

Lost Innocence: Childhood Trauma and the Fragmentation of Identity in Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*

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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma is a significant psychological and physical issue with far-reaching effects on both the victims and society as a whole. For a variety of causes, children might experience trauma that affects them for the rest of their lives. It has been regarded as a significant and important component for the growth and development of the child. This article examines a variety of issues related to trauma that children experience from their families and the wider community.

Keywords: Trauma, Children, War, Fear and Separation

Children don't get traumatised because of hurt
Children get traumatised because they're alone with their hurt.

- Dr Gabor Mate

The American Psychiatric Association has categorised a circumstance as traumatising when, "The person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others" (qtd. in Diagnostic and Statistical 431). The individual who experiences such trauma is haunted by recurrent memories, fear of the future, low self-esteem, and social anxiety. Incidents encountered by children in scenarios such as family disputes, deceit, betrayal, and sexual assault result in childhood trauma. The key idea is that different individuals will react in different ways to the same situations. In other words, not every person who goes through a traumatic situation develops psychological trauma. However, due to their young age, children who experience trauma end up with the consequences of childhood trauma. Children who experience stressful situations are described by Debra Kaminer and Gillian Eagle as:

Children in many instances are both direct and indirect victims of trauma and are frequently witnesses to violence enacted between adults in their environment. While children may have a range of coping capacities to deal with extreme stressors, the fact that aspects of their bodies, minds and brains are not fully developed means that they are often particularly vulnerable to

the impact of trauma. (122)

The effects of trauma can be witnessed in the future development of children.

Lenore Terr, a trauma theorist, offers an insightful and extensive examination of how trauma affects children. She identifies Type I and Type II causes of childhood trauma in children. She describes, “The type I traumatic conditions of childhood follow from unanticipated single events” (327) and “Type II disorders of childhood—massive denial, repression, dissociation, self-anesthesia, self-hypnosis, identification with the aggressor, and aggression turned against the self” (328-329). Children who go through these kinds of traumatic events gradually develop isolation, a sense of loneliness, change in behaviours, and occasionally engage in illicit activities. This article explores these two disorders of childhood trauma through Michael Ondaatje’s novels, *Warlight*.

The novel *Warlight* highlights the conditions of childhood trauma brought about by unanticipated single events, as described by Lenore Terr in type I traumatic condition. The unanticipated disappearance of parents puts the children in a number of traumatic situations. Children who are separated from their parents experience traumatic events during both their early and adolescent period of life, leaving an impact in their future. It transforms their lives from good to worse, forcing people to involve in illegal activities and pushing others to live in difficult circumstances. The most significant childhood trauma is to experience the separation from parents. The impact of World War II has led to the painful sufferings of children who were parted away from their parents. Men and elders were compelled to leave their families and children in order to serve their country. Some children who were left in the care of friends and neighbours underwent pain and agony. Parents lost their lives during war resulting in childhood trauma. The novel *Warlight* portrays the complexity of traumatic emotions and adaptations that children undergo during war situations and its effects on their personalities when they grow older.

Childhood trauma can be the result of anything that disrupts the child’s sense of safety and security leading to psychological symptoms such as grief, shock, denial, disbelief, confusion, difficulty in concentrating, anger, hatred, anxiety, fear, withdrawing from others, involvement in unnecessary relationships and sometimes illegal activities, behavioural changes, academic difficulties and loss of previously acquired skills.

In the novel *Warlight*, Michael Ondaatje explores the post-World War II London and the trauma undergone by children. Hermione Lee describes the novel’s powerful writing and concept in “The Mists of Time” as, “It is hard to read Ondaatje with a cold eye. He casts a magical spell, as he takes you into his half-lit world of war and love, death and loss, and the dark waterways of the past” (21). The novel focuses on children’s experience of loss after a war state. The damages of war can be both physical and psychological. In this novel, the characters are psychologically traumatised due to separation of family members. To analyse the trauma of children, it is essential to understand the setting of the novel and it is also necessary to know about London during World War II and its aftermath.

The title of the novel connects the readers to war and its history. Harlan Whatley in “Postnationalism and the Myth of England in Ondaatje’s *Warlight*,” opines:

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 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. (6)

Through the protagonist, the author depicts the life of a small child whose circumstances changes after his parents leave him and his sister in the care of strangers. In order to fulfil their wartime responsibilities, the parents are forced to leave them. A lot of children in London during the wartime experienced this condition. Children whose parents have been killed or hidden as a result of the war continue to live in darkness even after the war has ended, threatening their future. The plot also depicts the post-war state of London, which continues to conceal itself and lower its light in an effort to show its devastation.

Michael Ondaatje vividly describes the condition of children who lose their parents during and after the

war in his work *Warlight*. The children eventually experience a variety of stressful events, which have an impact on their psychological health. Even though the war has been declared to be over, Ondaatje believes that it still affects many people's lives today because of its effects. He admits it in his writing by stating, "Wars are never over" (W 248). Even years after a conflict has ended, its effects and consequences will be remembered. Ondaatje captures the core of psychologically painful experiences in children through the lives of Nathaniel and Rachael. He highlights each and every occurrence that these children experienced as an illustration of many others. In an interview to Deborah Dundas, Ondaatje states:

I didn't want it to be a book about the Second World War, or a war novel. It was much more a domestic situation in a way. The ending of wars is always kind of a treacherous time you know, we (take it) that it's always kind of a positive thing, but all these deals are being made, contracts are being signed, so it was just that leap from a war period to a peacetime period and all those hidden things that go on.

Professor GJV Prasad describes this novel as, "A war novel, a crime novel, a detective novel, and simply a novel about a son's quest for his mother" (27). The characters of the novel go through significant life changes as a result of psychological trauma. The family becomes divided as the war continues, which causes a number of incidents. Nathaniel and Rachael's lives are changed by the separation from their mother.

When children are small, parents are not able to reveal the truth to their children as they are still immature and young. As young children, Nathaniel and his sister, Rachael feel abandoned by their parents. It was the time of war that their parents disappeared without informing them about the actual reason and Nathaniel narrates, "In 1945 our parents went away and left us in the care of two men who may have been criminals" (W 5). Their father had to leave in the beginning to play his role in the war followed by the mother. When Nathaniel's parents abandoned him, he was only fourteen years old. As a young boy, he has to go through the biggest change in his life. The sudden disappearance of his parents created the thought of abandonment, uncertainty and insecurity in Nathaniel.

Nathaniel's life moves into a state of confusion. He was not pleased with the choice of his parents, despite the fact that their mother had made alternate arrangements. Nathaniel finally accepts the decision of his parent, "The arrangements appeared strange, but life still was hap-hazard and confusing during that period after the war; so what had been suggested did not feel unusual. We accepted the decision, as children do" (W 6). This marks the beginning of Nathaniel's psychological transformation into an autonomous person who needs to make his own decisions regarding his future as an adult. He feels traumatic as he has to make decisions without his parents and nobody to consult.

Loneliness and insecurity lead to anxiety, fear and suspicion. Nathaniel and Rachael experience this and initially they doubt the honesty and reliability of their guardians, The Moth and The Darter. They feel uncomfortable and insecure to live in the residence because of the behaviour of the strangers. Rachael and Nathaniel begin to long for their parents after witnessing the regular visits of their guardians. Nathaniel's homestay with his guardian is like living with animals and he feels, "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" (W 46). They are worried and fearful to live with the guardians. Nathaniel says, "We did not feel safe around him" (W 48). The two children suffer from a state of distress. Children experience anguish, live in constant fear of a wide range of situations, and completely lose hope when their parents moved away from them. Nathaniel's ongoing alterations are a result of the psychological adjustments he has to undergo as a result of children being abandoned by their parents.

Their traumatic situation continues when school reopens after the vacation. They were day scholars, but now are sent to the boarding. They are unaccustomed to life of a boarder and Nathaniel states, "In mid-September we arrived at our respective schools. Having been day students so far, we are unaccustomed to boarding school life, whereas everyone there already knew they had been essentially abandoned" (W 17). The children experience fear and anguish not knowing how they would accommodate themselves in the boarding.

The impact of being abandoned, isolated and feeling strange in a new environment makes Nathaniel to involve himself in all kinds of mischievous activities, hoping that he would be expelled from the boarding house.

All his expectations go in vain when he is punished rather than expelled. Nathaniel recollects, “I too hoped to be expelled but was simply beaten by a prefect” (W18). In “Children’s Reactions to Parental Separation and Divorce,” Catherine M. Lee and Karen A. Bax express, “Following their parents’ separation, children may regress, display anxiety and depressive symptoms, appear more irritable, demanding and noncompliant, and experience problems in social relationships and school performance” (217). Nathaniel too is a victim of such symptoms.

Children who experience childhood trauma may lose interest in learning and experience a decline in their academic performance. Without his parents, he feels that he is abandoned, affecting his performance in studies and school. Children who directly or indirectly experience such childhood trauma will typically exhibit a variety of changes in their future. In “Mental Health of Children in War Zones: A Risk and Protective Perspective,” Claudia Catani avers:

Children who grow up in the midst of war are at greater risk of developing challenging behavior problems associated with their traumatization, e.g. irritability, outbursts of anger, internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Their mental health problems are typically accompanied by functional impairments that compromise their ability to perform well at school, carry out household duties, and engage in social relationships. (105)

Nathaniel loses interest in learning and in order to escape from the trauma of being parentless and lonely he chooses to work and study simultaneously. During his holidays, he avoids going home just to get rid of the guardians whom he thinks as criminals. The Moth, his guardian suggests that he can apply for a job and instructs, “If I wished to earn a little money he probably could arrange a job during the coming holiday” (W 36). As his guardian suggests, he joins Criterion Banquest to work as a “Lift jockey” (W 38).

Nathaniel’s life completely transforms and he experiences a variety of physical pain at work, which also has an impact on his psychological state. He internalizes his emotions and does not let anyone know about the sufferings and agony he is experiencing. He expresses, “On my first day I thought that when I got home I would tell Rachael everything about what it had been like. But in the end I kept it all to myself—at first it was just the way I was embarrassed by the pains in my shoulders and legs” (W 37). He becomes aware of his altered behaviour towards everyone including not revealing his agony to his sister which is a result of his transformation. The childhood trauma he experiences forces him to be deceitful. He admits, “I hid what I was learning, not just from him [The Moth] but from my sister, with whom I had once shared everything” (W 45). He also maintains a distance from his guardians, “I held on to my secrets, kept my distance” (W 70). He lives an isolated life without being able to reveal his agony to anyone. He doesn’t reveal the conditions of his home to his friends. He ponders, “In my conversation with other boys, who should have been the friends I’d have normally attached myself to, I never admitted to what was occurring at home” (W 67). Edward Snowden opines, “Nothing is harder than living with a secret that can’t be spoken” (qtd.in Slepian 10). Nathaniel experiences this situation undergoing childhood trauma as he is not able to share his feelings to anyone and isolates himself from others.

Nathaniel engages himself in the illicit activities that are prevalent in the nation after the war because he is not guided by anyone as to what is right or wrong. He is moulded and shaped by The Darter’s illicit actions, leading him to involve in wrong activities. He joins The Darter and helps him to smuggle goods from the boats. He is psychologically traumatised with the sadness of losing his parents and expresses, “The illegal world felt more magical than dangerous to me” (W 99). He did not realize the danger in the illegal activities.

Nathaniel accepts that The Darter is the lone companion in his early life. He follows The Darter’s instructions and helps him in his illegal actions. Nathaniel declares, “He persuaded me to leave my job at the restaurant and instead help him transport them in darkness on the mussel boat to various locations where a van would then spirit his living cargo further away” (W 78). He also joins him in the criminal activity of greyhound racing.

Nathaniel loses his honesty when he begins to tell lies to those close to him in an effort to conceal his sufferings and psychological anguish and he also lies to his teacher in order to meet The Darter. He realizes this transformation in life, “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” (W 108). Nathaniel contemplates his participation in all these illicit actions and reflects, “When you are uncertain about which way

to go as a youth, you end up sometimes not so much repressed, as might be expected, but illegal, you find yourself easily invisible, unrecognized in the world” (W 98).

Nathaniel begins to learn the mystery behind the sudden disappearance of his parents, after he and his sister are kidnapped by a group of people in the theatre. A child being kidnapped is also another significant childhood trauma. Nathaniel recounts the kidnapping as follows:

It was the man on the bus when I was with Agnes, and again that night in the lift. Rachael’s body collapsed into his lap. He reached over, grabbed my hair and put the same cloth over my face, saying, “Nathaniel and Rachael, right?” I already knew it must be chloroform and I didn’t breathe, until I had to gasp it in. The schwer, I’d have thought if I had been conscious. (W 115)

Nathaniel is unable to comprehend how the people in his immediate surroundings are related to his parents, “I was surprised he knew my mother’s name” (W 116). The life of Nathaniel and Rachael are altered again as they experience the danger around them, creating a feeling of strong insecurity. As a young boy, he longs for his parents and the encounter of unexpected events leaves him with a psychological scar.

After the kidnapping incident, Nathaniel gets parted from his close companions, including The Darter, Agnes, and his sister Rachael. Nathaniel was once again deeply disappointed by the sudden shift in circumstances and recalls, “I was distanced abruptly from the world I had belonged to, where The Darter and Agnes and the ever mysterious Moth had existed. In certain ways it felt a greater loss than when my mother had gone away” (W 128). Nathaniel’s life has been affected by the trauma and the psychological turmoil of his early years.

The abrupt disappearance of parents causes anger and hatred in children. Nathaniel experiences these emotions when he joins his mother after escaping from the boarding school. He claims that he is compelled to join with his mother and says, “It was a time when my mother and I were not close” (W 129). His mother’s disappearance makes him hate her and his enagement is depicted as “I picked up the plate in front of me and flung it underhand viciously towards a wall as if that would finish our conversation. Instead, the plate arced up, hit the edge of the cupboard, and broke, and a section of it leapt twisting towards her and cut into her forehead just above her eye” (W 165). His past experiences haunted him, making it impossible for him to live a happy existence with his mother.

Traumatic incidents reverberate in the psyche of the person continuously and Nathaniel contemplates, “The lost sequence in a life, they say, is the thing we always search out” (W 129). Nathaniel longs for the parental love which he did experience during his childhood days. He recollects, “I had spent most of my youth balancing, keep afloat” (W 69). The entirety of Nathaniel’s life is a misery preventing him from progressing to lead a better life.

A traumatic situation for a child is also to witness the pain, physical bruises and scars of one’s parents. Nathaniel goes through this traumatic event when his mother was on the brink of death:

One day I came home early from work, walked into the kitchen, where she, in shirtsleeves, was scrubbing a pot in the sink. She must have assumed she was safely alone. She nearly always wore a blue cardigan. I thought it was used to hide her thinness. Now I saw a row of livid scars like those cut into the bark of a tree by some mechanical gardening tool—ending suddenly, as if innocently, in the rubber gloves she was wearing to protect her hands from dish soap. I was never to know how many other scars there were on her, but here were these slate-red ones down the soft flesh of her arm, evidence from that missing time. (W 129)

Nathaniel understands the physical trauma that his mother went through and the anger in him turns into sympathy. Psychological trauma and imbalance occur when there is loss in the form of death of family members. Loss of loved ones is an important childhood trauma leading to flashbacks and memories which is experienced by Nathaniel. He witnesses the death of his mother and the memory of his childhood days creates a psychological imbalance. In “Death of Parents and Adult Psychological and Physical Well-Being: A Prospective U.S. National Study,” Nadine F. Marks, Heyjung Jun, and Jieun Song describe the state of children as, “Men who reported loss of their mother also reported a greater decline in global happiness, a lower level of psychological wellness, and a greater decline in self rated health than men who continued to have both parents alive” (10). Nathaniel fits into

this description, and feels deeply wounded by the recollections of his younger days.

Trauma generally disrupts the natural equilibrium, but there are means to overcome this by focusing on other aspects. Nathaniel begins to investigate the causes of his mother's death and the reasons why she disappeared when he was a child. His childhood recollections provide him complete support throughout his search. In "Recovered Memories," Heidi Sivers, Jonatha Schooler, and Jennifer J. Freyd explain how memory plays an important part in portraying old events as, "Memory in general is a reconstructive process. We use our current knowledge and understanding to recreate our knowledge of the past" (181). In this instance, Nathaniel attempts to connect together his past events by using his current obsessions. His new job at "British Intelligence" (W 130) after the death of his mother, gives him access to government records, "The job I was being offered was to review various files in the archives covering the war and post-war years" (W 131). This allows him to search for everything relating to his mother, "Accepting a job that included sifting through the details of the war might, I thought, be a way of discovering what my mother had been doing during the period she left us under the guardianship of The Moth" (W 131). He develops a close relationship with Arthur McCash, an employee in his workplace.

Arthur exposes the reasons behind the deliberated decision of Nathaniel's parents to place him under the care of guardian, "Your mother left the Service, she did so eliminating every trail behind her for one reason only. It was so that no one could come after you and Rachael again" (W 154). He learns more about his mother and her responsibilities as a result of these events. These clarifications assist Nathaniel in recovering from his psychological trauma, but the experiences he endured as a child created the desire to learn more about the days they went missing. When he recounts the memories that cause him pain, he says, "So many unlabelled splinters in my memory" (W 180).

Having unveiled the mystery of his mother's life, Nathaniel contemplates about the life of his father. His father's mysterious life kept him in a state of uncertainty and luctuation. Arthur McCash did not mention about his father while revealing the facts about his mother. When Nathaniel asked, "My father?" (W 155), Arthur McCash, "Just made a dismissive gesture suggesting fate" (W155). The expression of Arthur McCash raises serious concerns regarding his father's responsibilities. Nathaniel is now keen on learning more about his father after this incident, "For a few days I tried breaking into other archives in the hope of discovering some presence of my father. But there was no evidence of him in any capacity, at home or abroad" (W 178). With the trauma of missing his father, Nathaniel imagines several outcomes, "Strangled in Johor. Strangled on board a ship on his way to the Sudan. Permanently AWOL. Permanently undercover, but active. In retirement at a facility in Wimbledon, paranoia invading him, constantly irritated by sounds coming from a nearby animal hospital. Still on the top floor of the Unilever building" (W 179). Nathaniel envisions and paints a picture of his father's final days. Although he is unable to find out anything about his father, his memories and experiences of the past led him to speculate about his father.

Nathaniel's psychological development can be seen in his recollection of past occurrences and his desire to understand the causes and hidden aspects of his existence. Isolation is a common symptom of childhood trauma which can be overcome by connecting with people. Nathaniel searches for everything in an effort to avoid being alone. He makes an effort to contact all the people from his childhood memories. He remembers The Darter as, "My long-forgotten Darter, that smuggler, a minor criminal, had possibly been a hero of sorts, for the activity was dangerous work. What he'd done after the war was just a consequence of the peace" (W 266). Nathaniel admits that his purpose of looking out for contacts with people is to handle his loneliness. He claims, "I was living a solitary life, so I recognize solitary, as well as the small dimensions of order that come with that" (W 270).

Through the character Nathaniel, Ondaatje deftly depicts the lives of children who are separated from their parents because of the duties to be performed during war. His life became unbalanced as a result of his childhood trauma. Nathaniel's psychological state is impacted by the absence of his parents while he was a youngster, the death of his mother in adulthood, the lack of documents for his father, and a longing for his childhood friends. He experiences childhood trauma that completely alters his life, and these were the circumstances of numerous children during the war.

Trauma in children can have detrimental impacts on their psychological, physical and emotional well-being. Rachael is also traumatised by a series of events, which has an impact on her psychological state by making

her consume alcohol to overcome her depressed condition. Nathaniel remembers his sister as, “My sister didn’t return until late that night, long past midnight. She appeared unconcerned, barely spoke to us. The Moth did not argue with her about her absence, only asked if she had been drinking. She shrugged. She looked exhausted, her arms and her legs were filthy” (W 31). Many children who are abandoned by their parents have no guidance and tread the wrong path and harm themselves. Rachael internalizes her feelings resulting in becoming inexpressive, “Rachael disappearing into the evenings. She said nothing about where she went, just as I was silent about my life” (W 67).

The psychological pain and agony which Rachael experiences lead to a decline of her physical wellness. Her life is ruined by the mental transformation and illness. An article titled “How Mental Health Difficulties Affect Children” elucidates, “Mental health – the way we think or feel about ourselves and what is going on around us, and how we cope with the stresses of life – affects our sense of wellbeing as well as our physical health” (“How Mental Health”). A sudden change in her circumstances and the events going on around makes her to become seriously sick. In the article “Impacts of Natural Disasters on Children,” Carolyn Kousky describes, “Children may be more vulnerable after a disaster” (75). Rachael loses her strength and the only companion with whom she can share her anxiety and fear is her brother Nathaniel, “She was still witnessing something terrible. As of course she was, for whenever such episodes occurred, she would later describe to me calmly what she had seen” (W 69).

Changes in behaviour, a diminished interest in learning, feeling of loneliness, and participation in illegal activities are common symptoms of childhood trauma. Rachael too suffers from these symptoms similar to her brother. She too skips her education, and joins with The Darter involving in illegal activities. After her parents departed, Rachael only had The Moth as her guardian. The Moth accidentally lost his life during the kidnapping incident while trying to protect Rachael and Nathaniel. Along with the childhood trauma of being separated from parents, the death of The Moth turns out to be yet another psychological distress for Rachael.

The experiences of childhood trauma leave a legacy of reminders that may persist for years. These reminders are associated with the traumatic experience, its circumstances and its aftermath and can reverberate within families, friends, and relatives causing hatred towards the person or people who are the reason for their psychological trauma. When Rachael realizes that her mother is the only factor in The Moth’s demise as he guarded her after her parent’s abandonment, she begins to hate her mother.

In the article “A Behavioral Perspective of Childhood Trauma and Attachment Issues: Toward Alternative Treatment Approaches for Children with a History of Abuse,” Walter Prather and Jeannie A. Golden describe the conditions of children who are abandoned by their parents when they are young and how this will cause them to develop anger toward their parents:

When children are not adequately cared for during their early years of dependency and vulnerability and their safety and survival needs are compromised, children may experience a series of painful or horrific events (referred to as “traumatic experiences”), either directly at the hands of their adult caregivers or indirectly due to their negligence. As a result, these children fail to learn the cluster of behaviours referred to as ‘attachment’, and learn an entirely different set of behaviours in their interactions with adults. (59)

Rachael does not have any attachment towards her mother and the inbuilt anger towards her mother is observed when she refuses to attend her mother’s funeral. Nathaniel recalls, “Rachael was not at her funeral. I tried reaching her when I was given the news, but there was no reply to my telegram” (W 181). This clearly demonstrates Rachael’s psychological condition.

Rachael entirely disregards the attachments she had during her childhood days, especially with her family. When Nathaniel tries to contact Rachael years later, she refuses to join her family, “You can look. Your name is Nathaniel, not Stitch. I’m not Wren. Wren and Stitch were abandoned. Choose your own life. Even your friend The Darter told you that” (W 151). This illustrates the anger Rachael holds and how it manifests itself in her actions where her own brother is rejected.

Children experience a variety of distressing situations when unanticipated occurrences happen in their lives. In the end, these traumatic events have a psychological impact on children and modify their lives in various

ways. Due to Rachael's traumatic experiences, she rejects any attachments with the family members and prefers to live a secluded life. Through the character Rachael, Ondaatje vividly describes how her life changes as a result of losing her parents and the pain that result in both physical and psychological repercussions.

Through the characters Nathaniel and Rachael, it is evident that Ondaatje has attempted to highlight the novel's hidden elements of trauma more than the conventional aspects of war. Ondaatje fills in the missing elements of war and its aftermath by picturizing the life of these two children. Though the nation only recalls the widely recognized aspects of the war's agony, Ondaatje in *Warlight* has exposed the childhood trauma caused due to loss of parents, abandonment, isolation, uncertainty, fear and insecurity through this novel.

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