

Michael Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

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The Perception of Violence in Michael Ondaatje's The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

A question that arises in almost any medium of art, be it music, film or literature, is whether or not the depiction of violence is merely gratuitous or whether it is a legitimate artistic expression. There can be no doubt that Michael Ondaatje's long poem The Collected Works of Billy the Kid is a violent work, but certain factors should be kept in mind before passing it off as an attempt to [shock](#) and titillate; certainly, the poem does both of these, but they are not the primary purpose of the work. For one thing, social context needs to be considered; Billy lived in the "Wild West", a time associated with range wars, [shoot-outs](#) and great train robberies. The entire legend of Billy the Kid has been built around his criminal activities and notorious reputation; indeed, the more popular this myth becomes, the more people he is accused of having murdered. If anything, it was a cultural fascination with violence that "created" the legend, perhaps even more so than anything the "real" Billy ever did. Michael Ondaatje comments on this phenomenon and actually offers an alternative vision of who Billy the Kid was; perhaps he was not just a blood-thirsty killer but a man who, due to circumstance and human nature, was continually being pushed over the edge. Ondaatje is more concerned with the motivations behind the acts of violence than the acts of violence themselves: "A motive? some reasoning we can give to

explain all this violence. Was there a source for all this? yup -" (54). If they shock, it is to shock the readers out of complicity and encourage them to think about the nature of violence and their own capacity for it.

Though it is more ...

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...nstitutes a "fit" subject for poetry. If love is deemed suitable, should the expression of violence be any less so? Both are part of the human experience; indeed, it is hard to imagine one existing without the other. As Billy says, "I am here with the range for everything" (72), a range which includes "hands that need the rub of metal/ those senses that/ that want to crash things with an axe" (72). Michael Ondaatje gives us this range and then leaves it up to us to define our own "edge"; what are we capable of?.... What is our potential?

Works Cited and Consulted

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