The English Patient Study Guide

The English Patient by Michael Ondaatje

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Michael Ondaatje, previously known as a poet, received immense critical and popular acclaim for *The English Patient*. The book earned The Booker Prize for best novel of 1992.

Author Biography

Ethnicity 1: Sri Lankan

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Nationality 2: Canadian

Birthdate: 1943

Poet and novelist Michael Ondaatje is perhaps best-known for his novel *The English Patient*, which focuses on an international group of characters isolated together in an abandoned Italian villa at the end of World War II. The novel explores themes of nationhood, identity, and displacement; the exploration of such themes seems to have arisen from Ondaatje's own life experiences. He was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on September 12, 1943, to parents Philip Mervyn Ondaatje and Doris Gratiaen. Ondaatje's family was what is known as Burgher□a minority but affluent class of people descended from the South Asian island's non-British European colonists. He spent his early childhood in Sri Lanka; after his parents divorced, he moved with his mother and siblings to England. He subsequently moved to Canada, where he attended the University of Toronto, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1965. His experience of inhabiting several countries throughout his life, and his multi-ethnically influenced childhood, have greatly informed and shaped the themes of his writing.

Ondaatje started his writing career as a poet□in fact, his primary focus as a poet greatly influences the style of his prose. His first collection of poems, *Dainty Monsters*, was published in 1967. His first work of prose, *Coming through Slaughter* (1976), is an experimental biography of New Orleans jazz legend Buddy Bolden. In the latter part of the 1990s, Ondaatje published *Handwriting*, a collection of poetry (1998) and the novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000), which is about the violent civil war between the Sinhhalese government and the Tamil separatists in Sri Lanka. Ondaatje had written about Sri Lanka previously in the critically acclaimed memoir *Running in the Family* (1982), in which he recounts his family's history in Sri Lanka, colonialist life on the South Asian island, and his own childhood.

The English Patient (1992) was awarded the Booker Prize for that year, and became a bestseller, making Ondaatje one of Canada's most famous writers and the most well-known writer of Sri Lankan origins. *The English Patient* was adapted as an Academy Award-winning film in 1996.

Since 1970, Ondaatje has been a member of the faculty of the Department of English at Glendon College at York University in Toronto. Ondaatje also serves as the editor of Brick, a Literary Journal, for which his wife, Linda Spalding, is also an editor. The journal is published twice a year out of Toronto.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1: The Villa

Near the end of World War II, a young Canadian nurse, Hana, is living in an abandoned Italian villa with a severely burned patient. Hana had decided to stay behind with her patient, who was too fragile to move, after her hospital regiment moved on. Hana does not know the patient's identity, but she tries to piece together his story from his fragmentary hallucinations. She thinks he is English.

Hana passes her time by reading to the patient from the villa's large library, as well as cleaning, gardening, and perusing books by herself. The war has left her emotionally scarred.

The patient remembers crashing a plane in the desert. A tribe of desert people find him and tend his badly burned body. They transport him across the desert as they care for him. As he heals, he serves them by identifying European-made weapons found hidden in the desert.

Chapter 2: In Near Ruins

Caravaggio, who knew Hana through her father in Canada, seeks her out at the villa. Hana had learned six months earlier that her father was killed in the war; Caravaggio knows of his death as well. Caravaggio, a former thief who worked as a spy during the war, tells Hana that his thumbs were cut off by the Germans after they captured him. When he wonders why they stopped at his thumbs, Hana tells him it is because the Germans were being forced to retreat from Italy.

Chapter 3: Sometime a Fire

A Sikh sapper (military explosives specialist), part of a British regiment, joins the group at the villa. The Sikh sets up his tent at the villa gardens. He is there with a sapper regiment to defuse the bombs of the area, which the Germans have left everywhere in the wake of their retreat.

Sometime after his arrival at the villa, Kip is working with intense concentration on defusing a bomb just outside the villa; coming upon a □trick□ in the bomb's wiring he finds himself in need of assistance, and yells for help. Hana runs out and assists him, in spite of the danger to herself, until Kip successfully defuses the bomb. They curl up together, exhausted, in their very first moment of intimacy.

That evening, Caravaggio brings home a pilfered gramophone, and the foursome have a small celebration in the patient's room. Kip suddenly leaves when he hears an explosion; another sapper, Hardy, had been killed while trying to defuse a bomb. Kip

returns hours later and finds Hana still in the patient's room. He crosses the room to be with her, snipping the wires of the patient's hearing aid so the patient will not hear them.

Chapter 4: South Cairo 1930-1938

Told from the point of view of the patient, this chapter consists of fragments of the patient's past: he had been part of an inter-European expedition mapping the Libyan deserts before World War II. In 1936, Geoffrey Clinton, a young Englishman, joins the patient's company in the desert, bringing with him his new, young wife, Katharine.

Chapter 5: Katharine

Told mostly from the point of view of Katharine Clifton, this chapter is a series of short accounts of the genesis of her relationship with the patient: her dreams of him; their somewhat violent lovemaking; awaking in their room in Cairo to the sound of morning prayers. He, in the meantime (although he has told her to claim no ownership over him), grows more and more obsessed with her and more and more disturbed by having to pretend in public that their relationship does not exist. She insists, for the sake of her husband's sanity, that they end the affair. The separation is heartbreaking for both of them, but neither lets the other know.

Chapter 6: A Buried Plane

Caravaggio believes that the patient is the Hungarian Count Ladislaus de Almásy, a desert explorer who helped the Germans navigate the deserts on numerous occasions. Caravaggio knows everything about Almásy because he had tracked his movement across the desert. Despite Hana's protestations, Caravaggio drugs the patient into a hallucination to get to the bottom of his identity.

In 1939, Geoffrey Clinton had attempted a murder/suicide by trying to crash his plane into the patient in the desert. Katharine was in the plane with him. He did not hit the patient, but Clifton was killed and Katharine severely wounded; the totaled plane left the patient and Katharine with no transportation out of the desert. The patient leaves Katharine in a desert cave and goes on foot in search of help. The patient is taken captive because the dessert is now a war zone, and he is thought to be a spy for the Germans. He is only able to return to Katharine years later. When he reaches the cave, he finds her body and carries her from the cave to a hidden plane. While flying out of the dessert, the plane catches fire, burning the patient, and then crashes.

Chapter 7: In Situ

Kip was the second son in his family. Although it was traditional for the second son to become a doctor, he enlisted in a Sikh regiment instead and was shipped to London, where he was selected by Lord Suffolk as part of a new sapper regiment. Kip was 21

years old when he joined the regiment, and he highly valued the intimate friendship he developed with Lord Suffolk and his assistants, Miss Morden and Mr. Fred Harts, especially because his experience with the rest of the army had been one of social alienation because of his race.

Kip tells Hana of the bomb that exploded and killed Lord Suffolk, Miss Morden, and Mr. Harts; however, he does not discuss their deaths at all. Rather, his story concentrates on his own efforts in continuing Lord Suffolk's failed attempts to dismantle a new type of bomb, which he succeeds at after much suspense. In the meantime, Kip tucks away the memory of his friends, so as not to let his anguish disturb his work. He does not share his grief with Hana.

Chapter 8: The Holy Forest

Hana, Caravaggio, and Kip lead a quiet and private life, together in the villa, with the patient. They bring a ladybug from the garden for the patient to look at; they play hide-and-go-seek in the darkness of the library.

Chapter 9: The Cave of Swimmers

Told in the first-person voice of the patient, as he speaks to Caravaggio during a morphine-induced conversation, the patient continues to fill in more details about his past with Katharine Clifton. He finds himself secretly falling deeper and deeper in love with Katharine, and after she had been in their company for more than a year, it is Katharine who initiates their affair by casually informing him that she wants him □to ravish□ her.

The patient's story segues into recollections of his good friend Madox who had been with him in the desert for ten years. Madox returned to England after the war broke out and the desert group was forced to disband. While at church with his wife, during a sermon praising the war, Madox shot himself to death.

The patient shifts into speaking in a third-person voice about Almásy and Katharine Clifton in Cairo, leading Caravaggio to wonder who he is speaking as now. The patient does not ever admit that he and Almásy are the same person.

Almásy brings Katharine, injured from the plane crash, to the Cave of Swimmers, and leaves her there to go for help. He walks through the desert until he comes to an English base at El Taj. The English soldiers there take him captive, thinking that he is an enemy spy because of his Hungarian name. He is unable to return to Katharine until, years later, he begins transporting German spies across the desert. When he returns to her, he cradles her decomposing body in the silence of the cave.

Chapter 10: August

Kip is in Naples in October, 1943, where a German soldier who turns himself in confesses that the harbor is wired with thousands of bombs that will explode when the city's power is turned on. The city is evacuated except for 12 sappers. They spread throughout the city and conduct the work of dismantling and re-wiring until the hour that the electricity is to return. Kip waits in a church until the electricity comes back. No bombs explode.

Back at the villa at the present moment, Kip storms angrily into the patient's bedroom, pointing his gun angrily at him. He has just heard that the United States has bombed Hiroshima. The realization of the injustice of the American and British-led policies against the non-Western countries of the world forces Kip to question why he, as a Sikh, is fighting a British war. He walks out on the patient, on Caravaggio, and especially, on Hana.

Sometime after Kip leaves, but before her patient dies, Hana writes a letter to her stepmother, Clara, in which she openly discusses the death of her father, Patrick, for the first time. The letter represents a catharsis for Hana.

Years later, Kirpal Singh, now a doctor in India with a wife and children, sits and thinks about Hana, who is now in Canada. Hana, in her kitchen in Canada, knocks a glass from the cabinet. At that same moment, Kirpal Singh catches a fork in midair, which had been dropped by his daughter, symbolizing a metaphysical connection between Hana and himself, though they are separated by the politics of their nations and the physicality of their continents.

Chapter 1, The Villa

Chapter 1, The Villa Summary

The English Patient, by Michael Ondaatje, is a novel written in the chaotic style of a dream, following four people attempting to find solitude in the last few months of World War II. Hana, a nurse, cares for a burned man, the English patient, while Caravaggio, an old friend from Canada, arrives to care for her. Kip, a sapper with the British army, arrives some time later to rid the villa where they all reside of unexploded land mines and booby traps, soon finding himself not only a part of this menagerie of broken people, but discovering a way out of his solitary life through an intimacy shared with Hana. The novel is an intriguing look at human nature and a touching snapshot of humanity as a whole.

Hana works in the garden, caring for the precious vegetables she has planted there to feed herself and her patient. Hana is a nurse with the allied forces who has elected to stay behind in a villa that was a temporary field hospital weeks before. There is a patient, an unknown man they call the English patient, who is severely burned, and Hana has been convinced could not be moved. Hana has elected to stay behind to care for the English patient. The English patient talks to her sometimes, telling her how he was burned in a plane crash and rescued by a band of Bedouin in the desert who knew how to care for his wounds. In exchange, the Bedouin took him to several places where they have hidden weapons and ask him to identify them. When the English patient is not talking about his time in the desert, Hana reads to him from books she has found in the villa's library.

The villa where Hana and the English patient live is scarred from the war. Many of the rooms have holes in the walls and the ceilings where bombs have ripped through the house. The library has been cordoned off due to the threat of booby traps hiding among the books and furniture. Hana knows about this risk and visits the library anyway. The stairs leading to the upper floors are missing the bottom three steps due to a fire. Hana has rebuilt them with stacks of books. There are many bedrooms in the villa, many that still contain beds, but Hana prefers to sleep in a hammock which she moves from room to room almost daily. The English patient has as his only possession a book by Herodotus that has cuttings and gluing that the patient has added. Hana looks through it from time to time, reading the patient's notes regarding the African desert. When the English patient sees her do this, he tells her more about the Bedouin and how they cared for him in the desert.

Chapter 1, The Villa Analysis

This chapter introduces two major characters to the story, Hana and the English patient. Hana is a nurse who has elected to stay behind in a deserted field hospital after the troops have moved on in order to care for a burn patient she does not believe can be

moved safely. This introduces Hana as a woman who is stubborn, strong, and independent. The chapter goes on to show how Hana spends her days, sneaking into a condemned library, moving her hammock from place to place, playing hopscotch in the upstairs hallway. This suggests a young woman who is restless, nostalgic about her youth, and perhaps a little suicidal if one considers the grave danger of Hana going in and out of the condemned library. The war itself can explain some of these behaviors, as the reader is aware that war is an ugly circumstance and can disturb even the most sane persons, but does not totally explain Hana's behaviors. This is foreshadowing for a future chapter in which some of Hana's behaviors are more deeply explained.

The English patient is another character introduced in this chapter. The English patient is a burned man who is presumably a pilot because he was seen crashing his plane in the desert by the tribe of men who found him and cared for him. The English patient is also assumed to be English by his manner of talk. However, the patient had no identification at the time of his arrival at the British hospital, so there is no way of knowing who he is. The patient himself claims not to know who he is and his face is so badly burned a picture would be of no use, either. This is all important because it foreshadows a time later in the novel in which the identity of this man is attempted to be found.

This chapter presents a story of a young woman and her patient living in solitude in the ruins of a war. This begins to develop the major plot of the novel that revolves around Hana and her patient and their attempts to withdraw from the world. It also begins to touch on the theme of companionship as the reader begins to see the development of a relationship between Hana and the English patient, even though this relationship does not appear to go any deeper than a nurse-patient relationship at this time. However, it is curious why Hana has elected to stay alone in the midst of a war to help this man, foreshadowing some of Hana's motivations that will be revealed as the plot continues to develop in the next few chapters.

Chapter 2, In Near Ruins

Chapter 2, In Near Ruins Summary

Caravaggio is in a hospital in Rome. Caravaggio overhears some doctors talking about a woman who has insisted on staying behind at an abandoned field hospital with a patient. When Caravaggio asks about this woman, he learns that the other doctors and nurses think she is insane, that the patient could have been moved despite her insistence that he could not, and that she had basically deserted her duties by staying. Caravaggio learns exactly where she is and decides he must go to her. Caravaggio arrives at Villa San Girolamo, and Hana is surprised to see this old friend of her father's, but she does not send him away.

Caravaggio has lost both his thumbs. Slowly, over a number of visits, Caravaggio tells Hana about how this has happened. Caravaggio worked for the British Intelligence, stealing for them as his profession before the war; basically, he was a thief. One day, Caravaggio attended a party in order to steal from some German generals, and one of the generals' girlfriends took a picture of him. Since the picture would be processed by the Gestapo, Caravaggio had to get the film. Caravaggio finds where this woman's room is and sneaks inside, naked, that night. The woman sees Caravaggio while he is in the room, but gives him the impression she will not tell. However, after Caravaggio jumps out of the window, he is caught and tortured, losing his thumbs. Later, Caravaggio escapes his captors when the allies move into the area, and he falls from a bridge as it is blown up.

Caravaggio enjoys being with Hana. Hana reminds him of his wife, the way she looks at him as though attempting to read his thoughts. Caravaggio thinks Hana is in love with the English patient and this is why she has insisted on staying alone with him despite the warnings of the other medical staff. What Caravaggio does not know is that Hana is suffering the stress of having watched more than a hundred soldiers die in her care and from the loss of her father. Hana likes the villa because it is built like a fortress and she feels protected here. Hana does not want Caravaggio here despite her deep affection for him. Caravaggio taught her many things when she was a child.

One night while walking with Caravaggio, Hana hears the English patient screaming. When Hana and Caravaggio reach the patient's room, there is a dog there. Caravaggio takes the dog away while Hana soothes the patient. Caravaggio and the dog become companions. A few days later, Hana is restless and thinking dark thoughts. Hana goes into the library and uncovers the piano, beginning to play a song she learned as a child. Hana thinks of her childhood while she plays, beginning slowly and then more richly. Two soldiers walk into the room. Hana ignores them and continues to play.

Chapter 2, In Near Ruins Analysis

This chapter introduces another major character, Caravaggio. Caravaggio is a thief by trade who was recruited by the British to aid their Intelligence division. Caravaggio found life to be one big party until the day he was caught by the Germans and tortured, losing both his thumbs. This experience has left Caravaggio scared, damaged, and seeking a solitary existence while at the same time needing to care for someone. Caravaggio has chosen to care for Hana, convinced that she too is damaged and needs him to take care of her. This foreshadows a time later in the novel when Caravaggio will seek out the truth about the English patient in order to show Hana what kind of a person he truly is.

This chapter also begins to explore the theme of death. Hana reveals to the reader some of the terror she saw as a nurse, dealing with dying patients on a regular basis. There is also Caravaggio's story of torture. Both of these not only deal with the idea of physical death, Hana's patients dying and Caravaggio facing the possibility of death, but it also begins to introduce the idea of emotional death. Hana is clearly hiding from the world, removing herself from the pain that she had to face on a daily basis during the war. Caravaggio, too, has come to the villa not only to find Hana, but to leave the memories of his torture behind him. This is a form of emotional death, a desire to not deal with the emotions of interaction with society.

Also introduced in this chapter is Caravaggio's idea that Hana is in love with her patient. Caravaggio does not see that Hana is attempting to isolate herself, introducing the villa as a symbol of this isolation, but suggests that she has stayed in order to care for a man she has fallen in love with. This is important because it foreshadows a time when Caravaggio, who has made himself Hana's protector, attempts to find the English patient's true identity in order to convince her he is not worthy of her love, perhaps so that she will see Caravaggio in this light instead. It is also possible Caravaggio feels like a father figure to Hana and simply does not want her hurt. Finally, the final scene of the chapter introduces two new characters, one of which will be the primary focus of the next chapter, foreshadowing this further development of the plot.

Chapter 3, Sometime a Fire

Chapter 3, Sometime a Fire Summary

Kip, one of the soldiers who has came to the villa, is a Sikh Indian from India. Kip is a member of an engineer unit with the British army and has spent much time traveling through Italy, both building bridges over muddy rivers and dismantling bombs, land mines, and booby traps. During his time in Italy, Kip has visited many churches and museums, fascinated by the paintings and statues in these places. In Sicily, Kip assisted on a bomb removal in a church. In Gabicce Mare, Kip witnesses the Festival of the Virgin Mary. Kip has never been exposed to these Christian symbols and is fascinated by them.

Kip and his partner have come to the villa in order to remove all the unexploded bombs, land mines, and booby traps. Kip stays at the villa to clear the buildings and the gardens while his partner has returned to the nearby village. Kip is self-sufficient, staying in a tent in the gardens and providing his own meals. Hana likes this behavior but Caravaggio finds it disturbing. Kip has a crystal set through which he listens to a British station, receiving war news as well as listening to western music. It bothers Caravaggio to hear him whistling these songs.

Caravaggio finds Hana in the library one afternoon. They talk about nothing important when Hana suddenly announces that she had an abortion a year ago. The father of the child had died so Hana felt as though she had no choice. Not long after, Hana learned of the death of her father. Hana tells Caravaggio how difficult it was to deal with the patients, some of whom would lash out at her before their deaths. Hana stopped socializing, stopped spending time with the other medical personnel. Hana began to withdraw before she chose to stay at the villa with the English patient.

Caravaggio and Kip go into the valley to pick up supplies. They talk about Hana because they have very little else to talk about. Kip explains how he got his nickname. His name is really Kirpal Singh, but the British had taken to calling him Kip. Hana remains at the villa to care for the English patient and to take a bath as the water is turned on in the fountains in the garden. Hana thinks of her father, curious about his death, of which she has little information. Hana's only relief from these thoughts is when she reads to the English patient. Hana learns that the English patient has been interrogated when the Bedouin brought him to the hospital. Hana also reads more in his book, learning of a woman who read a poem to him and of a betrayal the English patient felt he had committed in the name of love.

Kip finds a well concealed bomb in the garden that has been incased in cement. Kip attempts to disarm it but finds he needs a third hand. Kip calls out and Hana comes. Hana holds the wires and refuses to leave when Kip asks her to. Kip becomes upset by her presence, afraid he will make a mistake and blow the bomb. However, Kip successfully disarms the bomb. Hana confesses to him that she would not have minded

dying, there with him. Hana tells him how she imagines them lying in the grass together, two people of the same age, dying in each other's arms. Kip holds her until she falls asleep and moves from his touch.

There is a party in the English patient's room. Caravaggio has found a gramophone and plays music, convincing Hana to dance with him. While they dance, Kip hears an explosion and pretends it is nothing. However, when the smell of cordite reaches him, Kip rushes out of the villa and finds his partner has blown himself up. Kip buries the man and returns to the English patient's room where he finds Hana watching her patient sleep. Kip cuts the patient's hearing aid and goes to Hana.

Caravaggio visits the English patient and decides he must discover who he is for Hana's sake, or perhaps invent an identity for him. Hana visits the English patient and he confesses to falling in love once, at a much older age than Hana is now. Caravaggio, now aware of the other sapper's death, tries to talk Hana into leaving the villa with him, but Hana refuses to leave her patient. Hana has also begun to visit Kip in his tent at night, at first simply sleeping in his arms. Hana falls in love, but later she will realize that Kip has never allowed himself to feel the same for her. Hana wants to share everything with him, to take him home to Canada, but Kip shares little of himself with her.

Chapter 3, Sometime a Fire Analysis

Kip is introduced in this chapter. At first he seems to be a minor character, kept away from the others as though he does not want to become attached, touching again on the theme of emotional death. Something bad has clearly happened in Kip's past as it has in the past of the other characters, but the only thing revealed about Kip at this point is his fascination with Western religious symbols. This does foreshadow a possible connection to an English companion. Kip is a strong man, young and capable, willing to allow Hana into his life despite his emotional distance. This too foreshadows a development in the plot that will have to do with Hana and Kip's relationship.

Also touching on the theme of death is Hana's announcement to Caravaggio that she has had an abortion. This, on top of dealing with the deaths of her patients and the death of her father, finally explains Hana's desire to remove herself from society as a whole and suggests an explanation why she chose to stay with the English patient. Hana worries that her father had a bad death and this foreshadows a time when Hana will express a sense of guilt over this. Caravaggio, faced with this knowledge about Hana, has decided to discover the truth behind the English patient's identity in order to protect Hana. If he fails, Caravaggio has decided he will make up an identity, still hoping to protect Hana.

When Hana helps Kip with his bomb, Hana openly talks of a desire to die. This is the first time Hana has said this aloud, clearly alerting the reader to her suicidal thoughts that were only hinted at earlier in the novel. This also touches on the theme of death, exploring the depth of Hana's emotional death. Hana clearly is still struggling with all she has seen during the war, her own actions, and the death of her father. Hana is

devastated by all of this, suffering a sort of shock that has led her to believe death to be preferable over life.

Illustrating the theme of companionship, Kip and Hana grow closer, beginning an intimate relationship that will help both of them come out of their shells and learn to relate to another person again. This is important because it foreshadows the development of this love affair as the plot continues to develop itself. This is also important because it will begin the revelation of Kip's past, a past that will lead him onto a path that will eventually separate him from his newfound companions.

Chapter 4, South Cairo 1930-1938

Chapter 4, South Cairo 1930-1938 Summary

The English patient is a member of the Geographical Society during a period when great explorations are taking place in Africa. The English patient is a member of a team that is attempting to map the greater part of the Gulf Kebir Plateau, searching for the lost oasis called Zerzura. The exploration is difficult. They survive many dust storms, at times having to continue to move during the night to keep from being buried by the sand. The English patient and his team of explorers made several discoveries, traversing the desert with the Bedouin on foot and in cars with large, balloon tires. The English patient loves the desert, finding it a place where a man can be anonymous, wishing to live out his life there.

In 1936, a man named Geoffrey Clifton joins the exploration in order to allow the English patient and his partner, Madox, to use his plane to make the job easier. When Clifton joins them, he has brought along his new wife, Katharine, which is a surprise for the English patient and Madox. The English patient admits that he fell in love with Katharine, suggesting they had a love affair.

Chapter 4, South Cairo 1930-1938 Analysis

In this chapter the English patient begins to reveal more facts about his past. The English patient admits that he was an explorer in the African desert, searching for a place called Zerzura. The English patient had much success during his explorations, but the addition of a reliable plane was invaluable. However, this plane came with a married man and his young wife, with whom the English patient fell in love. This is important because it foreshadows the revelation of secrets and possibly the English patient's true identity. This confession also begins to develop the plot in another direction, exploring the theme of companionship more deeply, not only from the point of view of the companionship among the four main characters, but between the four main characters and people from the outside world. This also foreshadows two more characters that will be introduced in later chapters, Geoffrey and Katharine Clifton.

Chapter 5, Katharine

Chapter 5, Katharine Summary

Katharine falls in love with the English patient as well, and panics at first, though later she does not allow herself to think about it. They begin an affair and Katharine is torn with guilt, often taking her frustration out on the English patient, throwing plates and punches. When they are apart, he suffers a great deal, yearning for her to see him, to hear him, from her place at her husband's side. The English patient goes out of his way to see her in public, cold and distant from her while he watches her and secretly wishes to be at her side. Katharine begins to worry about her husband's reaction to their affair and decides they must end it. Katharine spends one last night with him and allows him to walk her to the botanical garden. Here Katharine insists they must end their affair. The English patient pretends to be callous, telling her he does not miss her. Katharine assures him he will.

Chapter 5, Katharine Analysis

Katharine appears in a flashback in which the English patient is telling Hana about his love affair with a married woman, Katharine Clifton. The English patient speaks of this affair with great passion, describing the affair as violent as well as passionate. The English patient is clearly still in love with this woman, driven crazy by the separation caused by a society that does not allow them to be together all the time. This passion is intense and deep, a passion that could not possibly be satisfied when Katharine ends the affair. This chapter foreshadows a later chapter in which the English patient talks about what happens to Katharine later and what their love has done to him, to her, and to her husband.

Chapter 6, A Buried Plane

Chapter 6, A Buried Plane Summary

The English patient begins to talk more to Hana about his past, recalling a time in 1937 when he spoke to his friend Madox about the hollow in a woman's throat, receiving warnings to be careful. Caravaggio takes Hana aside and tells her about a man named Almasy who flew in the Afrika Corps and was a great desert explorer. Almasy also worked for the Germans during the war. This man was not English, but Hungarian. Caravaggio believes this is who the English patient is. Hana does not believe him because of the patient's extensive knowledge of flower beds in Gloucestershire. Caravaggio asks her to allow him to give the English patient a cocktail of morphine and alcohol in order to encourage him to talk. Hana does not approve, but Caravaggio does it anyway. By this point, Caravaggio has become addicted to morphine as well.

Caravaggio administers the cocktail and begins to ask the English patient about his plane crash. The patient admits that he was leaving Gilf Kebir after having gone to pick someone up. The English patient tells Caravaggio that it was 1942 and there was no one left in the desert but soldiers. The patient was not far from his destination when his truck exploded, most likely sabotaged. The patient decided to walk, heading toward a buried plane he knew of. When Clifton joined the expedition, the patient and Madox had abandoned Madox's plane in Uweinat and it had subsequently become buried. The English patient found the Cave of Swimmers where he had left her. Katharine lay in the corner of the cave as he had left her, wrapped in a parachute. The English patient carried Katharine and a can of petrol to where he knew the plane to be.

Caravaggio asks what happened to Katharine. The English patient says that three years before, Clifton crashed his plane in what was supposed to be a murder-suicide of all three. In the cave, all the bitterness that had built in the English patient during their separation vanished and they spoke once more like lovers. Both admit their undying love, confessing how deeply they missed one another. The English patient left Katharine to get help and has returned three years later. The English patient finds the plane, unburies it, and manages to get it to start. The plane takes off but soon a fire starts in the cockpit, igniting oil that has leaked onto the English patient's legs. The English patient parachutes away and realizes too late he is on fire.

Hana goes to the English patient's room some time later and finds Kip there sharing a can of condensed milk with him. They are talking about Kip's training, discussing his teacher, Lord Suffolk. Kip tells the English patient that Suffolk, his secretary, and his chauffer died when a bomb they were dismantling exploded in 1941.

Chapter 6, A Buried Plane Analysis

Fulfilling some previous foreshadowing, Caravaggio decides to drug the English patient in order to learn his identity. Thanks to the stories the English patient has told all three of the other characters, Caravaggio believes he has already figured out who the English patient is. Caravaggio believes him to be Hungarian, a spy for the Germans. Hana does not believe him out of loyalty, but Caravaggio is convinced. Hana allows him to try the drugs even though she does not approve. As a result, the English patient reveals the circumstances of the plane crash that caused him to be burned and to be in this place at this time. The death of Katharine and the plane crash that her husband might have caused foreshadows a time later in the development of the plot in which the truth of these situations is revealed. In the meantime, the reader is left to wonder why the English patient did not return to Katharine sooner, why Clifton crashed his plane, and who the English patient really is.

Caravaggio's idea that the English patient is really a Hungarian spy for the Germans is an interesting twist, creating suspense as the reader yearns to learn the truth. If it is true, the reader must wonder what will happen as a result of this revelation and if this has anything to do with the English patient's memory lapse as to his own identity. Finally, the final scene in the chapter reveals some information about Kip and foreshadows the next chapter that reveals some of these answers.

Chapter 7, In Situ

Chapter 7, In Situ Summary

In Westbury, England, in 1940, Kip is working with Lord Suffolk and his secretary, Miss Morden, learning how to dismantle bombs. Kip joined the British Army some time before and had seen a flyer on becoming a sapper. Kip decided to try and was surprised when he was accepted so quickly into the program. Not only was Kip accepted into the program, but Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden welcomed him into their unique family. Kip learned a great deal from these people, as much about friendship and Western ways as how to dismantle bombs. Kip tells Hana one night how he and another sapper were dismantling a bomb when several officers arrived. Kip assumed these officers were there to inform them of the location of another bomb, so Kip walked over to ask. Instead, these officers tell Kip that Lord Suffolk and his team were dismantling a bomb while training four sappers and the bomb exploded. It was a familiar bomb, therefore they assumed there must have been some sort of new trick to it that would cause Lord Suffolk to fail. There was another one and they needed Kip to find this trick.

Kip went with the officers to the location of the second bomb and began to dismantle it under bright lights. Kip pulled the fuse away after it broke and discovered, by accident, that it had a second gaine that would explode after a sapper believes the bomb to be rendered harmless. Kip informed the officers about this second gaine and returned to Erith, where he drew out a diagram of the new bomb design and recommended ways of dealing with it. Soon after, Kip returned to his engineering corps and was on a ship for Italy when the other sappers decided on a way to deal with this new bomb.

Kip then talks to Hana about his brother. In a Sikh family it is traditional for the oldest brother to join the army, but his brother is mistrusting of all things western and finds himself in jail instead. Kip joined the army in his brother's place. Kip remembers working with Miss Morden once when she came to him during a dangerous bomb dismantling and cooled him with some cologne on a rag and gave him some cake.

Chapter 7, In Situ Analysis

Finally the reader gets to learn more detail about Kip. Kip has learned to dismantle bombs from an eccentric Englishman, Lord Suffolk. Lord Suffolk takes Kip in and makes him feel a part of a family, accepted by people who are different from him, something that is an entirely new experience for Kip. Kip is used to prejudice, to misunderstandings and hatred. Lord Suffolk proves to Kip that not all Western people are this way. It is an experience that touches on the theme of companionship, showing Kip how to be emotionally close to a person who is not of his own culture. However, the death of Lord Suffolk and his team is devastating to Kip, causing him to step back from society and hide among the masses so as not to put himself out there emotionally again. This is the

answer as to why Kip acts as he does and why he keeps everyone at arms length, including Hana.

Kip proves himself to be a talented sapper, using the skills Lord Suffolk has taught him to dismantle a bomb just like the one that killed Lord Suffolk. This is irony; Kip not only proves he can find the trick in this new bomb, but then he walks away from what Lord Suffolk has taught him and returns to the regular army to dismantle land mines and build bridges, as though he has turned his back on Lord Suffolk. An explanation could be found in the story of Kip's brother. Kip's brother is in jail because he does not trust anything English, and this is also why Kip is in the army in his brother's place instead of studying to become a doctor, as is tradition in his family. This also foreshadows a time later in the novel when Kip's brother's prejudices appear in Kip himself.

Chapter 8, The Holy Forest

Chapter 8, The Holy Forest Summary

Caravaggio accidentally knocks a fuse off the table and Kip catches it. Caravaggio thinks this may mean he owes Kip his life. Caravaggio and Kip are no longer tense around each other and now Caravaggio talks about his past life as a thief, of how he would often speak to the people he was robbing when he got caught in their homes. Kip recalls a time when he was lowered into a pit where a bomb had landed and uses frozen oxygen to disable the fuse. Kip accidentally broke the fuse and could not remove the component from its casing without using more oxygen. After a few tense moments, Kip managed to remove the fuse without incident. On a warm day, Kip and Hana wash their hair and then lay in the sun and talk while it dries. Kip talks some more about his brother, who believes Kip is foolish to trust the English. Kip contends they should hate the Japanese because they have brutalized India, but his brother ignores that.

One night at two in the morning, Hana and Kip play a game in which they move around the darkened villa and try to find each other. Hana makes her way to the library while Kip hides in the kitchen. Hana turns on her light for a quick second and finds Caravaggio sleeping on the couch. Hana uses Caravaggio as a pawn and tricks Kip out of hiding; Kip grabs Caravaggio, thinking it is Hana. For a month, Kip and Hana slept beside each other without intimacy. However, they have since found each other and are growing close. Kip remembers his ayah, when he was a child, giving him the comfort that his parents did not. Later in life, Kip will realize that he has always gone outside his family to find this kind of affection.

Chapter 8, The Holy Forest Analysis

This chapter describes how the four members of the villa's household have become close companions, touching on the theme of companionship. Even Caravaggio has learned to accept Kip. Kip saves Caravaggio's life by catching a fuse Caravaggio drops. Now Caravaggio knows that he owes Kip his life, a fact that will come into play later in the novel. Kip and Hana have also grown close, becoming lovers. Kip draws comfort from Hana, their relationship making it possible for Kip to trust the people around him again, growing closer to not only Hana but to the other men in the household as well. Kip respects both Caravaggio and the English patient, learning so much from the English patient that he admires his intelligence.

The memory in which Kip recalls defusing a bomb in a pit is important for two reasons. One, it expands on the idea that the Western civilization is not to be trusted. Among the people at the pit that day was Kip's assistant, an Englishman who had a great deal of affection for Kip. Two, it is important because it shows Kip's insanity when it comes to dismantling these bombs, as if like Hana, he has a death wish. This also touches on the theme of death, exploring the depth of Kip's emotional death. Kip has shut off his

emotions, afraid to trust anyone after the death of his friend, Lord Suffolk. However, he has begun to open up to Hana and Caravaggio, and trust the English patient. This development of trust foreshadows coming events for Kip.

Chapter 9, The Cave of Swimmers

Chapter 9, The Cave of Swimmers Summary

The English patient tells Caravaggio the story of his love affair with Katharine. The English patient tells how Clifton agreed to sign on with the expedition and showed up at the base camp with his new wife, Katharine. The expedition was a time of self-discovery for Katharine. Katharine began to explore herself, to learn about her own desires. The English patient knew how deeply Clifton loved his wife, could see it, and kept his distance at first. However, Katharine was a voracious reader and requested to read his copy of Herodotus. That night, Katharine read a romantic tale from the book. The English patient fell in love with her that very night. The English patient attempted to hide his feelings from Katharine, attempting to be formal in her presence. However, Katharine felt the same and approached him at a party, telling him exactly what she wanted from him.

Clifton was a man of importance and had important people around him constantly. Madox warned the English patient to be careful, but he did not heed the warning. After Katharine ended the affair, the English patient went insane with jealousy. The English patient treated Katharine with coldness whenever they were in public, intent on not allowing anyone, especially Katharine, to see his feelings. When rumor of war began, Madox returned to Somerset with his wife, whom he had not seen or spoke of in some time. The two of them attended a church service and during an impassioned sermon about the war, Madox shot himself.

Before Madox left, however, there was a party in a zinc bar. Katharine and Clifton attended. Almasy danced with Katharine, drunk and unwilling to let her out of his arms. Almasy was violent and passionate, knocking her to the floor once. The guests were not amused. As the English patient continues to speak, Caravaggio hears the name Almasy and wonders if the English patient is speaking his true name. Caravaggio asks if this is the case and the English patient says, "Death means you are in the third person" (247). Caravaggio reads in the English patient's book as he continues his narration.

The English patient tells Caravaggio that he took Katharine to the Cave of Swimmers after the plane crash, painted her with the colors from the walls, and wrapped her in the parachute. They spoke for a time and then the English patient left to find help. There was no transportation, no way out except to walk, which was Clifton's intention. The English patient walked through the desert for three days before he was picked up by an English military jeep. The war had begun and the English patient was mistaken for a spy. The English patient attempted to tell them about Katharine, calling her his wife instead of using her true married name, which might have made them listen. When the English patient was finally released from jail, he knew it was already too late. The English patient tells Caravaggio this is why he took the German through the desert. The English patient had hoped to be able to be with Katharine. Caravaggio tells the English patient that he was with British Intelligence at the time and that he trailed the English

patient through the desert, hoping to arrest him once he made it to Cairo with Eppler, a German with the key to the German spy code. Caravaggio is satisfied that the English patient is Almasy and suspects that Clifton, who was with British Intelligence as well, was planted in Almasy's expedition to keep an eye on the suspected spy and that this is the true reason he crashed his plane, not jealousy. Almasy talks to Caravaggio about love and the terrible things it causes a person to do at times. Caravaggio begins to relate.

Chapter 9, The Cave of Swimmers Analysis

Caravaggio has suspected for sometime that the English patient was a spy that he had known of during the war. Now Caravaggio knows for sure. However, instead of using this information to scare Hana into leaving the English patient to die, Caravaggio has begun to understand Almasy's motivations. Almasy did what he did for love, which is ironically the reason why Caravaggio is attempting to learn who he is. Caravaggio loves Hana and wants to protect her. This again touches on the theme of companionship.

The English patient's story is a sad one, but it is a story that wraps up several layers of foreshadowing from previous chapters. Katharine has been injured in a plane crash her husband caused while coming to pick Almasy up in the desert after he has closed down the base camp. Clifton flies over the area and then crashes, leaving himself dead and Katharine badly wounded. Almasy takes her to a cave and makes her comfortable before going for help. However, the people Almasy find put him in a jail and refuse to listen to his pleas for help, essentially killing Katharine. Almasy then turns around and becomes a spy for the Germans. This raises a few questions for the reader. Was Almasy a spy before this incident? Was the plane crash due to jealousy or to stop a spy? These questions are left to the reader to decide, but there are many clues within the novel that will help.

Madox's death is an interesting detail in this chapter. Madox has killed himself in church while listening to a sermon on the war. Why Madox would do this is unclear, but the reader might think it is because he has been pushed out of his beloved desert and is aware that all he has done up to this point will be used to aid the war's progress. Madox may also have done this because he has been ripped from all he has known and forced to live in civilization again. This seems like a parallel to the four people living in the villa. Will they be able to return to a normal life when this is over, or will they all end up like Madox? Madox's death is a symbol of everything these four people are struggling with, the struggle to learn to adjust, to accept the world as it is and to live life despite the horrors they have seen. Madox's death also touches on the theme of death, exploring it for all the reasons previously mentioned.

Chapter 10, August

Chapter 10, August Summary

It is Hana's birthday and Kip has decided to make dinner for them all. Caravaggio is not pleased because he does not like Kip's style of cuisine, but partakes nonetheless. Kip has found some wine, pleasing Caravaggio, and has lit forty-five shells full of oil in honor not only of Hana's birthday, but also the year. At night, in Kip's tent, he and Hana talk about his past and about hers. Kip tries to help Hana get past the deaths of her child and her father, but finds it difficult. Kip talks of a time when he was flown to Naples in 1943. The Germans had devastated the town and many of the citizens had hidden in caves surrounding the cities. The Germans had blown the cave entrances and when the allies found them, they had typhus. The people were being taken care of and the electricity prepared to go on when word reached the officials that the electricity had been rigged so that when they turned the power back on, the entire town would explode. The town was evacuated except for twelve sappers. Kip was one of these. Kip worked through the night with the other sappers. The next afternoon he found a church and fell asleep under a statue; he slept through the time when the power was to be turned on.

One afternoon Hana sees Kip walking through the garden. Suddenly he grabs his head and falls as if in pain. Kip goes to his tent, gets a gun, and rushes into the English patient's room. The bombs have been dropped on Hiroshima. Kip is enraged that the Western world would dare do such a thing to an Asian country. Kip threatens to kill the English patient, but changes his mind. Instead, Kip goes to his motorcycle and prepares to leave. Hana attempts to talk to him, but Kip will not respond. When Kip reaches the gate, Caravaggio is there with a gun, but he does nothing to stop Kip from leaving. Kip travels alone through many towns damaged by the war. There is a storm and he rides his bike off a bridge. Hana finds his bag and takes from it a photograph of Kip and his family. Later, Hana writes a letter to her stepmother, telling her about her father's death, of her guilt at not being the one to help him in the end, and asks permission to come home. Caravaggio strings a rope bridge to steal a worthless statue from the villa next door. The English patient imagines in the night he sees the sapper.

Years later, Kip has become a doctor and has two children and a wife. At home with his family, Kip thinks of Hana, wonders if she thinks of him, if she is okay, wonders where she is. Kip knows he will always think of her.

Chapter 10, August Analysis

To prove the solidness of their relationship, Kip makes dinner for Hana's birthday and provides wine for Caravaggio. This touches on the theme of companionship by showing how a friendship has grown between these people. This also is a symbol of the changes that have taken place within these people. Most of them did not want companionship at

the beginning of the story; in fact, they did not want other people around. Hana wanted to die and Kip did little to keep himself alive, too. However, they have all found each other, as well as a reason to go on with their lives, clear in the friendship they share. Hana and Kip have grown especially close with Kip telling Hana things about himself and his past that he would not have shared with her at the beginning of the novel.

Kip's story about Naples is interesting as it once again brings in the symbolic nature of Western religious icons. Kip appears to be fascinated by these statues and paintings. In this story, he slept beneath one just hours before the entire town should have exploded, and woke safe under the statue's light. It is symbolic of rebirth, of second chances, almost exactly what has been happening for the four people in the villa.

When Kip learns of the bomb that is dropped on Hiroshima, he feels betrayed by the people who have become his friends. Kip threatens to kill Almasy because of his role as teacher to Kip. However, this is ironic because Almasy was a German spy and the Germans did not drop the bomb; the Americans did. Kip leaves the house. Caravaggio waits for him at the gate with a gun but he does not attempt to stop him. This is symbolic of Caravaggio's realization that he owes Kip his life and he is saying to Kip that this makes them even. Hana is devastated by Kip's leaving, but her letter to her stepmother is symbolic of her recovery, of her ability to go back to a normal life. Hana reaches out to her stepmother, revealing her true feelings of guilt regarding her father and, in doing so, revealing her true motivations for caring for the English patient. Hana felt as though she should be with her father when he died. Hana stays with the English patient to assuage this guilt. Finally, Kip is now a doctor and has a family, though he thinks of Hana often, underscoring the relationship they had and the importance it played in his life.

Characters

Count Ladislaus de Almásy

See The English Patient

David Caravaggio

A middle-aged Canadian of Italian descent, Caravaggio, who was a professional burglar in Toronto, had joined the war effort as a spy for the Allies in Italy. He is an old friend of Hana's father, and when he hears that she is staying in an abandoned villa with a burn patient, he joins her there after his release from the hospital. His thumbs had been cut off while he was held captive and tortured by the Germans immediately prior to their retreat from Italy. He has developed an addiction to morphine.

Caravaggio, like the patient, represents a father figure to Hana. He is concerned about her health and safety and often tries to convince her to leave the abandoned villa. Hana remembers him as having been a gregarious and confident man, but the war and the torture have broken his spirit. He and Hana often sadly reminisce about their lives in Toronto before the war. Caravaggio is also a sort of a nemesis to the patient, as he is obsessed with the patient's true identity: he believes that the patient is not an Englishman but a spy who worked for the Germans. Because of his obsession with the patient's identity, he drugs him again and again into lucid hallucinations in order to pry his story from him. By the end, however, the patient's tragic story has removed any trace of Caravaggio's anger towards him.

In a novel that takes the futility of war on as a major theme, Caravaggio is a personification of this futility. As well as being the most vocal about his disdain for the war and its waste, his maimed hands are both evidence and symbols of its futility.

Geoffrey Clifton

An Englishman of high social standing, Geoffrey Clifton joins Almásy, Madox, and the rest of the Geographical Society desert expedition during the last days of his honeymoon with his new wife Katharine. He is a pilot with a good-natured personality; his wife is the apple of his eye, and he constantly boasts to the company of her beauty. It is later revealed that Clifton is a spy for the English government, keeping tabs on the international band of desert explorers.

Although Almásy and Katharine attempt to keep their affair a secret, Clifton eventually learns of the affair. On a trip back to the desert to retrieve Almásy, Clifton attempts to crash his plane into him; he misses Almásy but kills himself and mortally wounds Katharine.

Katharine Clifton

Fifteen years his junior, Katharine Clifton becomes Almásy's lover for a relatively brief and turbulent time. They had become acquainted during the Geographical Society expeditions in the Libyan desert, which Katharine's husband took her to during the last days of their honeymoon. She becomes enamored with the desert, and her growing interest in the desert is matched by her growing interest in Almásy, who is also secretly falling in love with her. She initiates the secret, and often somewhat violent, sexual affair, but the pressure of keeping it secret, coupled with her guilt, causes her to break it off□a move that breaks Almásy's heart, though he would not admit it to her.

When Clifton crashes his plane into the desert in an attempt to kill Almásy, he kills himself and mortally wounds Katharine. Almásy leaves her in a cave while he goes for help; she dies when he is unable to return to her. Katharine's death is the patient's greatest source of anguish. His inability to save her is the ultimate reason he renounces his identity.

The English Patient

The identity of the English patient is the crux of the mystery at the heart of this novel; his identity remains somewhat ambiguous even to the end of the novel. Burned beyond recognition, the patient is introduced to the young Canadian nurse, Hana, in an Italian hospital. She stays on with him at an abandoned Italian villa after her hospital regiment moves on. Through several fragments of his mostly hallucinatory monologues that pepper the novel, it is revealed that this patient, whom everyone believes to be an Englishman, was part of a Geographical Society expedition to map the Libyan desert. During his time in the desert, he meets and falls in love with Katharine Clifton, the young wife of his colleague Geoffrey Clifton. They commence a violent affair and break it off, only to have Clifton, in a fit of jealousy, attempt to kill them both by crashing his plane in the desert. Clifton is killed, and the patient leaves the severely injured Katharine in a desert cave until he can return with help. By this time, World War II has broken out, and he is captured by the English, who assume he is a spy for the Germans. He is unable to save Katharine. Two years go by before he is able to return to the cave and retrieve Katharine's body.

The patient was kept from saving Katharine because, by virtue of his name, the English assumed he was allied with the Germans. That he is thought to be an enemy by the British because of his non-Anglo name is the root of the patient's refusal to identify himself or align himself with any nation. The patient is a man of great historical and geographical knowledge, and a great passion for the desert. Both the death of his friend Madox and the death of Katharine cause him enough anguish to not be able to face his memories, except in the stupor of the morphine injections that Caravaggio administers.

Hana

Twenty-year-old Hana is originally from Toronto and was sent to Italy with the Canadian army as a nurse. The overwhelming trauma she experiences and witnesses during the war leaves her severely scarred emotionally: the experience of caring for scores of dying soldiers; receiving news of her father's death in France; becoming pregnant and having to terminate the pregnancy all leave her scarred. While working in an abandoned villa that has been transformed into a hospital, she meets a patient who is burned beyond recognition. When her regiment moves on, Hana remains at the villa alone with the patient. Later, she is joined by David Caravaggio and Kip the sapper, with whom she eventually develops an intimate relationship.

Hana idealizes her patient; she finds a fatherly type of comfort with him and regards him as a despairing saint. Her idealism, in spite of her emotional anguish, is evident in her attitude towards nationalism and race; when Caravaggio questions whether the patient is English or is in league with Germany, Hana states that it does not matter what side he is on. Hana also idealizes Kip, whom she is drawn to for comfort and whom she also regards as a sort of saint. Her observations of him reveal an adoration of his beauty; however, her mild obsession with the brownness of his skin and with his long, dark hair seems to have more to do with a universal idea of beauty and less to do with their difference in race.

Unfortunately, Hana's idealism did not affect Kip, who left her ultimately because she, as a Canadian, is associated with the West and with what he comes to regard as its violent racist policies against non-Western cultures.

Hana does, at the end of the book, achieve a catharsis that none of the other characters seem to: she writes a letter to her stepmother, Clara, informing her of the details of her father's death and discussing, for the first time, her own grief. Finally able to openly acknowledge her father's death, Hana achieves an emotional healing.

Hardy

Hardy is an Englishman and a member of Kip's sapper regiment in Italy. Unlike the other English sappers, who are reluctant to show the senior-ranking Sikh respect because of his race, Hardy is enthusiastic in following Kip's orders. Kip and Hardy form a friendship. Hardy is killed while attempting to defuse a bomb. His sudden death is an indirect factor that propels Kip towards starting a romantic relationship with Hana.

Mr. Fred Harts

Fred Harts is Lord Suffolk's chauffeur and constant companion in his bomb disposal work. Together with Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden, the threesome is known as the Holy Trinity. Mr. Harts is killed along with Suffolk and Morden while defusing a bomb in 1941.

Kip

See Kirpal Singh

Madox

An Englishman and a member of the Geographical Society, Madox is Almásy's closest friend, having spent ten years charting the African deserts with him. The Geographical Society, an international band of explorers stationed in the desert and away from the political tensions of Europe, seems to transcend the boundaries of nationalism. The group is disbanded because of the commencement of World War II, which sadly transforms the desert into a war zone. Madox returns to England and ends up committing suicide. The patient, heartbroken at his friend's death, says that Madox □died because of nations.□

Miss Morden

Miss Morden is secretary to Lord Suffolk and accompanies him during every bomb dismantlement. When Lord Suffolk chooses Kip to join his sapper regiment, Miss Morden becomes the only English woman to truly befriend Kip. He cherishes her friendship and views her as a sort of mother figure; she takes him to plays and, during one touching instant, daubs him with cologne to calm him during a bomb disposal. Her death by explosion, along with Fred Harts and Lord Suffolk, is a great source of anguish to Kip.

Kirpal Singh

Kirpal (Kip) Singh, as a sapper in the British army, is part of an elite and unique unit hand-selected and trained in bomb disposal. It is extremely technical and dangerous work. Kip is a Sikh originally from India, which is a colony of Britain at the time the novel takes place. His vehemently anti-British brother is jailed for refusing to join the British army; Kip joins in his place and is sent to London. He acquires his nickname, Kip (which he is called throughout most of the novel), from the British soldiers who derived his name from some kipper grease that got on some of his reports.

Kip faces discrimination in the army that, while it allows him to be a soldier, disbars him from social activities; that is, until he is befriended by his mentor in the sapper unit, Lord Suffolk, and his assistants, Miss Morden and Mr. Harts. Kip becomes Lord Suffolk's right-hand sapper, and he regards Lord Suffolk as a father figure. Indeed, Kip values these three English people as though they were family, and he is emotionally shattered when they are suddenly blown up by a bomb. Rather than facing his anguish at their deaths, he tucks away their memories□an act he compares to Peter Pan packing away his shadow□and heads to Italy with another sapper unit. Here, he encounters Hana,

with whom he commences a romantic relationship, and the patient, with whom he forms a fast friendship, based on their similarities in taste, knowledge, and personality.

During his time in Europe, Kip falls in love with Western culture, especially that of the English. He constantly hums the Western tunes he learns through his portable radio headset; he adores English tea and condensed milk; later, in Italy, he finds himself in awe of the vast frescoes of the churches.

In the meantime, Kip's own non-white racial background is a constant factor in his relationship to the European world he now inhabits; his race is represented especially by the constant repetition throughout the text of the description of his □brown skin.□ The consciousness of his color is ever-present and represents his racial difference as a significant factor in his life□even during the intense, life-and-death moments of bomb disposal.

The character of Kip is very much a mirror of the character of the patient: the patient himself often refers to Kip as a younger version of himself. He also refers to the both of them as □international bastards,□ based on their life experience of straddling different national and ethnic cultures, seeming to not be bound in spirit by the tenets of just one national identity. However, for Kip, the patient's idealized □international□ identity is shattered by the American bombing of Hiroshima. This act of violence by what Kip calls a □white nation□ against a □brown nation□ destroys Kip's previous idealization of the West, Europe, and especially the Britain; it makes clear to him the exploitation by these colonial nations of the non-Western peoples of the world. His explosive anger at the Americans' celebration of the nuclear bombing of Japanese civilians, and his subsequent, very sudden exit from both the villa and from Hana's life, forms the climax of the novel.

Lord Suffolk

Lord Suffolk, an English gentleman, is the head of an experimental bomb disposal unit as part of the British Army. He chooses Kip as a member of his elite sapper unit; Kip eventually becomes his top sapper. Lord Suffolk, along with his constant work companions Miss Morden, his secretary, and Mr. Fred Harts, his chauffeur, are known as The Holy Trinity. Kip becomes especially close to Lord Suffolk who, as his mentor, becomes a father figure to Kip. Lord Suffolk is killed in 1941 by a bomb, and his sudden death is a great source of sadness for Kip.

Objects/Places

Books

Hana reads books from the library to the English patient in an attempt to communicate with him, during their time alone at the villa. Later, Hana makes notes in some of the books still shelved in the library.

Herodotus Book

The English patient has no identifying objects on his body when he is brought to the hospital. However, the English patient has with him the Herodotus book, a book about Herodotus within which he has pasted pictures and quotes and has written his own notes.

Morphine

Morphine is a drug used to treat pain. Both the English patient and Caravaggio are addicted to morphine.

Land Mines

Kip is a sapper, or a soldier who specializes in disarming bombs and land minds. Kip comes to Villa San Girolamo in order to dispose of land mines left behind by the Germans.

Letter for Clara

At the end of the novel, Hana writes a letter to her stepmother, Clara, asking permission to come home, symbolizing her desire to rejoin the world of the living.

Triumph Motorcycle

Kip rides a Triumph when he leaves the villa.

The Library

The villa has a large library where Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio spend a good deal of time.

Villa San Girolamo

Villa San Girolamo is a severely damaged villa in Tuscany where an allied hospital was temporarily housed and where Hana stayed with the English patient, alone, to care for his wounds.

The Cave of the Swimmers

The Cave of the Swimmers is a cave the English patient found during one of his explorations of the desert that contains paintings on the walls. It is inside this cave that the English patient hides his lover, Katharine, after she is fatally wounded in a plane crash.

The Buried Plane

The English patient's fellow explorer had a plane that they used to make maps of the desert, but abandoned when Clifton joined their team with a better plane. It is this plane, buried by the sands of the desert, that the English patient attempts to fly out of the desert the day he crashes and is burned.

Rupert

Rupert is the name of the plane Clifton flew during the time in which he aided the English patient and his team with their explorations. This is also the plane Clifton crashed in his attempt to kill Katharine and the English patient.

World War II

World War II was a world-wide conflict that spanned from 1939-1945. This novel takes place in the final months of the war.

Uweinat

Uweinat is where the English patient and his team had their base camp. This is where Clifton is supposed to pick up the English patient on the day he crashes his plane.

Africa

The English patient was a desert explorer and spent much time exploring the deserts of Africa.

Italy

Kip, Caravaggio, and Hana all end up in Italy toward the end of the war.

Canada

Hana and Caravaggio are from Canada.

India

Kip is a Sikh Indian who was born and raised in India and returns there after the war.

Social Sensitivity

The English Patient is a richly textured book which movingly explores many of the broad issues of war—the pain, loss, sense of betrayal, quiet heroism, mixed allegiances and its effect on the heart and psyche—by focusing closely on four very different individuals who find themselves together at a deserted, halfdestroyed villa north of Florence in the final weeks of World War II. Twentyyear-old Hana, an allied nurse on the Italian front who has seen the carnage of war on a daily basis, decides not to go with her unit when it leaves the makeshift little hospital in the Villa San Girolamo to move to safer quarters in the south. She will no longer face the daily procession of critically wounded young men who are brought to the hospital only to die in front of her. Emotionally exhausted, she stays and devotes herself to the care of a single patient, a mysterious figure who lies upstairs, so severely burned as to be unrecognizable and unable to care for himself. The book opens with Hana's decision to remain in the war-ravaged villa, which had once been a nunnery and, earlier in the war, served as the last German stronghold in the area. It now stands with some walls blown away, ceilings caving in, doors missing or boarded up, a staircase disappearing in midair. Although isolated and vulnerable to attacks by brigands, she feels safe there. The villa, like Hana and her patient, is too devastated to draw much attention from the outside world.

Here, as throughout the novel, Ondaatje is able to evoke a great deal of emotion with a few apt descriptions and images. The power of war to uproot both institutions and individuals can be seen in Hana's decision to pull back from the war, leaving her group of five nurses, two doctors and one hundred patients to "care only for the burned patient. She would read to him and bathe him and give him doses of morphine." She attempts to make a life amid the rubble by planting a garden, removing books from the old library and nailing them to the floor to replace the bottom step of a staircase, carrying "the six-foot crucifix from the bombed chapel and us[ing] it to build a scarecrow above her seedbed, hanging empty sardine cans from it which clattered and clanked whenever the wind lifted."

But even if the war can be ignored temporarily in self-imposed isolation, the past cannot. The burned English patient's frequent, vivid flashbacks, which are often chronologically scrambled and fit no apparent pattern, reveal a complex world of desire and intrigue in the Sahara desert in the years before the war. The past takes a more tangible form in the figure of Caravaggio, an avuncular figure from Hana's childhood in Toronto. He finds his way to the villa after hearing rumors. Both his hands are bandaged, another victim of the coincidences of war. Through Caravaggio's comments and questions, the reader slowly begins to develop a sense of the young woman's childhood in Canada as well as some idea of the character and identity of the burned patient. Ondaatje moves continuously between present and past, from vivid details of life in the villa to the deceptions of desert explorers, from descriptions of the patient's plane crash and rescue by desert tribes to the recent brutality of the war.

Ondaatje's imaginative, delicate touch allows the reader—and the characters— to fuse the past and present seamlessly.

Hana "looks in on the English patient, whose sleeping body is probably miles away in the desert, being healed by a man who continues to dip his fingers into the bowl made with the joined soles of his feet, leaning forward, pressing the dark paste against his burned face. She imagines the weight of the hand on her cheek." Although no specific predictable pattern emerges, it is clear that any attempt to demarcate the present from the past is futile.

Issues of culture as well as character and chronology are thrown into even sharper relief by the appearance of Kip, a twenty-six-year-old Indian sapper who pitches his tent outside the villa walls and spends his days searching for and defusing bombs and mines scattered everywhere by the retreating German army.

His interaction with the others helps to bring each of them into sharper focus.

His quiet methodical manner, as he daily risks his life defusing bombs left by an enemy he's never met in order to save people who consider him a foreigner, only heightens our sense of the absurdity and the violence of the war.

In trying to come to terms with this violence, the conversations and recollections of all four characters point to a final important social concern: the power of language in shaping and clarifying what we term reality. Very little of the action of the novel takes place in the present. As the four protagonists converse, recall and explain, we sense the tremendous power of words and images to make sense of the events of the past and define their meaning and importance in the present.

Late in the book, as the English patient recounts his early adventures and intrigues in the desert, he realizes that "I am a man whose life in many ways, even as an explorer, has been governed by words. By rumors and legends. Shards written. The tact of words. In the desert to repeat something would be to fling more water into the earth. Here nuance took you a hundred miles." Ondaatje appreciates the power of nuance as he moves gracefully from the present to the past and back, from the specific to the symbolic, from the intensely personal to the shared concerns of the war. A book with little present action, The English Patient relies on richly poetic description and imagery to hold together the disparate episodes. Ondaatje has a masterly touch for the evocative metaphor, the single detail that reveals an entire situation, scene, personality or dilemma. The book itself is the best testament to the truth of the burned patient's insight at the end of his tale of forbidden love and betrayal: "Words, Caravaggio. They have power."

Techniques

The English Patient is a richly poetic work, one which relies on tone and style as much as action or character development to hold the reader's attention. Rather than present events chronologically, the book consists of a series of vivid individual scenes in the present coupled with flashbacks and descriptions. By choosing to present his tale in a nonlinear manner—even the flashbacks are random and often without context—Ondaatje creates a complex artistic challenge for himself. He must keep the reader interested through his use of language, through arresting images and apt metaphors. As the reader attempts to make sense of the various episodes past and present he may identify with the English patient's description of Herodotus, "one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consum ing everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage."

As the reader moves from "oasis to oasis," from a vivid flashback to a revealing episode in the present, he slowly begins to piece together disparate moments and motives. The phrase "piecing together a mirage" not only describes what the reader must do, it is also one example of the author's gift, revealed throughout the novel, for the startling, intriguing image.

Ondaatje's poetic economy of language and use of metaphor create a richly textured book and set a tone which unifies the whole work. It is the water between and in the oasis. The sentence, "Harpoons are still found in the desert," captures the reality of climatic change better than a long discussion on the subject.

"Cats slept in the gun turrets looking south," imaginatively tells us that the war has moved north of the region. "The women pacing like greyhounds, leaning against you while you muttered into their shoulders during 'My Sweet,'" conveys the sensual tension of night life at a Cairo jazz bar. "Her cool hand suddenly against my neck on a Cairo bus . . . Or the sun through her fingernails on the third-floor lobby at the museum when her hand covered my face," suggests the intimacy of the clandestine lovers.

Such rich imagery steadies us as we are spun through numerous shifts in chronology and point of view throughout the novel. The individual episodes are like pieces of stained glass, delicate and beautiful when viewed up close, which are even more impressive when the individual panes are seen in context with each other, a view which comes to the reader slowly. We do not learn some of the most significant facts about the four protagonists until the end of the book.

Ondaatje is able to create suspense and continuity as the reader imaginatively responds to glimpses of the mirage in images, references to books and artists, descriptions of the desert, and the characters' actions and conversations.

Themes

War

The English Patient is centered around the events of World War II, but markedly absent from its narrative is any mention□save the bombing of Hiroshima, which has great personal significance to the character Kip□of any of the major action or history of the war itself. Rather, it focuses on the personal experiences of war of the four main characters and, in doing so, portrays war as an endeavor that results not in glory, but destruction and, ultimately, betrayal to those who take part. Hana's letter to her stepmother Clara at the end of the novel most clearly states the betrayal of the war towards those who joined its efforts; Clara was the only one of Hana's family not to join the war effort, and Hana asks of her, □How were you not fooled like us?□ What Hana□and the others□were □fooled□ by was the sense of honor and duty that drove each of them to join the war effort. Hana, Kip and Caravaggio have all voluntarily left their own countries to join the Allied forces in Europe, but the novel focuses on what the war took from these characters: Caravaggio is horribly maimed; Hana loses her father, her lover, and her child; Kip, who joined the British army out of a sense of loyalty to England and the West, not only loses his best friends in a bomb disposal, but in the end is betrayed by the West by the bombing of Hiroshima, which he views as an act of blatant racism. The patient himself, who wanted nothing to do with the war, is unable to save Katharine as a direct result of the conflict and is forced to take sides; he also loses his best friend, Madox, who commits suicide as a direct result of the war. None of the characters exit the war with a sense of honor or glory; as Caravaggio notes angrily, □The armies indoctrinate you and leave you here and they f□□ off somewhere else to cause trouble, inky-dinky parlez-vous.□

Nationhood and Identity

The patient says to Hana that the idea of nations is one that deforms people. The novel *The English Patient* explores the attempt of the characters to transcend the constrictions of nationhood, and their helplessness and inability to do so because of the greater power of politics, government, and the war that surrounds them.

In the desert, the patient and his international band of friends had no need or desire to label themselves according to their nationality; being in the desert□removed, at that time, from the politics of Europe□they were able to forego their labels of nationhood. However, the war brought the politics of Europe to the desert; it forced the disbandment of the Geographical Society and therefore, symbolically, put an end to the patient's dream of transcending nationhood. The patient's best friend, Madox, shoots himself rather than be forced to ally himself with Britain against other men simply because of their nationality. Most tragic of all is the very fact that it is the patient's name, and the nationhood it implied, that kept the patient from saving Katharine's life. The English soldiers stationed outside the desert took him prisoner rather than help him rescue

Katharine, simply because his Hungarian name denoted an association□albeit nonexistent□with their enemy. In the end, the patient is only able to shed his identity through the literal loss of his face, as he is severely burned beyond recognition.

Kip, too, attempts to transcend the constrictions of nationality by attempting to straddle both his Sikh culture and the Christian British culture; his attempt at assimilation into British culture is especially symbolized in his adoption of the nickname given him by the British soldiers□throughout the book, he is known as □Kip□ rather than □Kirpal Singh.□ For Kip, however, transcendence is even more impossible because of his Asiatic race: he, a member of the British army's elite sapper unit, is indelibly marked as Indian by the very color of his skin, the □brownness□ of which is evoked repeatedly throughout the novel. Even in the heat of dismantling a bomb, he is still conscious of the brownness of his skin and, therefore, his status as an outsider. Kip originally joins the British army with the conviction that he can transcend the superior racism of the British, and therefore gain acceptance, simply by ignoring the laws, written and unwritten, that impinge upon his personal freedom. However, by the end of the novel, it is the bombing of Hiroshima□an act of extreme violence that he views as motivated by the racism of the white West against Asia□that makes clear to Kip that he cannot escape the racism with which the West would regard him. He leaves the British Army and returns to his own nation, resuming his name, Kirpal Singh. Although he loves her, that Kip leaves Hana behind denotes that he completely gives in to the labeling of nationality that he had so desperately tried to overcome: he leaves because he associates Hana, as a white Canadian, with the racism of the West.

Trauma, Personal Grief, and Healing

The novel, in its focus on the private, internal lives of each of the characters through their personal memories, examines the effect of trauma and, in the case of Hana, the progression from trauma, through denial, to acceptance.

The narrative of the novel is often propelled by the characters' dealing with anguish: for example, the English patient finds himself unable to face the death of Katharine, and his emotional shock and inability to fully face her death is reflected in the very narrative structure of the novel: his conversation and hallucination greatly alters as he begins to either speak or think about her. For example, the chapter □Cairo 1930-1938,□ the patient is speaking with Hana of his past and discusses the beginning of his affair with Katharine; throughout this chapter, he speaks in the first person. However, during his drugged conversation with Caravaggio he is eventually forced to confront the circumstances surrounding her death. The patient's narrative style shifts considerably: rather than speaking in the first person, he begins to speak in the third person of Almásy (the patient's true name), causing Caravaggio to wonder whether the patient is speaking as himself or as another person. This third person narration disconnects the patient from the person of Almásy and thus from Almásy's pain, making it the only way possible for him to discuss Katharine's death. The patient's hallucinations and refusal to acknowledge his true identity allows him to keep separate from his personal anguish

and, therefore, to not have to face it fully. As he says to Hana, "Death means you are in the third person."

But, while the patient does not seem to receive a respite from his grief except through his own eventual death, Ondaatje uses the character of Hana to show redemption through acceptance: Hana's character development is one from debilitating grief and denial, to healing and acceptance. Throughout the novel she refuses to acknowledge the death of her father, even going so far as to tell the patient that he is alive in France. The entrance of Kip into her life, and the happiness and comfort he brings her, helps Hana to be able to feel happiness again. Although in the end Kip leaves her, Hana is left with the ability to move on in her life. Her transformation is evident in the letter she writes to Clara at the end of the novel, in which she is finally able to openly discuss her father's death.

Geography

Hana, in her letter to her stepmother Clara at the end of the novel, writes, "Do you understand the sadness of geography?" Hana is discussing her sorrow at being unable to be with her father, Patrick, while he died in France and she was tending soldiers in Italy. Here, her sorrow is a helpless sorrow aimed at the impossibility of transcending the physical space of geography. In *The English Patient*, the physical geography of the earth symbolizes nationhood and the separateness that it forces between people. During their courtship, Hana constantly imagines Kip as an extension of his continent and as the embodiment of all of India. Indeed, their relationship is consistently described in terms of the geography they represent: for example, an intimate moment between Hana and Kip is described: "Hana now received this tender art, [Kip's] nails against the million cells of her skin, in his tent, in 1945, where their continents met in a hill town." The climax of the novel occurs when Kip, unable to separate Hana from the West he has come to despise, leaves her and returns to India. Hana returns to Canada; their retreat to their respective homes is as impossible a separation to surmount as the larger, political forces that drove them apart.

However, Ondaatje creates an ending that is almost magically surreal, allowing Kip and Hana to transcend the physical space of geography: as Hana, in Canada, knocks a glass from a shelf, Kirpal Singh reaches down to catch a falling fork in India. This ending to the novel seems to leave the hope that there is indeed a plane that transcends the constraints of both the political and the physical world.

Physical and Emotional Death

As with any book that takes place in a time of war, death is an important theme within this novel. However, it is not just physical death that is dealt with in this plot, but emotional death, as well. Physical death comes into the story as Hana deals with not only the death of her father and the baby she chose to abort, but with the impending death of the English patient whom she has taken under her care. Hana deals with her

father's death badly, taking it as a personal failure that she was not at his side when he died, there to help him recover or to make his passing easier. Hana has been at the side of many men who have died over the past few years. As a nurse with the allied forces, she has spent time talking with these men and easing their passage, but she has failed to be with her father. Not only this, but Hana chose to have an abortion when the father of her child was killed in battle. The pregnancy could have been Hana's ticket home, but she chose not to go through with it, worried about bringing a baby into such a time. However, the death of this baby is difficult for Hana to deal with on top of her father's death. Now Hana has chosen to stay behind the allied forces in order to care for a man whom she knows little about, including his name and nationality. This choice appears to be some sort of penance, as if she is seeking forgiveness for the two deaths she did not prevent.

Other characters within the novel have also had to deal with the consequences of death. The English patient has left his lover alone in the desert with no way to return to her. Kip, the sapper, has lost his teacher and his team to a bomb. Caravaggio apparently lost a wife at some point, his good friend, Hana's father Patrick, and most importantly, both his thumbs. It is the death of all these people that somehow brings these four people to this villa in Tuscany where they draw strength from each other and attempt to pull their lives together again.

Emotional death is the other side of this discussion. Emotional death is a state where a person has put up with so much pain that he or she can no longer deal with their own emotions and they shut down, removing themselves from civilization. That is exactly what all four of these characters have done. The English patient has removed his own identity, losing his credentials and pretending he has no memory of who he is. Hana has deserted the army and insisted on staying in the villa alone with a patient whom she claimed could not be moved, although others insist he could have been moved quite easily. Caravaggio has come to the villa to find Hana and has remained not only to be close to her and protect her, but to escape the realities of the torture he has suffered during the war. Kip removed himself from civilization long before coming to the villa, keeping himself solitary during the war and afterwards, as well. All four are hiding, but all four somehow manage to find within each other the strength they need to deal with their pasts and move back into the world.

Addiction

Addiction can manifest itself in many forms. In this novel, there are two forms of addiction. The first is drug addiction. Caravaggio and the English patient have both developed an addiction to morphine due to their injuries sustained during the war: the English patient's burns and Caravaggio's missing thumbs. However, this drug becomes more than just a painkiller for both men. The drug can also dull their perception of reality and the emotional pain that comes with the tragedies they have both suffered during the war. The English patient uses the morphine not only for his pain, but to help him reveal the truth of his identity to Caravaggio and to accept his role in the death of his lover,

Katharine. Caravaggio uses the drug to help him dull the pain of watching Hana develop a relationship with Kip and to dull the memory of his torture during the war.

Another addiction in this novel has to do with Hana's need to care for men. Hana appears to have been close to her father and his death has caused her a great deal of guilt. Hana feels guilty that she assisted at the death beds of more than a hundred soldiers, but she was not there when her own father died. Not only this, but Hana has had an abortion and feels as though she has killed her own child. This guilt causes Hana to need to help other people, especially the English patient with whom she has a shared affection, perhaps using him as a sort of surrogate father to help him die as she could not her own father. Caravaggio mistakenly believes Hana has remained with the English patient out of love for him, but in truth, Hana is paying a sort of penance by remaining alone to care for her patient.

Another addiction is Kip's obsession with diffusing bombs. Kip has lost touch with the world, unable to trust the people around him for fear they will leave him or die as Lord Suffolk did. Kip buries himself in his work, tempting fate and coming close to death on a daily basis in order to avoid emotional connections that could possibly cause him heartache in the end. However, when Hana insists on remaining close to him during one particularly tricky bomb dismantling, Kip begins to see the people around him as human beings he can no longer ignore. With Hana's affections, Kip slowly comes out of his self-imposed solitude and begins to reach out to the other occupants of the villa.

Companionship

Companionship is important to this novel because it is the one thing all the main characters want to avoid and the one thing they come to rely on. Hana has remained in the villa alone with her patient not only to care for a dying man, but to remove herself from the terror of the war and the emotional risks of being so near other people. Caravaggio has come to the villa not only to be close to a young woman from his past, but to hide from the terrible things that have happened to him, from the government he feels let him down, and the world that has become a hostile place. Kip has come in order to rid the villa of the mines left behind by the Germans, but also to hide from a world he finds hostile. Finally, the English patient, too, is hiding from the world as he has chosen to pretend that he does not know who he is.

These four come together in one household, each seeking solitude and instead finding a kindred spirit in the others. Hana not only finds relief from her guilt in her father's death by treating the English patient, but also finds intimacy with Kip in a relationship that helps bring both of them out of their shells and prepares them to return to the real world and the ability to live the rest of their lives in a somewhat normal fashion. Caravaggio has found companionship in the English patient, using him at first to learn his true identity in order to protect Hana, but quickly finding a kindred spirit within the burned body. The English patient finds compassion, not only in Hana, but in Caravaggio too, a man who understands what is like to have loved and lost, to have done terrible things for the right reasons. These four characters have come together to hide from the

world and found within each other the strength to not only face the world, but to heal old wounds.

Style

Setting

The novel takes place during World War II. The timing of the novel is integral to several of the themes it explores, including the role of nationhood in the identity of the individual, and the illusion of the honor of war.

Setting the novel during World War II also gives Ondaatje a backdrop through which to examine the effect of the colonialism of Britain on the world policies of the United States in later years: World War II marked the end of Britain's powerful colonial era, and the rise of the United States as the new world power. The emergence of the United States as the world power is metaphorically represented, in the novel, by the bombing of Hiroshima. Through the character of Kip, Ondaatje shows how the American rationale to bomb Japan with the atomic bomb is directly related to the racist colonialist philosophy of Western superiority that especially characterized the British Empire's rule over its non-Western colonies.

The large part of the action of the novel takes place in both an abandoned Italian villa, where the lives of the four main characters converge, and in the North African deserts prior to the start of World War II. The abandoned villa is a ruin, seemingly frozen in time. The paintings of a garden on the walls of the patient's room seem to blur the boundaries of internal and external physical space within the villa: this, combined with its removal from time, create an idealized space for the four main characters to attempt to remove themselves from the reality of the war and the politics of nations that surround them. The □boundary-lessness□ and timelessness of the villa is also echoed in the desert: the patient and the other members of the Geographical Society find sanctuary in the desert from the political conflicts of their individual nations, as well as a freedom from the labels of their nationalities. However, both of these sanctuaries prove unable to withstand the greater machinations of the politics of nations; eventually, the war encroaches upon both sanctuaries, forcing the inhabitants to either choose sides, or to eventually die. Through the portrayal of the powerlessness of these sanctuaries against the war, Ondaatje seems to show the powerlessness of the individual against the greater political movements of nations.

Collage

The English Patient employs a narrative structure that is not, like the majority of novels, based on the chronological order of the events around which its story is built, but is rather structured like a collage. It is constructed largely of the recollection or retelling of numerous, non-sequential memories of each of the four main characters. This collage of recollections is interspersed between the main action of the story, which includes both the love story between Hana and Kip, and the uncovering of the patient's true identity by

Caravaggio. Using this collaged and multi-voiced structure allows Ondaatje to do a number of different things.

By providing a collage of episodes, rather than being tied to a strict chronological structure, Ondaatje is able to reveal each of the character's private memories, most specifically those memories that they would not share with anyone else. For example, Kip's friendship with Lord Suffolk and Miss Morden is revealed only through the flashback of his memories. The personal effect of anguish is a major theme of the novel, and through revelation of each of the characters' most private memories, Ondaatje not only provides vital background information for each character but is able to specifically explore the source of each character's most private grief, as well as how they are either able or unable to come to terms with it.

The collage of memories, all told from the point of view of each specific character, also provides the novel with a number of varied points of view. For example, because Ondaatje□having abandoned chronology in the structuring of this novel□is not constricted by time, he is able to include the voice of a dead character□that of Katharine. Her perspective, given in the chapter □Katharine,□ on the stormy relationship she has with the patient, provides an intimate portrait of the character of the patient that would otherwise not be revealed.

The non-linear and multi-voiced, collage-like narrative structure of the novel is echoed by the patient's copy of Herodotus's *The Histories*, into which the patient has pasted his own personal writings and observances, as well as clippings from other books and magazines. Like the collage the patient has created with the histories by interspersing personal anecdotes and the writings of others between the pages of the story that Herodotus tells, Ondaatje has created a collage of multi-voiced narrations and experiences. This non-linear and multi-voiced, collage-like narrative structure, then, becomes more than a narrative device. It represents an alternative to the way that history itself□also traditionally recorded in a strictly chronological manner□can be written, providing a framework for a form of written history that takes into account more than one perspective.

Point of View

The point of view of this novel is dramatic third person. The point of view is limited because the narrator rarely reports on the emotions of the characters, only reporting their actions and limited amounts of their thoughts throughout the novel, as though the narrator is reporting actions and thoughts that have been told to him at a later time. This novel also contains examples of an authorial voice in which the writer himself openly addresses the reader as the narrator, speaking in the first person point of view while analyzing or commenting on certain events or characters.

This point of view makes the novel somewhat more difficult to read because the novel lacks the intimacy most modern readers have come to expect in novels of this type. The novel never moves deep into the lives of the characters, often leaving out important

details about their lives and their pasts, keeping an emotional distance between the reader and the characters. Most modern novels delve deeply into the physical and emotional pasts of the characters, creating such an intricate past for these characters that the reader cannot help but relate to them long before the conflict of the novel's plot begins to affect either reader or character. However, this novel keeps an emotional distance, introducing a circumstance and brief outline of how these characters have found themselves in this circumstance without creating the emotional bond between reader and characters. Although most likely intentional, this style of writing leaves the reader curious how the characters found themselves in their respective situations and what happened to them afterward.

Setting

There are two major settings within this novel. The novel takes place in the final months of World War II, 1945, in Italy. The first major setting of the novel is a damaged villa in Tuscany, the Villa San Girolamo, which was at one time a field hospital for allied troops and has become home to Hana, a nurse, and her English patient. This villa is so damaged from the war that many of the rooms are missing whole walls and roof sections. There are mines in the library and throughout the garden. However, the villa is secluded from the rest of the world, surrounded by large gardens and orchards. This setting is important because it is symbolic of the isolation the four people living within the walls of this villa seek at this terrible time in their lives. Each is struggling with the affects of war and the loss of someone they loved dearly. These four live in solitude among the walls of this villa, slowly regaining the strength required to return to the real world, almost like a damaged home that has been reconstructed.

The second major setting is the deserts of Africa. The English patient was an explorer who spent his adult life mapping the deserts. It is during these explorations that the English patient falls in love with Katharine, a woman married to a British Intelligence officer who has been assigned to the English patient due to the possibility that he is a spy for Germany. It is in this desert that the English patient falls in love, where he losses the woman he loves, and where he is severely burned and nearly dies himself. After crashing his plane and being burned over the majority of his body, the English patient strips himself of all identifying material as though he has decided he does not want to be himself anymore in punishment for not having been able to save his lover. It is also in this desert that the English patient betrays England and helps the German's move one of their spies through the desert. Perhaps this, too, is the reason the English patient hides his identity. The importance of this setting is the volatile and dangerous nature of the desert, not unlike the life the English patient has lived and the nature of his relationship with Katharine.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is precise English that at times is formal and clearly from the mind of a well educated person. When the language drifts into a more formal type of

word usage, it is normally when the English patient is speaking, giving the reader a clue as to his identity by the depth of his education and knowledge. This language is meant to prepare the reader for the knowledge that this patient is of sophisticated heritage with all the advantages his background allows him. The novel is also filled with foreign names and words that might not be familiar to the reader. These words are used to discuss locations in Africa, to describe Kip's heritage and job within the military, and to again show the depth of education of these characters.

The language of this novel works because it gives the novel a literary feel, as though the novel were more of a display of graceful prose than a novel with a tight plot. While the novel does develop an interesting and well-rounded plot, the language itself is the showcase, as the prose is intricate and well-developed. However, this choice of language can make the novel difficult to read for some readers who prefer a more simple approach to language, the type of reader who prefers not to consult a dictionary while reading a novel. At times the more formal language can be a barrier to the reader's understanding of the plot, but at other times the formal language can help the reader discover secrets hidden within the plot, such as the English patient's true identity. It is a complex novel and the language chosen to tell the story is equally complex.

Structure

The novel is written in ten chapters, with each chapter named for a person, place, or action that will take place within the chapter. The chapters tend to be quite long in page count, but they are each broken into multiple sections, dividing the action into small pieces. The chapters tend to cover scenes from several different points of view, moving from one person to the next with nothing but a break between paragraphs to warn the reader of the change. Most scenes are also broken into small parts, divided by narration that moves the story in another direction or elaborates on something that has been touched on lightly in previous scenes, using this method to develop the sense that it is all simply a dream. Each section can also move either into the present or into the past.

There are several main plots within the novel. First is the relationship between Hana and the three men who have come to stay with her at the villa: the English patient, Caravaggio, and Kip. Another plot is Caravaggio's attempts to discover the truth of the English patient's identity. The third is Kip's past and his future, as well as his love affair with Hana. Each story line moves in and out of the others, weaving an untidy story that is dropped and picked up at odd points. Each plot is eventually resolved, although not all in an entirely satisfying manner. The English patient reveals his identity to Caravaggio, but the reader never learns of his eventual fate, although his death has been predicted throughout the novel. Caravaggio goes back to his thieving ways, but it is never revealed where he goes after Kip leaves the villa. Finally, it is implied that Hana will return to Canada and that she will spend the rest of her life thinking and wondering what has happened to Kip, but no more information than that is ever revealed.

Historical Context

The English Patient is set largely in Italy at the end of World War II and features characters from Africa, Europe, Canada, and India. The war is the direct cause of the convergence of the main characters□Kip, Hana, Caravaggio, and the patient himself□at a bombed-out villa in Italy, several months before the war's end. The international nature of the relationships between the characters, and the effect of the war on the characters as individuals and in their relationships to each other, is integral to the development of the novel, particularly the theaters in which the war was played out, and the bombing of Hiroshima that punctuated the war's end.

World War II was a direct result of the failure of the outcome of World War I to provide a satisfactory environment for peace: Germany, who was the loser of World War I, was left in complete economic turmoil, and the terms of the Treaty of Versailles□the treaty that marked the end of World War I□left the country with little recourse for reconstruction or growth; and both Italy and Japan, who were victors of World War I, were highly dissatisfied with the spoils of war they were awarded. Eventually, these three countries formed the Axis powers that faced off with France, Great Britain, the USSR, and the United States, which formed the Allied powers in World War II.

Before the commencement of World War II, both Italy and Germany adopted a totalitarian form of government known as fascism, militaristic in structure and centered on a dictator. The rise of fascism in Germany occurred with the installment of Adolph Hitler as Germany's dictator in 1933, who offered promises to overthrow the Treaty of Versailles and restore German power by annexing its surrounding countries. Earlier in Italy in 1922, Benito Mussolini became that country's fascist dictator. Concurrently, Japan, which had already long established a military government, began the process of invading and taking over China.

In 1938 Hitler began his quest to conquer Europe with the forced annexation of Austria, an event that was backed by Italy and not stopped by France or Great Britain, who were surprised by Germany's show of sudden power. World War II officially began when Germany invaded Poland, a country that had a mutual protection agreement with France. The act of aggression against Poland caused both France and Great Britain to declare war on Germany on September 1, 1939. In the coming years, Germany proceeded to invade much of Europe, including France itself.

The grisly hallmark of Hitler's reign in Germany and his actions in World War II was the mass extermination of Jews and other minority groups in concentration camps, which has come to be known as the Holocaust. His aim was creating what he saw to be a □pure□ German state.

The United States, which had taken an isolationist stance and was reluctant to become involved in another large-scale conflict in Europe, managed to stay out of the war until December 7, 1941, when the Japanese launched an attack on the military base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, provoked by the United States' freezing of Japanese assets that

threatened to cripple that country's economy. The United States entered into a war with fronts both in Europe and in the Pacific Ocean.

The involvement of Great Britain in the war brought in people to the war in Europe from its commonwealth territories and its colonies all over the globe, including Canada□an independent state that nevertheless has strong ties to Great Britain□and India, which was still under British colonial control. The physical theater of war also extended outside of Europe to the colonies of France and Great Britain in Africa, as seen in the novel. In *The English Patient*, the war was one that brought many people from all over the globe to fight to defend lands they had never seen, and the sense of disconnectedness brought on not only by the act of war, but of fighting in a foreign land, is a major theme of the novel. Likewise, especially for India, Indians were at once fighting to defend the British Empire, while at home a burgeoning independence movement was taking hold□only a short 2 years after the end of WWII would India force Britain to give it independence, in 1947. The tension between Great Britain's control over India, its movement towards independence, and the complex results of the racism that characterized the imperialist attitude of the English towards the native people of the Indian subcontinent whom they governed, is especially played out in the character of Kip and his own attitude towards the West, which profoundly changes by the end of the novel.

Although in the early years of the war the triumph of the Axis powers seemed imminent, by 1941, with the involvement of the United States, the tide had begun to turn in favor of the Allies, with the British, Canadians, and Americans taking Italy in the summer of 1943. On June 6, 1944, which is known as D-Day, Allies surprised the Germans and took the beaches of Normandy, finally beginning the reclamation of France; the Allies succeeded in breaching the German border in the Spring of 1945. May 8, 1945, known as V-E Day, Germany officially surrendered.

The atomic bomb was dropped by the Americans on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and August 9, 1945, respectively, killing an estimated 240,000 people. Japan formally surrendered on September 2, 1945.

World War II was especially characterized by the prominence of new and more lethal technology, most notably the atomic bomb. In terms of loss of life and destruction of property, World War II is the most destructive in history. It was the framework for the use of the most horrific weapon that humankind had ever created; it was the theater of the gruesome genocide of the Jews by the German Nazis. It was characterized by air raids that took the lives of many civilians. It left the once powerful British Empire and the overall economy of Europe in shambles, providing a power gap into which the United States and the USSR became the new superpowers, touching off a new era: the cold war between the capitalist democracy of the US, and the communist USSR.

Critical Overview

Although Michael Ondaatje had published several collections of poetry and novels prior to *The English Patient*, it is this novel that propelled him into worldwide fame as a writer. *The English Patient* was a bestseller in 1992, the year that it was published and received highly favorable reviews in the major North American newspapers. He was awarded the Booker Prize in 1992, sharing this prize for Best Novel with Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger*. Ondaatje was the first Canadian to be awarded this prize.

Ondaatje was previously known as a poet, and the critics picked up on the influence of poetry on the narrative style of *The English Patient*. A review in *MacLean* found the poetic influence a strength of the novel. John Bemrose wrote:

Michael Ondaatje ... who began his writing career as a poet, has managed to recast the traditional novel in his own peculiar way, so that the measured dance of his poetic rhythms and images leads the reader ever deeper into a story. His new novel, *The English Patient*, is one of the finest Canadian novels ever written ... Ondaatje has somehow found a way to give an abstract narrative the illusion of physical presence. That accomplishment also depends on his masterly command of rhythm.

While the novel received almost entirely highly favorable review by the general readership, it has also held its own as a subject for critical literary interpretation during the 13 years it has been in publication, providing in its unconventional construction a rich critical source for narrative studies, and in its subject matter, a source for post-colonial literary studies, among other subjects.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Fernando is a writer and editor living in Seattle, Washington. In this essay, Fernando examines how the narrative structure of The English Patient *serves as a criticism of traditional historiography.*

In *The English Patient*, the title character is a nameless, severely burned man cared for by a young nurse at the end of World War II. His only possession is a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus, into which he has pasted his own writings as well as clippings from other books, creating a collage of knowledge, observations, and unrelated events.

As the patient discusses his love of *The Histories* with Hana, his nurse, he says of Herodotus:

I see him more as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage. □This history of mine,□ Herodotus says, □has from the beginning sought out the supplementary to the main argument.□ What you find in him are cul-de-sacs within the sweep of history.

Like the patient's personal version of *The Histories*, Ondaatje's novel is a collage; its narrative structure is not based on chronological events but is constructed largely of numerous non-sequential memories and experiences of the four main characters. This non-linear narrative structure, however, is more than a narrative device. It is through this use of non-linear narration that Ondaatje not only tells the personal stories of the four main characters of the novel, but deconstructs the way history itself is recorded, narrated, and understood.

The □cul-de-sacs□ and □the supplementary to the main argument□ that so interest the patient in the quote given above are the occurrences and points of view that existed and do exist outside of the chronology of a history (what the patient calls □the main argument.□) This idea is illuminated by Amy Novak's essay on the narrative structure of *The English Patient*, in which she discusses the traditional process by which history is written□that is, the act of historiography. She summarizes the philosopher Hegel's influential theory of historiography thus:

According to a received Hegelianism, which still informs conventional thinking about the past, History is constructed as a linear movement, through erasure, toward an already predetermined meaning.... In order to ensure this coherency of this totality, contradictory moments that do not record the present's coming to Being are erased or expelled from signification.

In other words, the conventional practice of historiography is the telling of history chronologically, that □linear movement□ to which Novak refers. That chronology, by its very nature as a linear progression, is therefore singular in its point of view not only of the past, but of the state of the present to which the historical narrative is pointing. The

singularity of the point of view of a chronologically written history, in order to remain coherent, eliminates any occurrence or interpretation that not only does not contribute to a forward-moving chronology, but offers a contradiction to that singular, linear point of view. These □erasures□ are indeed the supplementary, the □cul-de-sacs□ to which the patient refers in the quote above.

History looms large in *The English Patient*; the novel takes place during World War II, which is, arguably, the event given the most significance in the commonly known historiography of the twentieth century. But the most familiar stories and people named in the commonly held historiography are strangely absent from this novel. Instead, it seems that Ondaatje seeks to tell what can be called a □supplemental□ history of World War II, one that focuses on the private stories of four characters profoundly affected by the war, on those types of stories that would be cast aside as Novak's erasures. Ondaatje's abandonment of the mainstream history is not merely evident in the subject of his novel, but is manifested in the very structure of the novel itself. Like the traditional historiography that Novak discusses above, the traditional structure of a novel□a chronological plot with a beginning, middle, and end□is linear. But Ondaatje wrote *The English Patient* not as a linear, chronological story. It is built from individual scenes, collaged in a non-sequential order, from both the main characters' respective pasts and their present lives together at the Italian villa.

This can be seen in, for example, the progression of Chapter 8, □The Holy Forest.□ This chapter, a non-linear collection of stories, abandons chronology in its construction and therefore does not give the reader a sense of the movement of time, either forward or backward. These self-contained accounts include: the careful delivery of a ladybug to the patient from Kip; a discussion among the characters of Indian sarongs; Hana recording her thoughts in a book; an extended section detailing a single bomb disposal carried out by Kip and his assistant sapper Hardy, which delves not only into Kip's state of mind while defusing a bomb, but provides intricate specifics of the technicalities of his job; Kip and Hana washing their hair; almost six pages of Kip, Caravaggio, and Hana playing hide-and-go-seek in the darkened villa; Hana and Kip laying in his tent, recalling his childhood.

Each of these small episodes is what the patient referred to as the □cul-de-sacs,□ the □supplements□ of history. They do not contribute to the forward movement of chronologically ordered historiography, but are rather encapsulated in themselves. However, the fact that these stories do not denote a forward motion in time does not mean at all that they do not develop. Rather, Ondaatje has skillfully woven together these seemingly self-contained episodes into a composite, like a quilt made of many pieces. The reader comes away from Chapter 8 with a clear sense of the intimacy developed between the characters during their days together at the villa, with a sense of the refuge from the war they take in each other, and the way that their lives are constantly subject to the strong undercurrent of the threat of sudden death during wartime. With the wartime experiences of the four characters□noticeably away from the battlefield and away from the more familiar theaters of World War II□Ondaatje does succeed in creating a narrative that veers completely away from the over-arching action of the war.

The abandonment of chronology not only allows for the inclusion of the supplementary stories (additional stories deemed unnecessary to the linear plot), but it also allows for the inclusion of points of view that are not, as Novak noted, allowable within the constraints of chronology. Ondaatje is able, because he is not constrained by the element of time, to provide the point of view of a character who is dead. Chapter 9: □Katharine□ is told in the third-person voice but from the specific point of view of Katharine Clifton, the patient's dead lover.

Throughout the novel, the reader is given clues to the patient's past through his fragmentary, hallucinatory memories, and slowly the reader learns the tragic story of his affair with Katharine Clifton, and her subsequent death. However, by including a chapter told from the point of view of Katharine, the reader is given a perspective on the affair that would never have surfaced strictly from the patient's own recollections and interpretations. Through this chapter, readers learn that about his self-righteous talks, his pompous insistence on refusing to be beholden to their relationship, her feeling of extreme guilt for being unfaithful to her husband. With such details that only Katharine's point of view could provide, this chapter not only provides additional details about the nature of the affair that is at the heart of the mystery of this novel, but also provides a perspective on the patient that further develops his character.

This inclusion of Katharine's point of view gives voice to a character who would otherwise, within the constraints of a strict, forward-marching chronology, be silent. She is a character who is already dead by the time the novel's present time commences. In fact, even in the writing of a linear historiography, the biggest flaw is the very fact that, by its nature, it leaves existing but competing points of view out of the narrative, thereby rendering these points of view silent. Novak relates that the philosopher Ernesto Laclau goes so far as to call traditional history an □ideological fantasy□ that □[conceals] the fundamental split or antagonism around which the social field is structured.□ The linearity of history is inaccurate because it does not allow for the natural fact of multiple, and opposing, points of view in society.

Ondaatje's nonlinear narrative construction goes farther than simply being an alternative narrative device. It becomes a physical criticism of the chronological writing of history that is inaccurate and incomplete in that it omits and erases. That the novel is a critique of the writing of history is strongly evident not just in its alternative structure, but in its content□in particular, at the climax of the novel, when Kip discovers that the United States has dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Kip, an Indian Sikh and a loyal member of the British army, is horrified, enraged, and disillusioned by the bombing of Hiroshima's civilians by the United States, an act he sees as motivated by a racist sense of superiority of what he terms the □white nations□ over the □brown nations.□ But what is interesting about this scene in the novel is that Kip can hear, over the radio, the immediate construction of a narrative that excuses this blatant act of violence. He says to his friends: □I'll leave you the radio to swallow your history lesson ... All those speeches of civilization from kings and queen and presidents ... Listen to the radio and smell the celebration in it.□

Two opposing points of view are portrayed in this scene: Kip's anger at the racist motivation and violence of the atomic bombing, and, represented by the radio broadcast's □celebration,□ the immediate interpretation by the Allied forces of the bombing of Japanese civilians as a just measure to bring an end to the war. This broadcast represents the creation of a historiography to describe the bombing as it is happening. By the end of the war, the United States will emerge as the victor and, therefore, will be the dominant interpreter of history. Kip's opposing point of view, representing the members of □brown nations□ facing the exploitation of the more powerful West, will become one of the erasures, a valid voice rendered silent by the chronological writing of history.

The bombing of Hiroshima represents a turning point for Kip's character, and therefore a climax in the novel: it is the occurrence that propels him to leave the villa, leave the British army, and even to leave Hana. As a climactic point in the novel, Kip's interpretation of Hiroshima seems to be the point to which the novel was leading□not only in its development of characters and plot, but in its very structure. For Ondaatje, through the character of Kip, is offering a sharp criticism not only of the bombing of Hiroshima, but of the very historiography that excuses the bombing and, by its exclusive nature, would render any opposing viewpoint silent and, therefore, written out of existence. This criticism extends not only through the characterization and actions of Kip, but through the very structure of the novel itself. In its success in creating a non-linear narrative made from what the patient terms □cul-de-sacs□ and what Novak terms the □erasures□ of history, Ondaatje's novel calls for no less than a new paradigm of historiography, away from the chronological and therefore exclusive, and towards a model that seeks to include opposing interpretations and myriad voices.

Source: Tamara Fernando, Critical Essay on *The English Patient*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Quotes

"This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world." Chapter 1, The Villa, pg. 7

"That was how he felt safest. Revealing nothing. Whether they came at him with tenderness or subterfuge or knives." Chapter 2, In Near Ruins, pg. 27

"Moments before sleep are when she feels most alive, leaping across fragments of the day, bringing each moment into the bed with her like a child with schoolbooks and pencils."

Chapter 2, In Near Ruins, pg. 35

"But now there is hardly a world around them and they are forced back on themselves."

Chapter 2, In Near Ruins, pg. 40

"He had approached the villa on that night of the storm not out of curiosity about the music but because of a danger to the piano player. The retreating army often left pencil mines within musical instruments." Chapter 3, Sometime a Fire, pg. 75

"'I thought I was going to die. I wanted to die. And I thought if I was going to die I would die with you. Someone like you, young as I am, I saw so many dying near me in the last year. I didn't feel scared. I certainly wasn't brave just now." Chapter 3, Sometime a Fire, pg. 103

"Now if he moves towards her she will stare him out, will treat him to a similar silence. Let him guess, make a move. She has been approached before by soldiers."

Chapter 3, Sometime a Fire, pg. 115

"At the hotel he was excessively polite. When he behaved this way she liked him even less; they all had to pretend this pose was courtesy, graciousness. It reminded her of a dog in clothes."

Chapter 5, Katharine, pg. 151

"How does this happen? To fall in love and be disassembled." Chapter 5, Katherine, pg. 158

"Revealing his past or qualities of his character would have been too loud a gesture. Just as he could never turn and inquire of her what deepest motive caused this relationship."

Chapter 7, In Situ, pg. 197

"I carried Katharine Clifton into the desert, where there is the communal book of moonlight. We were among the rumour of wells. In the palace of winds."

Chapter 9, The Cave of Swimmers, pg. 261

"Now there are these urges to talk with her during a meal and return to that stage they were most intimate at in the tent or in the English patient's room, both of which contained the turbulent river of space between them. Recalling the time, he is just as fascinated at himself there as he is with her, boyish and earnest, his lithe arm moving across the air towards the girl he has fallen in love with." Chapter 10, August, pg. 301

Adaptations

One section of the book, the "In Situ" chapter, appeared in slightly different form in The New Yorker, August 1992, as a short story entitled "Drawn by Desire."

There it functions as a complete tale in itself; in the novel it serves as a background sketch for Kip's role in the war.

The English Patient was made into a critically acclaimed movie in 1996. Produced by Saul Zaentz (One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest) and written and directed by Anthony Minghella, an English playwright and film maker, it won academy awards for best picture and best director.

The movie starred Richard Finnes (The English Patient), Juliette Binoche (Hana), William Depo (Caravaggio), Navreen Andrews (Kip), Kristen Scott-Thomas (Katherine), Julian Wodam (Maddox), and Colin Firth (Geoffrey). Ondaatje himself was pleased with the production, saying that he easily recognized his characters in the screen version. The movie version places greater emphasis than the book on the roles of Katherine and Maddox. Minghella does an effective job of portraying the power, passion and consequences of the burned patient's love.

Topics for Further Study

The film version of *The English Patient* has several differences from the original novel. Watch the film after reading the novel. Compare and contrast the differences in the plot and the characters. Why do you think these changes were made and how do they change the overall story? Take a chapter or event from the book that was not in the film, and write a scene for it. How would you have fit this scene into the film?

At the end of the novel, Hana writes a letter to her stepmother, Clara, and discusses in detail the death of her father, Patrick. This letter signifies an emotional healing on Clara's part because she had previously been unwilling to acknowledge his death. Kip and Caravaggio, also, have been emotionally wounded by the events of the war. Do you think that, like Hana, either of them achieved a sense of healing by the end of the book? Write a letter, in the voice of either Caravaggio or Kip, that reflects what you believe their state of mind is by the end of the novel.

Kip's brother is jailed in India for refusing to join the British army. At this time, India is a colony of Great Britain. India would gain independence only two years after the end of WWII, in 1947. Kip's brother is a protestor against the British presence in India. Write a research report on the independence movement in India. Who were the key figures? How is the British influence still seen in India today? What has been the impact of Indian culture on the British?

The English Patient is actually a sequel to an earlier novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*, which takes place in Canada and includes the characters of Hana and Caravaggio. Read *In the Skin of a Lion*. What are the thematic elements in the earlier novel that carry over to *The English Patient*? How do you feel Hana and Caravaggio have changed as characters? Based on your reading of *In the Skin of a Lion*, how do you think their lives would have played out if they had never gone off to war?

The bombing of Hiroshima by the United States is, to Kip, an unforgivable act of violence that he believes is fueled by racism. Kip is also angry over the way that he hears the bombing reported over the radio. Research news clippings on the bombing of Hiroshima, from the time of the bombing to the present time. How is the bombing reported? What is the tone? Is the bombing condoned? Is there ever a sense of injustice or wrongdoing that would reflect Kip's feeling? See if you can find news sources from different countries regarding the bombing. How have different cultures responded to the bombings? What is the lasting impact on those cultures today, specifically in Japan?

What Do I Read Next?

In the Skin of a Lion (1987) is the prequel novel to Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. Set in Canada between the World Wars, the novel features the characters Caravaggio and Hana, who are important figures in *The English Patient*, but focuses mainly on Hana's father Patrick. The novel shares some of its major themes with *The English Patient*, including the examination of personal grief and anguish.

Like *The English Patient*, Ondaatje's novel *Coming through Slaughter* does not stick to a chronological narrative but rather pieces together the life of jazz legend Buddy Bolden through a collage of imagery and anecdotes. It was first published in 1976.

Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* (2000) is set in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje's native country. The novel is about the work of a forensics specialist sent by the United Nations to investigate the brutal civil war that tore the island nation apart for the better part of the latter twentieth century.

Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family* (1982) is an account of two trips he took to his native country of Sri Lanka and, through the stories he learned during these trips, is an account of his family's history and his own childhood.

Ondaatje has published several collections of poetry since the late 1960s. *The Cinnamon Peeler: Selected Poems* (1989) is a collection of previously published poems.

The God of Small Things (1997), the 1998 Booker Prize-winning novel by Indian writer Arundhati Roy, examines both personal grief and loss, as well as the inescapable power of government, politics, and society over the individual. The novel takes place in mid-twentieth century Southern India during a time of political unrest. Told through the eyes of two children, it portrays the taboos of caste and sexuality that pervaded their society.

Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul's novel *The Mimic Men* (1967), which features a character of Indian descent who lives in the British Caribbean, examines, through the dysfunctional and globe-trotting life of the main character, issues of identity pertinent to a Third World shaped by British colonialism.

For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940), one of Ernest Hemingway's best-known novels, is set during the civil war in Spain. It is a tale of camaraderie in wartime that ultimately portrays war as futile and destructive, rather than honorable and just.

Key Questions

Set against the larger context of a world war, The English Patient focuses closely on the lives and characters of only three men and a woman. A fruitful topic for discussion is how these two emphases work together, how the circumstances of war help define these four individuals and how their actions and interaction help convey a sense of the scope and the human cost of war. The chapter "In Situ" is an example of how well Ondaatje is able to present both at once. An account of Kip's early training as a sapper under the guidance of Lord Suffolk, an eccentric English aristocrat, the chapter describes the intricate nature of land mines and the dangers involved in defusing them. It also focuses on the human aspect. Lord Suffolk tells Kip that bomb disposal depends on character, on understanding your opponent: "You must consider the character of your enemy.

This is true in bomb disposal. It is two handed bridge. You have one enemy.

You have no partner. Sometimes for my exam I make [potential sappers] play bridge. People think that a bomb is a mechanical object, a mechanical enemy.

But you must consider that somebody made it." And we learn a lot about Kip's character as we watch him go about defusing the mines both in England and Italy.

Our impression and understanding of the four protagonists are formed also by the author's skillful weaving of past and present into a unified tapestry. Any indepth discussion of this novel must examine how the two are related, how one gives meaning to the other. Such a discussion will inevitably give rise to questions of style, of how Ondaatje is able to stretch traditional approaches to characterization and plot to create a powerful portrayal and critique of society and individual actions and motives.

1. How do the constant shifts in time, place and point of view affect—or create—the overall story and character development? Do they create a tension or dissonance which becomes part of the story itself? Is it effective?

2. How do form and content, style and meaning, work together to create the story we have? Would it be a different tale if told in a different manner? What if we were given the story from an omniscient point of view only or from the perspective of a single character?

3. What is the artistic advantage of centering the story around a mysterious patient without a specific identity? How is each of the other characters defined by their relationship with the English patient?

4. How does war blur the sharp line between good and bad and challenge traditional views of national loyalty? Why is Caravaggio, a former thief, recruited by Allied Intelligence? Why does Hana ask Caravaggio to teach her to steal?

5. What role does national identity play in this drama? Why does the English patient refer to Kip and himself as "international bastards"? Why does Kip leave the war zone and return to India after the bombing of Japan?

Literary Precedents

In his depiction of the human cost of modern warfare, Ondaatje has a precedent in Ernest Hemingway and, to a much lesser degree, Stephen Crane, who is mentioned in the book. There is also an echo of Hemingway and the modernists in the characters' disillusionment at the end of the war.

The importance and power of the past have been movingly explored in the works of William Faulkner. Sudden shifts in time and point-of-view, which Ondaatje uses quite effectively, can be found also in Faulkner's novels and short fiction.

Three of the great "desert" novels that bear on The English Patient are T. E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom (1935; popularized as Lawrence of Arabia), Paul Bowles's The Sheltering Sky (1949), and Lawrence Durrell's The Alexandria Quartet (1957-1960; see separate entry).

To find another book with the deft poetic imagery of The English Patient we would have to go back to F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925; see separate entry). There are several other interesting similarities between these two books, in addition to their lush, lean prose, including mysterious identity, forbidden love, and a focus on four or five main characters who are defined by their reactions to each other. Ondaatje may have taken a lesson in plot development or at least character revelation from Fitzgerald's book. In both books we are introduced to the protagonists, watch them interact and only slowly learn their pasts and possible motivations. Much of what we learn about Gatsby, including his early mentor, his first love and his metamorphosis from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby, we learn near the novel's end. Fitzgerald is brilliant in his ability to keep our suspense ever present and yet at arm's length, often distracting us with much more recent events. Ondaatje, too, skillfully and ever-so-slowly unveils the story behind the story, and consequently is able to tell us two stories, that of the past and that of the present, at the same time.

Another element of Ondaatje's evocative style is his use of poetic language. His study and practice of poetry are apparent on every page. Ondaatje's success in creating a beautiful and original work of art was recognized when he was awarded the Booker Prize for fiction in 1992.

Further Study

Herodotus, *The Histories*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

In *The English Patient*, the title character's only possession is a copy of *The Histories* by Herodotus. Herodotus, who lived during the 5th century b.c., is widely regarded as the father of the study of history. *The Histories* records the customs and practices of peoples of what is today known as the Middle East; the book also covers various wars between the Greeks and Persians.

Keegan, John, *The Second World War*, Penguin Books, 1990.

A chronology of World War II, this one-volume history also includes chapters specifically devoted to the details of such components as weapons production and espionage.

Kipling, Rudyard, *Kim*, W.W. Norton, 2002.

First published in 1901, *Kim* is the British author Rudyard Kipling's masterpiece novel. Set in British colonial India, it is the story of an Indian-born British boy who lives among the native people of India and becomes a follower of a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Ondaatje makes numerous references directly to this novel in *The English Patient*.

Said, Edward, *The Edward Said Reader*, edited by Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, Vintage Books, 2000.

Edward Said was one of the most influential figures in the field of post-colonial studies, especially pioneering the study of the effect of colonialism on the reading and writing of literature. *The English Patient*, especially through the character of Kip, broaches many of the themes of identity that post-colonial studies examine: this collection is a worthy introduction to Said's works on the subject.

Related Titles

The most significant related title is In the Skin of the Lion, an earlier Ondaatje novel (1995) that features some of the same characters as The English Patient. The setting is during Hana's childhood in Toronto. Hana, her father, and Caravaggio are an integral part of that tale.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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