle. Moreover, the integration of people from many different backgrounds and the notion of inclusiveness is the foundation of the postnationalist ideology. Later in the novel, Nathaniel reflects on people like Olive Lawrence, who, based on her contributions to the war effort, was more than just an ethnographer and a geographer. He states, "There were so many like her, who were content in the modesty of their wartime skills" and feels that these silent contributors to the war were "ignored like the sea pea on those mined beaches during the war" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 284-285). In order to hide their true identities and feelings, many who supported the war effort wore disguises or a mask of sorts, e.g. The Darter and The Moth.

Masks in postmodern literature are common as many characters are without a core or are hiding something from their past or present, which leads to a fractured self or unstable identity. Nathaniel observes that, "Ours was a family with a habit for nicknames, which meant it was also a family of disguises" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 6). In *Warlight*, Nathaniel's mother calls him by the nickname "Stitch" and his sister, Rachel, is known as "Wren." Ondaatje uses nicknames for his characters as they serve as a type of mask. One of the children's primary guardians is Walter, a large man known as "The Moth" for his shy demeanor, who is the third-floor lodger at the home in Ruvigny Gardens. The Moth tutors Nathaniel in mathematics, as he is failing in school, and works in a profession that is linked to "ledgers and salaries" (Ondaatje, 10-11). Rachel suspects that the Moth was a criminal and was a colleague of their mother as they were both in charge of fire watching at the Grosvenor House Hotel during the war and worked together in the "Berkshire Unit," a group of British spies that intercepted German messages from across the English Channel (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 12).

As Nathaniel has chosen to abandon his prestigious boarding school education experience, he has replaced it with working at the Criterion Banquet Halls with newly arrived immigrants. This serves as an extension of his fractured identity and postnational formation. The Moth "oversaw the daily work of the mostly immigrant staff" who were busy servicing the celebrations of post-War London and the upper-class folks that were funding these events (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 23). Until the turn of the twentieth-century, immigration into the U.K. was only formally regulated, and class rather than citizenship determined the migrant's likelihood of gaining entry. Ondaatje compares the immigrants polishing, vacuuming and whisking away in the Great Hall at the Criterion to "a train station where every passenger had a purpose" (23). This is a visual metaphor of class distinction and identity that was a part of the old definition of Britishness. At the Criterion, there are characters that have a lasting effect on Nathaniel and his cosmopolitan upbringing in London, including Harry Nkoma, a dishwasher with whom Nathaniel would "thrust fragile glasses into the rotating bristles, and tossed them a second later into boiling water" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 41). When he was a young boy in St. Lucia, Nkoma played the piano and was proud of sharing his libidinal activities and sexual episodes with his piano instructor, Mrs. Rafferty. This introduction to sexual enlightenment encourages Nathaniel to explore his own sexuality as part of his leap from adolescence to adulthood. The sexual experience is an integral part of the *bildungsroman* for the male adolescent hero to experience as it can be life changing. Nkoma can be seen as a role model for Nathaniel as he inspires him to experiment with his sexual urges and manhood.

Similar to the dark and shadowy streets of post-war London, Nathaniel describes the basement laundry of the Criterion as "a grey universe, windowless, separate from any daylight" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 37). This is where Nathaniel works for "pay and a half wages" and eventually becomes a "lift boy" where he mixes with "so many saints and heroes I never knew" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 39). Nathaniel describes himself as "bored" and "invisible" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 38). Eventually, Nathaniel becomes a dishwasher at the Criterion and meets immigrants from Poland and the Caribbean. All of these eclectic types of people that make up the social landscape of post-war London have a lasting effect on the identity of Nathaniel Williams as they make a significant impression on him as a teenager in 1945. Moreover, they are the beginning of postnationalism in post-war Great Britain as they are bringing pieces of their own culture to London. This is very broadening for Nathaniel and adds to his cosmopolitan formation. As a boy in London in the 1950's, Ondaatje's mother, Doris, worked in hotels in London to support herself and her son. Other minor characters that include Mr. Lawrence, a "verbose beekeeper . . . who was under a cloud for some unspoken misdemeanor in the past" and Citronella, a former haberdasher who had worked as a spy for the government are introduced (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 35-36). Also, there is Arthur McCash, who "spoke French, as well as other languages" and was "quiet and modest" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 101). Both Nathaniel and his mother, Rose, are adept at foreign languages, a good skill for a spy. Although the character's roles may appear to be minor or they do not engage in as much dialog as The Moth or The Darter, they do have a significant impact on Nathaniel and his coming of age in *Warlight*, as their unique abilities and talents are an integral part of Nathaniel's education into Foreign Service and espionage. One skill

that is critical to a good spy is the ability to lie well, which Nathaniel learns to master as part of his postnational formation in life.

Lying as a Theme in Warlight

By continuously lying, Nathaniel is pushing himself further away from being a traditional protagonist in an English *bildungsroman*. Lying is a major theme, not only in *Warlight*, but in other Ondaatje works including *Running in the Family* and *The English Patient*. In a novel filled with spies and other practitioners of espionage, lying is one of their most utilized skills, so this makes perfect sense. In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje writes, "In Sri Lanka, a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts" (206). Moreover, in Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, Almasay and Katharine discuss lying. Katharine says, "If you make love to me I won't lie about it. If I make love to you won't lie about it." Almasay asks Katharine, "What do you hate most?" She responds with, "A lie. And you?" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient* 152). It seems appropriate for lying to be a major theme in *Warlight*, as one of the skills required of being a good spy is to be a good liar. Most of the characters in *Warlight* are liars and are quite good at it. The novel opens with a lie when Nathaniel's parents tell both Rachel and him that they are relocating to Singapore for a year so that the father can manage the Unilever office there. Later, we learn that the mother never went to Singapore as she left her steamer trunk behind in the basement of the Ruvigny Gardens home. Eventually, Nathaniel begins to lie to his teachers at Dulwich so he can skip school and spend time on the waterways with The Darter on his boat, smuggling greyhounds and other illegal cargo. Nathaniel lies to his girlfriend, Agnes, by telling her that The Darter is his father. He reflects on this moment with, "I had become a liar not so much to confuse her as to remove the hurt she felt because I kept the inexplicable situation in my life from her—and perhaps from myself as well" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 108). Years later, after Nathaniel has left London for Suffolk, he discusses The Darter's ability to tell a lie:

What led me to understand what had taken place in his flat was remembering what a great liar The Darter was. How, when surprised by a policeman or security guard at a warehouse or museum, he would improvise an unplanned lie that was so intricate and even so ridiculous that he would be laughing at it himself. People did not usually lie and find it funny at the same time that was his disguise. "Never plan a lie," he told me during one of those night journeys. "Invent as you go along. It's more believable." (Ondaatje, *Warlight*, 273)

Since Nathaniel is a postmodern protagonist, he goes against the grain of the traditional hero found in a *bildungsroman* by lying throughout the novel. In a conversation with Agnes Street, she asks Nathaniel about his sexual past and says, "You can tell me in French if you want?" Nathaniel tells her, "'I failed French,' I lie" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 71–72). There is continual lying all throughout the novel and it seems to be a part of both the urban culture of post-war London and the culture of British espionage. The biggest lie is that of the power of the British Empire that occurred after World War II ended. England's deception of its colonial nations such as Ireland, India and Egypt under the guise of Pax Britannia began to unfold as the British Empire began to implode and Russian spies were suspected of infiltrating Whitehall and the Cabinet. It is the beginning of the Cold War as the Commonwealth collapses and relies heavily on financial support from America.

Postnationalism in Warlight

Such qualities of internationalism and globalization are not new for Ondaatje, and indeed the theme of postnationalism surfaces in many of Ondaatje's novels and non-fiction works. Ondaatje, a Canadian citizen who was born in Sri Lanka, comes from a multi-ethnic background that includes Dutch, Sinhalese, and Tamil ancestry. Milica Živković elaborates with, "It is both this intricate maze of social affiliations charged with the colonial mythos and his family history which is equally laden with the fictions and mythical elaborations of memory that Ondaatje tries to disentangle" (105). Because he is of mixed nationalities, Ondaatje often reflects on these different ethnicities in his books. Vadde contends that Ondaatje's novels "are able to dissect the stories that nations tell to

define themselves not just as communities evolving over time but as communities that derive character, shape and purpose from a particular understanding and performance of their origins" (259). Farhana Haque contends that in Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, "The unreliable nature of desert symbolized the unreliable national identities, which was shattered and isolated because of the traumatic conditions of the characters in the unknown landscape and different culture" (1950). In *Warlight*, many of the immigrant workers at the Criterion Banquet Halls, including Harry Nkoma, have "unreliable national identities" similar to those in *The English Patient*. As exiles, the characters in *The English Patient* hail from England, Canada and Hungary with mixed ethnicities as Anglo-Indian and Canadian-Italian. The omniscient narrator in the novel comments on nationalism by saying, "We were German, English, Hungarian, African—all of us insignificant to them. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations" (Ondaatje, *The English Patient* 138). Count Almasy, a Hungarian cartographer, is beyond ownership and does not recognize any nation or nationality. Mike Marais contends that in *The English Patient*, "We have come to realize that national identity—whether it be English or Hungarian—is quite simply beside the point, that Almasy exceeds, is more than, that which such tropes of identity denote. Having been privy to this story, we know that he has moved beyond national boundaries that he, like the desert with which he is metaphorically associated, is impervious to names" (106).

John Carlos Rowe argues that postnationalism "calls attention to the negative heritage of colonial or national practices" and that "colonialism and nationalism has disappeared (or will shortly do so)" (79). Examples of postnationalism are exhibited by Ondaatje in *Running in the Family* as he returns to Sri Lanka as a Canadian citizen and writes, "I am the foreigner. I am the prodigal who hates the foreigner" as his children complain about the heat of the country that D.H. Lawrence despised when he visited what was then Ceylon in 1922 (79). The poet, Pablo Neruda, lived in Sri Lanka for two years as a diplomat for Chile and wrote "poems that saw this landscape governed by a crowded surrealism—full of vegetable oppressiveness" (Ondaatje, *Running* 80). In *Running in the Family*, Ondaatje's niece refers to foreigners, such as Lawrence and Neruda, as "Karapothas," which are beetles with white spots on them (80). This colonialism reference suggests that, like the beetles, the foreigners "never grew ancient here," but just admired the landscape, disliked the natives, and left (Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* 80). Ondaatje migrated from Sri Lanka to England and has become not only a Canadian citizen, but a global citizen, as his sense of nationalism and allegiance to Sri Lanka is long gone. In essence, it can be established that postnationalism is a predominant theme in Ondaatje's oeuvre, which are set in many international locations including Sri Lanka, England, Italy and Libya. His characters tend to move beyond traditional constructs such as language, nationality and religion. Ondaatje creates both a modern and postmodern aesthetic in his novels that allow his characters to become embedded into a newly formed praxis of postnationalism. Jernej Habjan's observes, "As the new global city-states with their rentier classes override national jurisdictions, tackling national economies with their neoimperial and/or regionalist projects, the national bildungsroman, too, is being replaced by novels of the metropolis" (347). *Warlight* is a novel that is primarily set in the City of London that has become the global representative for the United Kingdom to the world.

Conclusion

The effects of war and the debunking of the myth of England and the Empire are integral themes in the coming-of-age novel, *Warlight*. With the imploding of the British Empire and its colonialism and imperialism, *Warlight* becomes another sterling example of Ondaatje's works where he undermines the notion of nationhood with strong representations of cosmopolitanism, globalization and postcolonialism in post-World War II London. As an English *bildungsroman*, Nathaniel Williams as the abandoned adolescent protagonist is more of an anti-hero as his formative journey takes him from his traditional British identity to a more cosmopolitan and postmodernist identity. Once Nathaniel's jeremiad comes to an end, he laments "I felt I too had disappeared. I had lost my youth"

(Ondaatje, *Warlight* 145). Having rejected the English notion of gentlemanliness, Nathaniel chooses to have a career in the Foreign Office in a group known as The Silent Correction, where "the job was to unearth whatever evidence might still remain of actions that history might consider untoward" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 133). This is a unique background and setting for a novel of formation set at the beginning of the Cold War. Compared to the multi-national group of characters who detest nationalism and nation-states in *The English Patient*, the sacrificial lambs of the United Kingdom in *Warlight* learn that "wars are never over" (Ondaatje, *Warlight* 248). Based on Nathaniel's rejection of the prosaic and materialist world, *Warlight* could be interpreted by some as a "Romance of Disillusionment," a term coined by George Lukacs, as opposed to a *bildungsroman* (Lukacs qtd. in Boes, "Modernist Studies" 239). *Warlight* is a novel of formation set in a rapidly changing nation that used colonialism and imperialism to create the façade of being a global superpower, in which Michael Ondaatje successfully challenges the Western metanarratives of colonialism, nationalism, and imperialism.

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