

# The english patient, michael ondaatje

Literature



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'The English Patient', by Michael Ondaatje, is a work of historical fiction set primarily in a small villa in the hills near Florence during World War II. The story revolves around a few individuals and reflects upon the metamorphosis of their lives, brought about by the war. It is a novel of revelation and learning, which intersperses the factual and the imaginary into a tale of tragedy and passion. Ondaatje writes his novel of discovery revealing things only briefly, 'like flashes of lightning'.

This metaphorical lightning abounds throughout the novel, lighting up the dark and melancholic landscapes for a very brief period, but long enough to reveal hints of the truth. Surrounding these flashes of lightning is a heavy and dreary darkness in which the characters navigate, trying to learn about themselves and others. It is almost as if the novel is an exploration of the way we understand things and discover the truth. People are always meeting in the dark, and the only way they can know each other is through casual, occasional bumps in that darkness and through brief flashes of light.

The author expresses the themes, symbols, and motifs through flowing transitions moving from present action to flashback, mirroring real action and remembrance in smooth movements of prose. Innovative in narrative structure, he uses the novel to renew themes that have been explored throughout the ages: the concept of nationality and identity, the connection between appearance and reality, and love that transcends place and time. The tone is reflective and poetic, allowing each of the characters memories to be revealed complete with their thoughts and personal connections.

Just as the identity of the protagonist Almasy (the English patient) is gradually discovered as the narrative progresses, so too are the inner selves and spiritual identities of the other characters in the novel. One major theme of 'The English Patient' is the way the war transforms the individuals who are involved in it. All the characters introduced in the opening chapters have been entirely altered by the war. Caravaggio, a former " thief", has lost not only his thumbs (page 57), but also much of his youth and his identity; " she sits across from him... she reminds him of his wife.

Nowadays he doesn't think of his wife... " (page 42). He can no longer steal, nor can he live any kind of happy life. He finds himself envious of those " whole" men he sees, who can live independently without pity (page 62). The English patient has likewise been visibly transformed by the war - his body burnt black, almost beyond recognition. Having literally lost his entire identity, he is alive only to reflect on the life he once had; " He remembers picnics, a woman who kissed parts of his body that now are burned into the colour of aubergine", (page 4).

Hana, too, has been irrevocably altered by her wartime experience. After having a near-breakdown, she stands on the threshold of adulthood, unsure whether to take charge of her life or to hide and look for shelter like a child. She chooses to postpone her decision, and builds a resolution, to nurse and " remain with the one burned man they called 'the English patient'", (page 54). Accordingly, the war has taken a piece of each character's identity, replacing it with a scar that each now bears and discovers from the other.

Symbolically, just as Almasy has mapped the landscape of the 'shifting desert', he tries to map Katharine. Yet he cannot, which makes him so intrigued and want to know about her - the special qualities she possesses, those he is incapable of colonising. An important and recurring symbol in the novel is the Italian villa in which Hana and the English patient reside. The setting of the war torn villa reflects the damage in it's inhabitants lives. Ondaatje writes, " there seemed little demarcation between house and landscape, between damaged building and the burned and shelled remnants of the earth".

Such an organic image is allegorically important to the novel; straddling the line between house and landscape, building and earth, the villa signifies both death and rebirth. War has destroyed the villa, making huge holes in its walls and ceilings. Despite so, nature returns to fill these holes, replacing the absences with life. This image mirrors the spiritual death and rebirth of the villa's inhabitants. Through learning, they revive each other. Most significant is the scene when Caravaggio, " her [Hana's] father's best friend, and an uncle" travels the whole distance to meet her when he hears of her in his distant hospital.

His return to visit her in the Villa inspires her to keep going. His presence not only brings with him the element of a loving and caring uncle, but joyful memories of pre-war life, which revive both Hana and himself. The setting of the 'desert' is too not just a stage for events to take place, but a motif that represents the inner turmoil of the characters. " Its destitution and heart of tumult beneath its calm and parched exterior seems also to burrow itself deep into the natures of its character prisoners".

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Ondaatje's graphical portrayals imply the desert to be the force that tugs and pulls at the characters making them behave in ways that they themselves cannot explain. The historical context of the novel is the occurrence of the Second World War. The war disrupts the lives of all the characters and makes it an obstacle for them to trust each other. Nevertheless, it causes them to learn about each other's past. The incident of the commander severing Caravaggio's thumbs highlights the general fears of being betrayed.

This suspicion is contrasted with the peaceful aura in the monastery where knowledge of each other's experiences forms a trust between them. The union of the spirits bring tranquillity and peace, and a chance to escape from the horrors of the war. When war occurs, taking sides is irrelevant, because war is anarchic. What matters most for the characters is the friendship and bond between them, which is most comforting during such challenging times, hence, Almasy's fascination of Katharine; love and war are both capricious and subjective which no right or wrong can define.

Thus, in 'The English Patient', the war metaphorically wounds both the earth's landscape and every individual physically yet more emotionally. However, it is through hardships like the war that allows the learning and discovery of a character's true self, the experiences that one could never forget, and moulds tensile bonds between comrades that are sincere and everlasting. Besides, it is ironic to note that love that stems during war is factually all-conquering, only due to the hardship and barriers that the individuals overcome together.

Focussing on the character of Kip, he is first introduced only as " the Sikh". He is polite and well-mannered, and has both the skill and character to be an excellent " sapper". A coloured man in a white nation, Kip has grown emotionally detached, aware that people will not always react positively to him. His emotional detachment stands in the way of his relationships, most significantly his relationship with Hana. Much of the emotional distance Kip builds for himself is a result of his incredibly dangerous job in the war.

As a man who must descend into deep pits to defuse bombs that could explode at any time, he comes to grips with the idea of his own mortality. His job has taught him to distrust everything and everyone. Yet in the Italian villa, he becomes a part of the small community that has sprouted there and learns positive prospects towards life. Ondaatje's blend of prose and poetry, evoking images and emotions with highly lyrical language allows the elements of learning and discovery to permeate the characters' relationships throughout the course of the novel.