

The Ship Is Alive! Not Really, But Maybe!

By Sam Darlington

Much is made of the characters, Michael, Cassius, and Ramadhin and their experiences in Michael Ondaatje's novel, *The Cat's Table*. There are numerous articles and reviews that praise the portrayal of the characters as authentic and fully realized. As such, there is little need to further plod along well tread ground. There is one character, however, that begs investigation. The ship, the Oronsay, is arguably the most important character in *The Cat's Table*, although at first glance it avoids most of the conventional definitions of character. The Oronsay must be put under the magnifying glass because so much of Michael Ondaatje's protagonist's future life depends on the events that transpire on the ship. With that in mind, the discerning reader might come to see the Oronsay as a surrogate mother to the protagonist, Michael.

Of course, all of this depends on the definition of character. According to thefreedictionary.com, character can be defined as, "the combination of qualities or features that distinguishes one person, group, or thing from another". The key word that should be focused on is "thing". It would be difficult to argue that the Oronsay is alive in the biological sense but the ship does bear some striking similarities to a living organism. As such, before the maternal nature of the Oronsay is proven, it might benefit the reader to begin to view the ship in a new light.

Take, for instance, the unnamed captain of the ship. He behaves in a manner akin to the human brain, responding to stimuli and initiating a response. From the captain down to the lowest levels of engineering is an apt portrayal of the human nervous system. The captain makes decisions that subordinates on the ship make a reality, from changing the

ship's heading, to raising the temperature if a deck is too cold. Engineering itself draws to mind the living organs of the human body, processing fuel to power the ship and provide the energy to the turbine, the legs if you will, that push the Oronsay through the sea. The ship even possesses a tattoo on the inner hull, "a large mural in pink and white of naked women astride gun mounts and tanks" (34). The tattoo is a throwback to the ship's youth when it was a troop ship during the second-world war (34). Here, we see a timeline of the life experiences of the ship, from the war-ravaged days of its youth to the relative peace of its mid-life, ferrying passengers across the sea.

Obviously, my reasonably imaginative evidence that the ship possesses the characteristics of life is not the only available indication that the Oronsay is a character. For the Oronsay to be truly considered a character, then character traits must also be attributed to the ship, furthering its personification. This will benefit the reader as Helene Cixious and Keith Cohen state on the subject of character, "the more 'character' fulfills the norms, the better the reader recognizes it and recognizes himself" (385).

Nurturing, maternal and resilient, the Oronsay housed Michael, it fed him, and kept him warm and safe. The typhoon that thrashed the ship (92) caused much damage aboard the Oronsay but the ship did not sink or capsize. This illuminates the ship's resiliency, protecting Michael and the other inhabitants of the ship from the external dangers of the world like a mother defending her young. Considering the fractured relationship Michael has with his own parents, much of what the ship provided to Michael is exactly what he had not received from his own absent mother. Michael does not have the relationship with his own mother that a boy his age should have. Instead, he knows the Oronsay. The ship that is bringing Michael to his long absent mother is preparing him for the rest of his life, although

Michael does not realize it at the time. In all of Michael's recollections within *The Cat's Table* he only mentions his mother in a small amount of detail at the end of his journey when they tentatively greet each other after Michael has left the Oronsay (265). With a few exceptions, every other recollection revolves around the events of the twenty-one days on the Oronsay. That may be evidence enough, Michael's biological mother provided little in her son's formation whereas the Oronsay provided much opportunity for Michael to grow and develop.

One of Michael's most powerful new experiences, provided courtesy of the Oronsay, is the initial urge of pure, albeit innocent, sexual attraction he feels from his voyeuristic observations of the Australian girl. He remembers her in the shower on the deck one morning; "she would stand in the gush and spray of it, tossing her hair this way, that way, like some clothed animal. This was a new kind of beauty" (37). What a mother provides her offspring is the opportunity for growth. Although innocently enough, Michael experienced a lesson in attraction on the primal level, finding that certain something that resonates differently for all individuals. The Oronsay also imparted some motherly wisdom about sex and heartbreak to Michael when he covertly watched Sunil move the strap of Emily's dress and lean forward to her shoulder (52) in an obviously sensual fashion. The scene bears a strong similarity to a recollection that Michael makes later in the tale. He recalls watching his wife, Massi, dance with another man and, "her right hand lifted the shoulder strap of her summer dress and it shifted slightly--she was glancing down at it, as he was. And she knew he was" (154). Although a disappointment to Michael and certainly hurtful, if it wasn't for the lesson taught to him by the Oronsay then perhaps he would have gauged his wife's actions far differently. Michael may have continued to participate in their failing marriage,

none the wiser to what the gesture Massi made meant and ultimately found himself unhappy.

It is during his adventure with the Baron on the Oronsay that he experienced another aspect of life between a mother and child. Michael experienced a second birth during his stay on the Oronsay. He is oiled and squeezed through the narrow window of the private rooms of patrons of the Oronsay (83), much like an infant entering the world via the birth canal of the mother. Once on the other side of the bars, Michael entered a new territory of life as an accomplice to the Baron's thefts. "It was a little escape," Michael recalled, "into being somebody else, a door I would postpone opening for some years, at least until I was beyond my teens" (84). This new experience onboard the Oronsay provides Michael with a taste of a different example of what life has to offer, just as a mother offers her children a variety of life experiences. While what Michael did may be technically unlawful, it is important to recognize that, according to Kendra Cherry, "children raised in an enriched environment might be more secure, confident, and capable of dealing with later challenges" (Cherry). That particular experience with the Baron provided Michael with that enriched life experience that developing children need.

The Oronsay also nurtured in Michael an education in the fragility of life when he was forced to learn that death certainly exists and that it may be intertwined with fate. After all the excitement and adventure that Michael had experienced up to this point, the reality of the ebb and flow of life sets in with the death of Hector de Silva. As the mood on the ship darkened after his passing, Michael took notice of the change. He recalls, "perhaps emotionally we felt landlocked after all the freedom that came with the wilder oceans we had crossed. And Death existed after all, or a more complicated idea of Fate" (110). This

revelation is important for children as an understanding of death and its implications are important to further development. The author's of "Children's Conceptions of Death" highlight a study by Piaget that "has found a relationship between concrete-operational thinking in children and their belief that rules are absolute and universal" (White). In other words, death teaches children that the universe has rules that cannot be avoided.

Continuing the protagonist's education, as any good mother would, the Oronsay educated Michael in the system of classes that existed in his world. He himself was sat at the "cat's table", the furthest social rung from the captain's table (8). His lodgings were deep within the ship with no windows, bare except for a bunk bed and a light (4) while during a later trip to first class Michael sees the affluent rooms of the first class passengers (83) full of their valuable possessions. This could be considered an important education for Michael because it illuminates for him the levels that exist with social system. Such an insight might motivate him to later seek an education and reach the same lofty heights as the wealthy in first class, or he may learn that money is not everything. Considering the adventures that Michael had on board the ship despite his low social status, he more likely learned that anyone can live a good life, regardless of social status.

The Cat's Table is not the only story to utilize an inanimate object as a character. A plethora of both films and literature utilize inanimate characters to advance the story. The film, *Cast Away* (2000), provides the marooned protagonist with the silent Wilson, a Wilson volleyball. The obelisk in both the film and written versions of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is nothing less than the surrogate God to the entire human race, and one cannot forget Fred, the wandering mannequin from *I Am Legend* (2007). Literature has not been shy about the inanimate character either. Stephen King's *Christine* tells the story of a homicidal car while

in Isaac Asimov's "Robbie", the author portrays the unlikely friendship between a child and a robot.

The Oronsay is neither homicidal nor does it offer overt friendship. What the ship does possess is maternal characteristics. The Oronsay, like any good mother, is fertile with life. Deep within the ship lives a garden created by Mr. Daniels that glows with a "golden light" (47). The garden is the life that the ship is transporting to a new world, much like an infant gestating in the womb. The room that Michael was given for the duration of his stay aboard the Oronsay resembled a womb. The reassuring thump of a mother's heartbeat, "one extended limb of a driveshaft revolved behind a paneled wall continuously" (71). Without portholes, the room was hot (50) and music from the neighboring room reached Michael's ears (50) similar to sounds reaching the unborn child's ears. It is reminiscent of an infant in the womb before birth and the experiences that precede parturition.

The ship did not just have an impact on Michael. Cassius was greatly influenced by the Oronsay. When Michael seeks to visit with Cassius at an art show, he finds that Cassius' work was taken at, "the natural angle of a small boy with a camera looking up at the adults he was photographing" (132). Cassius' art reflected the experiences that he had while on the Oronsay. In a fashion, the same is true for Michael. As a child, he chronicled his adventure aboard the Oronsay in an empty school examination booklet and interestingly enough, Michael proceeded to become a writer in his adult life. More interesting though, is the bond between Michael and Cassius. As Michael views Cassius' artwork he realizes that they are "real brothers" (131) in the context of their experiences on the Oronsay. Without the experiences aboard the Oronsay, neither boy would have grown to be the man they became, tying them forever to the ship.

Terry Arednell writes in his article about motherhood, “mothering is particularly significant because it is ‘the main vehicle through which people first form their identities and learn their place in society’” (1192). The Oronsay taught Michael about friendship, love, life, and death. The environment that Michael existed in for those twenty-one days was every bit the experience that a more traditional mother figure would have provided. I protest, reader, if you claim that only females can be mothers and disregard all the above findings, I ask you to remember that it is part of our common English vernacular to refer to ships as “she”.

Works Cited

Arendell, Terry. "Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship".

Journal of Marriage and Family. National Council on Family Relations. 62.4. (Nov. 2000). 1192-2017. Print

Cherry, Kendra. "Experience and Development: How Experience Influences Child

Development" *psychology.about.com*. About.com. Web.

Cixious, Helene. "The Character of Character". *New Literary History*. The John Hopkins

University Press. 5.2. (Winter 1974). 383-402. Print

Ondaatje, Michael. *The Cat's Table* Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 2012. Print.

thefreedictionary.com. Farlex, Inc. Web. 24 Mar. 2013.

White, Edward, "Children's Conceptions of Death". *Child Development*. Society for Research

in Child Development. 49.2. (June 1978). 307-310. Print.