

# The english patient

[Environment](#), [Nature](#)



Max Cembalest SYA English, 6th Period March 7th, 2013 The Villa is Alive, But the Sand is Forever Barren. Lifeless. Considered one of the most hostile environments on the planet, the Sahara Desert takes away all meaning and identity and covers it with sand. Amal, the so-called English Patient and one of the central characters of our story, thrusts himself into this empty land to dispose of the idea of nations. In this way the desert is an escape; a common void for those who wish to cede into the past rather than survive in the present. Lush. Alive.

Arguably the nation with the richest history in the world, the Italian countryside encompasses a feeling of togetherness that brings our four main characters together. The villa they live in recovering from the atrocities of world war two not only gives them space to heal, but also itself exhibits the characteristics of healing through nature. In this way the villa exists among our four protagonists, and is one of the fragmented victims of war along with them. Michael Ondaatje, author of our novel *The English Patient*, focuses most of our front story in the Italian villa.

Holes line the inner and outer walls, creating voids in the frescoes of outdoor landscapes. At first glance, war has reduced it to a fraction of its former grace and beauty. " The Villa San Girolamo, built to protect inhabitants from the flesh of the devil, had the look of a besieged fortress, the limbs of most of the statues blown off during the first days of shelling. " But as is a representative of a war victim healing with time, we see how nature slowly replaces the man made structures, eventually causing the villa to fade into the land. There seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the

earth. To Hana the wild gardens were further rooms... In spite of the burned earth, in spite of the lack of water. someday there would be a bower of limes, rooms of green light," (p. 45). Ondaatje uses this beautiful image of a broken, fragmented house being consumed and reborn anew to show the process of healing from war. The villa represents the hope Hana sees in the future; that even though everything is here life is burned, broken, and dead, someday she will recover just as the villa has.

Then there is the desert. Despite being just across the Mediterranean, the Sahara Desert could not be more of a different environment than the countryside surrounding the Italian villa. It is arid, harsh, unforgiving. But even with the physical difference between the desert and Italy, the greater contrast lies in the history of each place. Italy, for thousands of years, has been owned and claimed over and over, by the Etruscans, Greeks, Romans, Barbarians, and Italians. But the desert belongs to no one, no single nation.

All boundaries, all sense of difference between people that exists solely because of nations get swept away by oceans of sand. It is this aspect of the desert that draws Amalysy in. As he narrates to Hana, he says, " The desert could not be claimed or owned—it was a piece of cloth carried by winds, never held down by stones, and given a hundred shifting names before Canterbury existed, long before battles and treaties quilted Europe and the East.... All of us, even those with European homes and children in the distance, wished to remove the clothing of our countries.

It was a place of faith. We disappeared into landscape," (p. 147-148). Amalysy praises the desert for being sovereign, just as he himself strives to remain neutral and uninvolved during the chaos of World War II. The desert endures

for centuries unharmed by human squabbling, since it is never contained or 'held down by stones'. Amalsy flees to the desert to escape the ruthlessness of reality and to connect with the past contained in his books. Instead of a place of healing, for Amalsy the desert is a denial of the real world entirely.

He is able to purge himself of his past life and leap into a new world in which the past and the present are no different. He steps in the same sand, traverses the same dune, embraces the very same realm that Herodotus so admired. In this environment, Amalsy and the other explorers can deny the war and remove the notion that one's nation has any significance. The desert is stagnant. Any and all attempts to claim ownership are swiftly swept aside. The endurance represents the foolishness of war, how nothing that happens between nations has any meaning there. But Italy is change. It is life, death, and then rebirth.

Italy is hugely affected by the war, but we see the recovery of its wounds and hope for the future. Each of these settings in *The English Patient* is a way for Ondaatje to communicate to us the drastic toll of war on our characters and the different way each person handles themselves. Hana remains in the thick of the war and is shattered by grief, but come the end of the novel we see the beginning of recovery and the hope for a happier life. Amalsy, however, escapes entirely in the hopes of avoiding the war and the pointless differences among nations. Even up to his death his mind is still among the sand.