

Sumayya Bashir

5 March 2026

Broken Worlds, Broken Forms: Societal Disruption and Narrative Rupture in *The English Patient* and *Green Grass, Running Water*

Both Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1992) and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) explore historical violence not just as a theme but as a structural element of their narratives. Ondaatje addresses the Second World War's impact on identity and time, while King highlights the ongoing colonial dispossession of Indigenous peoples in Canada, manifested through legal systems and cultural erasure. Both *The English Patient* and *Green Grass, Running Water* dismantle linear narrative form, yet their disruptions operate in fundamentally different ways. Ondaatje's use of involuntary analepsis fragments chronology to represent a consciousness shaped by the traumatic collapse of imperial Europe during the Second World War. King, by contrast, replaces linearity with polyphony, circular storytelling, and metafictional intervention to challenge the authority of colonial history itself. When read in conversation, the novels reveal that narrative form becomes a site of historical argument: where Ondaatje exposes how imperial violence fractures time and identity, King reconstructs narrative through Indigenous storytelling practices that refuse the very foundations of colonial historical order.

The most fundamental formal consequence of societal disruption in both novels is the destruction of sequential time, though each novel's treatment of that destruction reveals a different understanding of what must be recovered. In *The English Patient*, the primary societal

disruption is the collapse of sequential temporality precipitated by total war. The narrative moves associatively between the ruined Villa San Girolamo in 1945 and the North African desert of the 1930s, refusing any stable chronology. The villa itself is presented as an architectural accumulation: once a nunnery, then a German stronghold, then a war hospital, now a ruin in which there is “little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth” (Ondaatje 42). Its history does not unfold chronologically but layers itself spatially. The building contains all its former identities simultaneously. This spatial simultaneity becomes the novel’s governing logic: the present is never free from the sediment of what preceded it. War has not merely interrupted linear time; it has shattered the possibility that time might proceed cleanly forward. Ondaatje translates this spatial ruin into a narrative structure through radical analepsis. The novel does not employ retrospective flashback in a controlled, explanatory manner; rather, memory intrudes involuntarily, obeying the logic of trauma rather than chronology. The opening enacts this across three stages, Hana in the present tense, “SHE STANDS UP in the garden” (Ondaatje 4), creating the illusion of immediate, stable narration. Yet that present is quickly infiltrated by the patient’s past-tense memories surfacing mid-scene without transition, “I fell burning into the desert” (Ondaatje 5), then the conditional past, “She would sit and read, the book under the waver of light” (8). The analepsis does not move forward; it loops. In Chapter 4, the patient begins: “In 1936 a young man named Geoffrey Clifton had met a friend at Oxford ... and two weeks later flew with his wife to Cairo” (Ondaatje 135). The paragraph ends there. In Chapter 9, the same paragraph reappears word for word but continues: “They were on the last days of their honeymoon. That was the beginning of our story” (King 213). The repetition is not redundancy but the formal image of traumatic memory: the patient’s consciousness circles the wound and

penetrates it incrementally. Memory returns to the same entry point and advances only when pressured by morphine, interrogation, or proximity. The grammatical instability collapses the distance between past and present, forcing both to coexist within a consciousness shaped by war.

Placed beside this trauma-driven analepsis, King's disruption of sequence appears formally similar but politically distinct. Instead of traumatic memory breaking into the present, the text is structured through recursion, interruption, and circular return. The creation story begins, fails, and restarts, eventually ending where it began with water. When the Lone Ranger attempts the opening of Genesis, the narrator stops the process immediately with the declaration that it is "the wrong story" (King 12). These interruptions are not the loops of a damaged consciousness. They are the structural markers of an oral tradition that understands time as cyclical rather than progressive and refuses to begin in a form that carries colonial authority. King's use of recursion reflects a cyclical Indigenous world where stories are told to return rather than to resolve. When Coyote asks if they can "go through it one more time" (King 281). The comedy masks a serious political point. Colonial history is not a single past wound but a structural repetition that persists in the present.

This recursive structure exposes the artificiality of Western narrative beginnings. European chronology depends upon singular origins and clear causality. By interrupting Genesis, King reveals that such beginnings are already instruments of colonial authority. Recursion becomes the assertion of an Indigenous way of knowing in which stories return in order to remain alive. This formal choice directly interrogates the societal disruption of the Grandview Dam. The dam represents a colonial attempt to fix the land and stop the water, mirroring the Western desire for a fixed, linear historical record. The eventual breach of the dam through Coyote's dancing is the ultimate narrative rupture. It allows the running water of memory and

myth to reclaim the landscape from the static colonial map. In *The English Patient*, the loops of repetition allow the reader to follow the patient's fragmented attempts to tell a story that war has dismantled. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the loops allow the reader to see that the story is a living process. By blending oral storytelling with the novel form, King constructs a transcultural space where no single story can claim total authority.

The contrast sharpens when examining narrative voice. In Ondaatje's novel, disrupted time produces grammatical instability. The patient sometimes speaks in the first person, sometimes in the third, sometimes shifting mid-speech so that Caravaggio cannot track the transition: "Who is he speaking as now? Caravaggio thinks" (Ondaatje 229). The question is left unanswered. The patient's own response is the novel's sharpest line: "Death means you are in the third person" (Ondaatje 223). The loss of a stable first person, the grammatical marker of a coherent, continuous self, cannot survive total war. Identity erodes into pronoun instability. The burned body becomes the physical analogue of a burned "I." If an empire once guaranteed a stable national identity, its collapse leaves behind anonymity and grammatical fragmentation. The wind catalogue deepens this argument. The desert winds "live in the present tense" (Ondaatje 18) as permanent grammatical facts, but one wind's name has been erased: "the _____, the secret wind of the desert, whose name was erased by a king after his son died within it" (18). Almásy's anonymity and the unnamed wind are the same erasure: colonial authority operates by removing names from the record. In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King's deployment of voice, by contrast, refuses the premise that singular grammatical authority is desirable. The intrusive "I" narrator repeatedly reminds the reader that stories are made, foregrounding narrative construction rather than concealing it. Authority is distributed across a community of tellers, sections headed "This according to the Lone Ranger," (10) displacing

omniscient sovereignty. King presents a reimagined version of divinity, suggesting that God is a constructed concept rather than a creator, mirroring the foundations of colonial power. The phrase “As long as the grass is green and the waters run” (King 184) highlights the shifting meanings of colonial narratives as it evolves through different contexts, from a romanticized portrayal on Bursum’s television to a territorial assertion by Eli, and finally, into federal legislation that undermines Indigenous land rights. This illustrates how power dynamics shape the interpretation of words and stories. King’s narrative is therefore self-reflexive, reminding the reader that stories are made and can be remade.

The deepest formal comparison lies in how each novel treats the disruption of individual identity through the Western archive, and it is here that reading each text against the other produces the sharpest political claim. In *The English Patient*, total war produces a man whose identity has been literally burned away: “A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire” (Ondaatje 47). His self is presented as a fluid accumulation of memory rather than a fixed social position, mirroring a world where national borders and biographical certainty have been incinerated. The novel reflects this through the subversion of the Western archive: Almásy’s annotated copy of Herodotus’s *Histories*, filled with “maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books” (Ondaatje 92) becomes the structural model for the novel’s own form. By cutting and pasting personal observations into an ancient narrative, he creates a layered history that rejects the imperial idea that history moves forward toward progress. The novel’s refusal of stable character construction enacts the same argument: “Who is he? / We don’t know his name. / He talks all the time, he just doesn’t know who he is” (Ondaatje 27). To have named him at the outset would have been to perform the biographical fixity the novel identifies as the source of imperial damage: “We are deformed by

nation-states. Madox died because of nations” (Ondaatje 132). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, the disruption of identity takes the opposite material form, reflecting a societal disruption characterized by over-regulation rather than erasure. The four old Indians bear names colonial institutions assigned them — the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, Hawkeye — while simultaneously remaining Indigenous cosmological figures. Identity is not erased into anonymity; it occupies incompatible positions at once. The archival parallel is Alberta Frank’s lecture on Plains Indian Ledger Art: prisoners at Fort Marion given “drawing materials, ledger books, and colored pencils” (King 15) by their captors drew their battles and lives over the pages of colonial accounting books. The ledger book becomes the surface on which Indigenous history is scratched across the margins of colonial authority. *Green Grass, Running Water* adopts this principle formally. Genesis, Melville, and Defoe are overwritten from within Indigenous story space. “Young Man Walking on Water” (King 229) is relocated and destabilized. Even GOD is revealed as a dream Coyote mistakenly allowed to escape, exposing divinity as a narrative construction. Where Ondaatje’s altered archive reflects imperial collapse, King’s overwritten archive enacts reclamation.

The political stakes of these formal divergences crystallize in their respective conclusions. In Ondaatje, simultaneity attempts to preserve a fragile connection across geopolitical rupture. Kip in India catches a falling fork at the precise moment, Hana in Canada dislodges a glass. The narrative holds both gestures within a single paragraph, suturing two distant bodies through reflex rather than speech. Political history has rendered their intimacy unsustainable; narrative form temporarily sustains what empire and Hiroshima have severed. The gesture is elegiac. It preserves connection in the face of irreversible loss. King’s climax, by

contrast, emphasizes continuation rather than preservation. Narrative remains mobile, and survival lies in multiplicity and motion rather than restoration.

Both texts demonstrate that when societies are disrupted by systemic violence, traditional narratives cannot convey the full impact of that disruption. Narrative disruption becomes a formal and ethical response, revealing what official records and histories often obscure or erase. Ondaatje's looping analepsis and shifting pronouns show how a consciousness is fractured when empire collapses, highlighting the vulnerability of individual identity and memory under total war. King's polyphony, collective corrections, and recirculating stories, by contrast, actively reconstruct relationships among people, land, and culture, demonstrating that survival under ongoing colonial pressures requires multiplicity, motion, and continual renewal. Together, the novels reveal that narrative form is not simply a literary device but a means of making sense of historical violence: it can mourn what is lost, as Ondaatje does, or reclaim and preserve what would otherwise be effaced, as King does. In this way, both works show that storytelling is itself a site of resistance and recovery, where the stakes of history and identity are inseparable from the way stories are told.

Works Cited

King, Thomas. *Green Grass, Running Water*. HarperCollins, 1993.

Ondaatje, Michael. *The English Patient*. Vintage International, 1992.