Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* is a story of transformation, both of the human element (taking on a new identity, learning to verbalize past experiences) and of landscape (city, nature). The novel depicts the process of changing consciousness of the main characters as well as the transformation of primitive Canada into a modern country. *In the Skin of a Lion* is set primarily in the Toronto of the 1920s and 1930s and it discusses issues of work and life in a capitalist city. One of the central themes of the novel is the human cost of the process of transformation and what it means to be a worker constructing sometimes magnificent artifacts of an emerging urban civilization. The novel also presents the story of the exploiters and the exploited in which the rich are conventionally portrayed as parasites drawing profit from the toil of the common workers. This is, however, just one of the possible perspectives: by depicting many jobs that often prove costly to the people performing them, Ondaatje also suggests that the traditional critique of the capitalist system apparently responsible for both physical and psychological suffering of the masses is one-sided and fails to represent the complexity of human experience in a satisfying way. *In the Skin of a Lion* shows that work, although hard and seemingly debasing, can prove an artful and rewarding experience.

Ondaatje pays much attention to the kinds of labor that his characters perform as well as to the conditions in which they work and live. *In the Skin of a Lion* abounds in detailed descriptions of various kinds of jobs, which seem to have at least one common denominator: all of them prove dangerous, are often unhealthy and potentially lethal. Loggers are shown to start their toil before daybreak, finishing at six in the evening, working “through the worst storm, in weather far below zero” (Ondaatje, 16). In Ondaatje’s novel hard working conditions lead directly, although not necessarily fast, to death: “[t]he sweat moves between their hard bodies and the cold clothes. Some die of pneumonia or from the sulphur in their lungs from the mills they work in during other seasons” (Ondaatje, 8). The work-related diseases are shown to be widespread, merely a natural side effect of working. More
violent death, however, is also an ordinary event. In the case of loggers, dynamiting log jams to free the river may result in “[a] twenty-foot log suddenly leaping out of the water and side-swiping a man, breaking his chest” (Ondaatje, 17).

*In the Skin of a Lion* shows not only the dangers connected with labor but also depicts the workers’ inhuman living conditions. In a letter to his lover, a Finnish immigrant, Cato describes the loggers’ camp:

> The only heat in this bunkhouse is from a small drum stove. In the evenings the air is thick from the damp clothes in the rafters above the fire and from tobacco smoke. To avoid suffocating, the men in the upper bunks push out the moss chinking between logs [...] I write at a table hammered permanently into the floor. The log bunks are nailed into the walls. Fires die out at night and men wake with their hair frozen to damp icicles on the wall (Ondaatje, 154).

The description presents a world of deprivation. It highlights the lack of space, the tendency to cramp many people into a small room, which leads to the lack of privacy. Moreover, the permanently attached table and bunks suggest associations with prison and, as Cato’s later unfortunate fate shows, loggers cannot enjoy the real freedom. Apart from the deprivation of space and privacy, the loggers are doomed to suffer from the physical discomfort of a constant exposure to the cold. Ondaatje suggests that the combination of physical and psychological suffering renders their life particularly miserable.

Although loggers’ work seems particularly exhausting, other jobs in Ondaatje’s novel are also shown to be extremely demanding. Patrick and other workers digging the tunnel under Lake Ontario for Toronto’s water supply system suffer from several inconveniences. Hard, physical labor is presented to be literally painful: “Each blow against the shale wall jars up from the palms into the shoulders as if the body is hit” (Ondaatje, 105). What makes it even worse is the fact that the effort and the accompanying suffering are continuous. Physical pain, however, is just one element of the underground reality. Ondaatje highlights the lack of hygiene and the impossibility of taking a rest while digging the tunnel: “All morning they slip in the wet clay unable to stand properly, pissing where they work, eating where someone else left shit” (Ondaatje, 106). Eating and defecating in the same place seems appalling and unhygienic. The foul smells and the lack of light make the underground reality of toil bleak. Ondaatje’s novel
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also shows that the workers are forced to comply with low salaries and unfavorable conditions because there are no alternative jobs for the uneducated.

Digging the tunnel in In the Skin of a Lion, however, does not merely present the difficult working conditions but also highlights the more serious consequences of the exhausting work and the low status of laborers. The job is so tiring that “[d]uring the eight-hour shifts no one speaks” (Ondaatje, 106). The silence of the workers suggests that they are stripped of one of the attributes of mankind and reduced to muscle power. In fact, one of the comments on the use of animals in the tunnel suggests kinship between workers and animals: “The brain of the mule [is] no more and no less knowledgeable than the body of a man who dug into a clay wall in front of him” (Ondaatje, 108). Both workers and animals are forced to work in the dark and In the Skin of a Lion also shows that the lack of light continues even outside of the underground tunnel. After his shift is over, “Patrick embraces the last of the light on the walk home” (Ondaatje, 107). Working in the dark, going to and returning from work in the dark makes workers literally invisible, which symbolically represents their marginal role in society and the fact that their stories are not recognized by official history as worth telling. As Michel Foucault emphasizes, work is one of the cogs in the intricate web of mechanisms used by the ruling classes in order to control and subdue the common laborer (Cf. Foucault). Furthermore, in Ondaatje’s novel, when Patrick reaches home, he is so exhausted that he does not have time to enjoy life, therefore “[i]n his Wyatt Avenue room he drops all his clothes in a corner, feeds the iguana, and crawls into bed. He picks the clothes up again at six [...]” (Ondaatje, 108). After a ten-minute long breakfast, he walks back to the tunnel. Ondaatje shows that work fills nearly all the waking hours of Patrick’s life. Because of the long hours of toil, there is no time for entertainment or social life. Michel Foucault’s theory proves again illuminating here: in the capitalist system, “[t]ime penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power” (Foucault, 152). This seemingly intangible agent exerts an enormous pressure nearly on all the characters of Ondaatje’s novel, who are forced to succumb to the tyranny of the clock. Foucault’s concept of the “docile body” proves relevant here, as in the new industrial reality “the body is manipulated, shaped and trained” (Foucault 136), subdued, in order to obtain maximum efficiency.

Work at the tannery is presented as equally dehumanizing and dangerous. In the factory’s killing-floors “[t]here was never enough ventilation, and the
coarse salt, like the acids in the dyeing section, left the men invisibly with tuberculosis and arthritis and rheumatism” (Ondaatje, 131). Although the diseases take their toll inevitably in the future, Ondaatje suggests that the worst aspect of the work at the tannery is the present, when the laborers are young and they desire to enjoy life. Most workers, after the shift, took a shower but “were allowed only ten seconds of water” (Ondaatje, 129), which was not enough to get thoroughly cleaned. In the Skin of a Lion does not investigate why such limitations were introduced, nevertheless, by meticulously enumerating the seemingly insignificant and yet tangible deprivations of this sort, it highlights the undesirable situation of individuals. Moreover, Ondaatje depicts how work invades their private life. After a day’s work, the dyers, who “consumed the most evil smell in history” (Ondaatje, 130), would go back home to their families but they could not liberate themselves from the factory because “[w]hat remained in [their] skin was the odour that no woman in bed would lean towards” (Ondaatje, 132). Consequently, labor is shown to have the power to destroy intimacy between husband and wife, the power to disrupt even the life of a family.

In the Skin of a Lion shows work as a destructive force, ruining people both physically and psychologically. Although, traditionally, work was perceived as a dignifying task that made the life of an individual meaningful to the community, in Ondaatje’s novel, work kills and leads to degeneration rather than cures or helps gain respect. The destructive power of labor is symbolically represented in a number of various injuries depicted in the novel. Nicholas Temelcoff seems proud, when he says “I got about twenty scars [...] all over me,” (Ondaatje, 37) pointing to his chin, recollecting how a coiling wire broke his jaw and nearly killed him. When routinely having his breakfast at some eatery, Patrick notes the “oil burns on [the waitress’s] wrists, the permanent grimace in her eye from the smoke” (Ondaatje, 111). A Macedonian, Daniel Stoyanoff loses his arm in an accident in a meat factory (Ondaatje, 44). Patrick’s body is constantly injured in various circumstances. Nearly every character boasts some scars, which do not let them ever forget about their work.

Scars, however, paradoxically can also be viewed as a symbol of luck, of victory in the game of survival in the harsh world. In fact, many characters in Ondaatje’s novel do not manage to stay alive and to tell their story to friends or family. Patrick’s father dies in a feldspar mine. Patrick himself is nearly killed by Ambrose Small, a runaway businessman that he managed
to locate. Logger Cato is shot in cold blood for organizing the labor union and preparing a strike. Hundreds of anonymous workers of all professions are mentioned in the novel as victims of various diseases and accidents. In the final scene, during the confrontation of Patrick and Commissioner Harris, who seems to embody a ruthless capitalist, the latter when asked about the number of fatal accidents during the construction of the magnificent waterworks, answers “There was no record kept” (Ondaatje, 236). All the scarred and dead workers in Ondaatje’s novel are presented as the forgotten victims of an unjust system based on exploitation.

The social relations are of central importance in In the Skin of a Lion. At first it seems that, as Canadian literary critic Frank Davey claims, in the novel, Canada is “constructed as a battlefield of class interests” (Davey, 146) in which the rich are presented as enemies of the poor workers. It seems that somebody must be responsible for the scars and suffering of the poor loggers, tanners or tunnel diggers, somebody must force them to work in inhuman conditions for meager salaries. Patrick’s lover, Alice, identifies the enemy, saying: “I’ll tell you about the rich. [...] [T]hey keep you in the tunnels and stockyards. They do not toil or spin. [...] There are a hundred fences and lawns between the rich and you” (Ondaatje, 132). Her socialist perspective shows the rich as parasites growing more and more affluent, preying on the suffering and deprivation of the common laborers. When Patrick reads about the history of the Bloor Street Viaduct, which was constructed at the cost of much suffering and many lives, he discovers that all sorts of details are mentioned, the wood, the soil, the concrete used for the bridge, “everything but information on those who actually built the bridge” (Ondaatje, 145). The protagonist realizes that the official version of history is imperfect and he becomes more radical in his evaluation of the social reality he inhabits.

The division between “us” and “them,” the rich and the poor, the greedy exploiters and the exploited workers is reinforced by references to social Darwinism, according to which the human world, similarly to the natural world, favors the fittest, as only the strongest individuals manage to accumulate wealth and power. Missing businessman, Ambrose Small, is presented as a jackal, a wild and aggressive predator, ruthlessly using his strength to build his own position. He seems to illustrate the urban theory of sociologist Louis Wirth, who claimed that “[t]he close living together and working together of individuals who have no sentimental and emotional ties foster a spirit of competition, aggrandizement, and mutual exploitation”
(Wirth, 101). In fact, Alice blames capitalism itself for the evils of the world and the rich for perpetuating the unjust system. The fact that the waterworks are constantly guarded and that speaking languages other than English at public meetings is forbidden suggests that there is a deep split in the society and that without radical measures it could lead to open hostility.

While the perspective of class conflict is definitely present in Ondaatje's novel, the power of *In the Skin of a Lion* lies in the fact that it simultaneously challenges the division into “us” and “them,” and shows it to be oversimplistic. According to Davey, the novel suggests the “blurring of conflict” (Davey, 156) between the seemingly hostile classes. The actions of several characters illustrate the point. At the end of the novel, Patrick, intending to destroy the hated waterworks, which for him and many others symbolize exploitation, is confronted by Commissioner Harris, a representative of the evil capitalist class. It turns out, however, that Harris himself is the son of a caretaker who, by means of hard work and perseverance, managed to gain status in the world of the rich, therefore Patrick himself could be in his place. Moreover, Harris realizes that he is merely “an amateur in the midst [of those with real power]. He [has] to sell himself every time” (Ondaatje, 242); he thus suggests that the “them” that so many workers loathe do not form a homogenous group. Harris also admires Patrick for having swum all the way through the intake tunnel, and, when the latter falls asleep, he does not call the police but a nurse to dress his wounds. The novel implies that the clear-cut opposition between the rich and the poor proves to be merely a construct, a tool too simple to describe the complexity of real relationships.

Although Ondaatje undoubtedly demonstrates the dark side of workers’ existence and the burden of hard work, he also offers insights that complicate the picture of labor relations. The story of Temelcoff, a Macedonian immigrant, illustrates the opportunities offered by the New World. First, he is an illiterate peasant in a foreign country who, while working at a bakery at night, attends a free school during the day, where he learns to speak English. Later he performs the most dangerous tasks during the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct, routinely risking his life and health. Gradually, he manages to save enough money to open his own bakery. He becomes “a citizen here [...] successful with his own bakery. His bread and rolls and cakes and pastries reach the multitudes in the city” (Ondaatje, 149). Temelcoff becomes a self-made man, a member of a society originally alien to him. His example demonstrates that, despite various hardships, the transition
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from being an under-privileged immigrant to a respected citizen is possible. *In the Skin of a Lion* challenges other lines seemingly clearly defined. Patrick, although underprivileged and uneducated, can afford a car during the severe economic depression of the 1930s. Thanks to the system that he does not approve of, he has access to a free public library, which allows him to understand the shortcomings of this very system. By planning to destroy the waterworks, Patrick the worker becomes a “potential exploiter and killer” (Davey, 154). Socialist Alice is killed not by the representatives of the system willing to silence opposition but by the bomb that was originally meant to destroy some property of the rich. Despite Cato’s death, his life continues to be meaningful as his letters describing the horrible working and living conditions of the loggers reach Alice and can be distributed; he can tell his version of history from the grave. Patrick’s father dies in a feldspar mine in a natural accident and not as a result of bad working conditions. All these examples illustrate that *In the Skin of a Lion* departs from stereotypical representation of life in the capitalist system.

Finally, work, one of the central elements in the novel, is not presented solely as a dehumanizing and stupefying round of toil performed for the parasitic ruling class. As Davey argues “[a]n implicit socialist critique of capitalism” is gradually replaced in Ondaatje’s work by “a humanist construction of the male individual as artist” (Davey, 155). Indeed, work is also shown by Ondaatje to be a meaningful and artful activity, requiring physical stamina, patience, expertise and co-operation, rewarding individuals with pride for their achievement and even contributing to a sense of belonging in the New World. Both Patrick and his father realize that using dynamite in proportions appropriate to the task is a difficult but also a rewarding skill. Though extremely complicated from the technical point of view, the rescue of a cow from the freezing river fills them with a sense of a well-performed duty. Furthermore, the depiction of Nicholas Temelcoff’s performance at the bridge brings associations with art: “He knows the precise height he is over the river, how long his ropes are, how many seconds he can free-fall to the pulley. It does not matter if it is day or night, he could be blindfolded. Black space is time” (Ondaatje, 35).

In Temeloff’s case, memories of work finally make him realize his attachment to place. Although he crosses the bridge regularly after its completion, it takes him years to realize that he had been an important element in the process of its construction. Eventually, he learns to identify with Toronto, his new homeland. Thus, Ondaatje suggests that individuals
get rooted in their new place of residence, that a new identity is constructed through participation in shaping the physical environment.

In the Skin of a Lion escapes the oversimplifications resulting from adopting just one ideological viewpoint. It blurs the binary oppositions that have been conventionally applied to the portrayal of labor relations and undermines one-sided value judgements. Furthermore, Ondaatje’s story of Toronto highlights the human element in constructing the physical reality and shows that places shaped by men prove to be powerful agents that contribute to the process of defining individuals. In the Skin of a Lion offers a balanced view of the pre-war life in Canada, showing that everyday life and work involve not only a dull routine, but also illuminating moments of joy, of the sense of belonging in the right place and time.

Works Cited

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