LONELINESS IN MICHAEL ONDAATJE’S
THE ENGLISH PATIENT

by

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Declaration

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I declare that ‘Loneliness in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient’ is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Miss C Langsford 25 February 2009
Summary

This dissertation attempts to show that the phenomenon of loneliness is written into Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. The Introduction offers a description of the origins of loneliness as a field of study, presents key instances of loneliness in literature, and investigates the nature of loneliness. In the first chapter, the Villa is introduced as a figural and conceptual framework for analysis. The second chapter focuses on the patient’s room and the library, leading to a discussion of personal and existential loneliness, identity and naming. The third chapter investigates social loneliness with reference to the kitchen, garden and hallway, addressing notions of race and othering, home and family. The fourth chapter discusses the body and embodiment, as well as emotion and metaphor. The dissertation argues that the stylistic, thematic and structural features of *The English Patient* suggest and reflect the complexities and characteristics of loneliness.

KEY WORDS: Ondaatje, loneliness, emotion, identity, memory, history, desert, heat, metaphor, representation
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‘The others wrote out their love of solitude and meditated on what they found there’


‘Do not mistake the abnormal for the untrue. We are caught in metaphors. They transfigure us and reveal the meaning of our lives.’

Salman Rushdie, ‘The Firebird’s Nest’
Introduction

The Phenomenon of Loneliness

Although loneliness is a universal phenomenon, critical study of the representation of loneliness in literature is almost non-existent, even though the terms ‘loneliness’, ‘alone’, ‘lonesome’, ‘solitude’, ‘isolation’ and ‘alienation’ have been current in some form in popular literature for centuries. This dissertation explores the representation of loneliness in relation to one example of how loneliness is expressed in literature, Michael Ondaatje’s novel *The English Patient*.

In her insightful attempt to understand the everyday experience of loneliness, Irma Kurtz traces the phenomenon of isolation all the way back to biblical times. In the Christian faith, it is in (and because of) the Garden of Eden that Adam and Eve are doomed to a lonely existence. Their transgression is to blame for civilisation’s eternal isolation from God and His paradise. Strikingly similar is the ancient myth of Pandora. According to the myth, Pandora was the first woman created and was made by request of the supreme god Zeus as a gift and a plague for mankind. At the time she was sent to earth, humankind was living in a state of paradise, free from misery and sickness. Pandora carried with her a sealed gold jar (the proverbial ‘Pandora’s box’ is in fact an early error in translation). The jar contained a multitude of disasters, evils and sicknesses and, if we agree with Kurtz’s categorisation, loneliness was one of these. Pandora could not contain her curiosity and opened the jar. The result was that all the miseries contained in the jar were spread among mankind to stay there for ever. The correlation between Pandora’s sad tale of woe and that of Eve is remarkably close. Both women are to blame for the woes of the world and it is because of their actions that loneliness is part of human life. However, both women retain the potential for redemption. Eve acknowledges her error and repents of it, which suggests the possibility of forgiveness, and Pandora holds on to hope in the face of the misery she

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has unleashed on the world. For Kurtz, the dominant implication is that there is always the possibility of overcoming loneliness.

Another example of loneliness personified, this time from Greek mythology, is the figure of Psyche. This myth is so resonant that it deserves some retelling. Psyche, ‘the personification of the soul’ and the youngest daughter of the King of Sicily, was extraordinarily beautiful, much to the envy of her sister Venus/Aphrodite. Aphrodite sent her handsome young son Eros/Amor to find the most despicable man he could, and made Psyche fall in love with him. Psyche, in the meantime, suffered terribly, as all adored her but none asked for her hand in marriage and she sat alone at home cursing her beauty. Eros was bewitched by Aphrodite and later became Psyche’s lover but his identity was concealed. Eventually, Psyche became pregnant. Eros warned her that if she said nothing about the identity of her lover, she would bear a divine child, but if she disobeyed him, she would give birth to a mortal child. Naïve Psyche did not take the warning seriously and, in time, she realised that her lover was Eros and she fell deeply in love with him. Eros returned to Aphrodite and they became aware that there was very little chance that people would return to worship them because of the treachery they had committed. Hence, ugliness and lovelessness would govern the world from then on, as Psyche would give birth to a mortal child and there would be no place for beauty in the eternal.

The tale teaches us that ‘[o]nly by overcoming divine love could the soul find its true fulfillment’. This assertion offers an interesting reply to the narratives of Eve and Pandora, where their wilful betrayal is seen as the downfall of humankind and Psyche’s is seen as the attainment of ‘soul’ truth. Kurtz wittily claims that the ‘reason loneliness (and other ills) arrived in a previously untroubled world, according to all these major myths, was a woman’. Some of the earliest narratives suggest that loneliness came about in the world in the form of a woman.

It is also important to trace origin myths concerning loneliness in oral literature or the literature of indigenous peoples, as opposed to those of Western societies. One such

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tale is that of Gilgamesh – an Akkadian myth.\(^6\) Gilgamesh is a powerful and brutal leader who meets his equal in Enkidu, a monster created by the gods. He befriends Enkidu and together they become powerful adventurers. Gilgamesh believes he has at last found fulfilment, only to lose Enkidu to a fatal illness. He is driven wild with grief and must face the rest of his life alone. There is a palpable sense of restlessness at the heart of the hero and the narrative, seen most clearly in the lengths to which Gilgamesh is willing to go to sacrifice himself for his friend and the emotive language used in the tale.

Buddhism is another example of a belief system with principles related to loneliness which are not typically Western. Malcolm David Eckel sees loneliness as something that Buddhism seeks to overcome.\(^7\) Meditation and seclusion, key tenets of Buddhism, are important on the path to non-attachment and overcoming the ego. However, once this peace has been achieved, the individual or ascetic can return to society with compassion, having fully overcome the experience of being alone. This form of loneliness is an internal sense of solitude, a loneliness borne of isolation or in isolation, rather than a shared or communal loneliness.

The above examples focus on the origins of loneliness from a mythological perspective. Hamilton B. Gibson offers a comprehensive, albeit whistle-stop, tour in what extensive research into available texts has shown to be one of the few published works on loneliness.\(^8\) Gibson begins his analysis of loneliness with the mystery and morality plays of the medieval period, particularly the traditional *The Summoning of Everyman*. As early as the fifteenth century, audiences were dramatically coming to terms with ‘the reality of life – that we are all essentially alone’,\(^9\) and it was a common theme in art and literature of the time.\(^10\) The Book of Ecclesiastes contains particular reference to loneliness in later life,\(^11\) extolling the situation of the elderly

\(^10\) Gibson even suggests that ‘Mass itself was, in a sense, a dramatic performance, the re-enactment of the Last Supper’ – a voluntary embodiment of possibly the loneliest time in the life of a man facing his imminent death [Gibson, Hamilton B. 2000. p. 62].
and the loneliness of no longer being a productive member of society. Other literary works Gibson mentions that were popular during the medieval period are John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, a justly famous allegory about the solitary journey through life, and Malory’s romances, which deal with loneliness by investigating the rites of passage taken by knights in order to fulfil their roles in society. Gibson points out that solitariness during the Middle Ages was acceptable only in a strictly religious context since ordinary civilians lived in a communal society and were political beings. As servants of the king or queen, they were not afforded the opportunity to live and work autonomously; hence loneliness caused by isolation would not occur. If one’s station in life required some kind of religious service that included a form of isolation then loneliness was a possibility. Knights were allowed to wander alone, as they were generally on dedicated missions but, otherwise, people tended not to spend time alone.

The influence of the pastoral tradition on notions of loneliness and solitude during the Renaissance period is moot. Pastoralists are shepherds who wander free in nature according to seasonal shift and the availability of food and water. The pastoral tradition romanticises the life of the shepherd, who becomes an idealised figure living in solitude in an Edenic state surrounded by the mythological and magical. Shepherd ing becomes a side-lined chore, while pleasures of the heart and flesh take precedence over the daily routine. The term pastoral is thus extended to forms of literature, music and art which encourage a return to nature and sentiment. Pastoral literature began with Greek poetry, spread to Roman poetry, and was taken up by English poets such as Spenser, Pope and Arnold.

It is with Shakespeare that a strong focus on loneliness as a distinctive and significant theme develops. Shakespeare’s plays deal generously with both positive and negative forms of solitude. The tragedies carefully document increasing solitude and its effect on the hero, and the comedy *As You Like It* has solitude as one of its main themes. *Twelfth Night* is exemplary, as are *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, especially as examples of psychological breakdown and the loneliness associated with existential crisis. Other texts from the Elizabethan period are Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta* and *Dr Faustus*. 
The Age of Enlightenment saw no reprieve from the literary canon’s engagement with the solitary figure. Daniel Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe* and Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver’s Travels* both chronicle one man’s encounter with increasing loneliness and isolation from society which was once familiar and acceptable.

Charles Dickens, in the nineteenth century, strongly identified with the pain and comfort of loneliness. He endured profound solitude in his own life and, because of his keen and intuitive understanding of every station in society, he was able to write loneliness into his epic texts. He was especially gifted at representing almost unbearable solitude in children and childhood. Oliver Twist, Pip, Jo the crossing-sweeper, David Copperfield, Little Nell and Florence Dombey are only a few such examples.

Loneliness is dealt with explicitly in twentieth-century literature. Perhaps some of the most memorable instances of loneliness can be found in the poetry of the Romantics and Modernists, such as Coleridge, Yeats, Eliot (such as ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’) and Lear. In these texts, the solitary figure tends to be valorised and romanticised. In ‘The Song of the Wandering Angus’, for example, Yeats imagines a character who is drawn out into nature ‘Because a fire was in my head’ and who accepts his solitude when a little trout he catches becomes a girl who calls him by name and is spirited away. Another significant example is Wordsworth’s ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’. Here, the solitary life is the exulted life. The works of Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and Herman Melville, on the other hand, are stark and unrelenting novels. These texts suggest that loneliness is never comforted or resolved. The loneliness of repressed homosexuality is suggested in Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* and later in Tom Wakefield’s novel *Mates*. George Orwell’s novels during this period, with his focus on disorientation and isolation, are significant too. Gibson rather abruptly ends his discussion with a brief disquisition on feminist literature, which, he claims, ‘tends to represent loneliness as the result of the

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intolerance of male-dominated society’. Thus, women feel loneliness because society privileges men over them.

Although Gibson offers a comprehensive and helpful account of loneliness in literature from the Middle Ages to present times, he does not examine the manner in which loneliness is represented, and there appears to be a fundamental contradiction in his analysis. Gibson insists that the things that make people lonely are the same in childhood, mid-adulthood and old age. Whether this is necessarily the case is unclear, since numerous factors contribute to a sense of loneliness; age being one of the factors, along with other factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, social status, sociability and physical location.

The terms ‘loneliness’, ‘solitude’, ‘solitary’, ‘isolation’ and ‘alienation’ appear to be interchangeable in Gibson’s account. I will argue that they are not. The view that such words are not co-terminous is shared by Dorothy Meyer Gaev, who comments that solitude is ‘the constructive counterpart of loneliness; it is a state of aloneness characterized by feelings of peace, contemplation, and pleasant privacy … usually free of the sadness, longing, and tension of loneliness’.16 This positive reading of solitude is a foil for the negativity generally associated with loneliness, intimating that it may be possible to find a balance between being alone and being distraught by it.

Samuel M. Natale writes that loneliness is not the same as solitude or aloneness,17 and John C. Woodward claims that loneliness and solitude are very different.18 Thus there appears to be considerable consensus from several authors that being alone or apart from others does not necessarily result in loneliness. Gibson rightly assumes that the numerous texts which he mentions do concern themselves with loneliness, and not some phenomenon like it, or some phenomenon that can be mistaken for loneliness, such as isolation or melancholy.

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15 A long list of texts such as the one provided makes one painfully aware of what is not included: poetry, modern plays, cinema, feminist literature, literature from other cultures and their histories, and literature from religions outside of the capitalist, WASP-type canon upon which Gibson draws.
Robert Cummings Neville, a Confucian, writes that ‘loneliness is to be understood in terms of certain kinds of disorientation and loss of poise’. When one loses one’s bearings, a sense of loneliness accompanies the feeling of being directionless. Living in various locations and interacting with numerous cultures contributes to a sense of being out of place. Cultural variation can result in misunderstanding and disorientation.

Since a chronological analysis of each of the texts mentioned exceeds the bounds of this dissertation, I have chosen to explore these ideas in relation to a single text, Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*.

Loneliness has not been addressed explicitly across the human sciences as a topic in its own right. It is thus problematic to trace the origins of thought concerning the subject, particularly because research relating to the phenomenon of loneliness is limited within the domains of psychology and philosophy. While a thorough discussion of these (and the links between these) two fields concerning loneliness is beyond the scope of this dissertation, numerous points warrant discussion. Several key schools of thought, theorists and theoretical perspectives recur too frequently in both psychologically oriented and philosophical texts to go unmentioned. These include phenomenology, existentialism and hermeneutics, and theorists such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, Kant and Lacan.

Edmund Husserl (working roughly between 1890 and 1938) called for a philosophy that was relevant to life and encouraged an increased exploration of consciousness. Heidegger was Husserl’s assistant, who subsequently took over his Chair at Freiburg University. Freud was a contemporary of Husserl but while Freud focused on the unconscious, Husserl explored the conscious mind. Heidegger (1889 – 1976) developed the concept of phenomenology, which he described as the ‘letting be seen ... that which shows itself, just as it shows itself from itself’. Heidegger proposed in

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20 Heidegger later became the Rector of Freiburg University once Husserl, a Jew, was excluded from the university during the Second World War.

Being and Time the notion of the Dasein, which refers to ‘being there’ – the ‘beingness’ of a person – and to the entity, the actual person. In this case, being is related to Being, which is the supreme power, the ‘everything’. It can be said that this ‘everything’ is the antithesis of the lonely impulse since it is full, whole and complete.

The theorists of this period voiced dissatisfaction with the classical Cartesian understanding of consciousness. The expression cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am) assumes a unified conception of self – a secured subjectivity. Phenomenologists and existentialists were not as certain that the subject is unified and stable, and it can be argued that loneliness is proof that this is not the case. It is worth mentioning at this point that Freud’s, and later Lacan’s, work concerning subjectivity also suggests that the unconscious is not a simple set of developmental steps through which every human being progresses, but rather a complex, dynamic realm. One can align the apparent loss of faith in anticipated patterning in the mind to the suspicion of positive empiricism that occurred in the post-modern period. A growing atmosphere of alienation, insecurity and a lack of meaning are evident in the research of this period, prompted by existential questions concerning science and spiritualism.

Most of the research into loneliness has been done within the domain of psychology. According to the editors of Loneliness: Theory, Research, and Applications, the ‘theoretical discussion of loneliness by behavioural scientists probably started in the late [nineteen] thirties with Gregory Zilboorg’s article on loneliness (1938)’ and the first empirical testing and study is ascribed to Paul Dawson Eddy and J. C. Whitehorn (both 1961). In the same year, a book by Clark Moustakas, simply entitled Loneliness, was published. The text is distinctly spiritual and stresses the exultation and clarity that loneliness and solitude can produce. Moustakas treats the subject with immense sensitivity and affection, describing the phenomenon of loneliness as follows:

Loneliness has a quality of immediacy and depth; it is a significant experience – one of the few in modern life – in which man communes with himself. And in such communion man comes to grips with his own being. He discovers life,

who he is, what he really wants, the meaning of his existence, and the true nature of his relations with others. He sees and realizes for the first time truths which have been obscured for a long time. His distortions suddenly become naked and transparent. He perceives himself and others with a clearer, more valid vision and understanding.

In absolutely solitary moments man experiences truth, beauty, nature, reverence, humanity. Loneliness enables one to return to a life with others with renewed hope and vitality, with a fuller dedication, with a deeper desire to come to a healthy resolution of problems and issues involving others, with possibility and hope for a rich, true life with others.24

Moustakas’ account of loneliness is tender and lofty, but someone caught in the throes of loneliness may find it difficult to accept such a sensational representation of a daily struggle. However, he does describe the creative prowess of loneliness, a point picked up in an article by Alfred J. Lubin, where it is stated that loneliness and sorrow are a gateway to joy, understanding, deeper faith and greater trust – most notably to creation (of new ideas and new intentions).25

The artist Vincent van Gogh is one of the subjects of Lubin’s article. Van Gogh, a prolific writer on the topic of loneliness, wrote the following on the relationship between art and loneliness: ‘[h]ow rich in beauty art is; if one can only remember what one has seen, one is never empty or truly lonely, never alone’.26 The idea that loneliness is not necessarily something negative is reinforced here. Loneliness can move someone into exultation, toward a greater sense of self and a greater commitment to self-expression.

These texts are followed in 1973 by the landmark empirical text Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation (dubbed the ‘loneliness researcher’s Bible’) by the so-called father of loneliness research, Robert S. Weiss. Prior to the collation of this text, loneliness was described as separation distress without an object. This is the term given to the anxiety felt by a child when she or he has not yet formed her or his own identity and momentarily is unaware of her or his mother. Weiss viewed this as a narrow understanding of loneliness and took on the task of further

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26 Ibid. p. 522.
investigation. Weiss argues that two broad forms of loneliness exist: emotional and social loneliness. The suggestion that loneliness could consist of several elements and degrees had not been documented before, thus the text became a departure point for future research.²⁷ From then to the present there have been sporadic published works, but nothing that can be termed a publishing explosion.

What is worth noting is that almost all texts on the subject of loneliness emphasise the need to be positive. There is a distinct undertone within the literature that the phenomenon is an unpleasant one, requiring euphemistic language and lots of encouragement. Several authors report that anyone who admits to researching loneliness is met with reactions that are a mixture of pity, astonishment, sympathy and even panic. Even within empirical research a strong need to overcome this ‘disease’ is evident. This is interesting because it indicates that loneliness is camouflaged by silence. Natale asserts that loneliness is a problem in that it signifies deficit in personal capacity, social graces and general well-being²⁸. Moustakas suggests that ‘[m]aybe the value of a bitter and painful loneliness is that in the intensity of the pain and the feelings, we can come to realize our own worth in relation to another person’.²⁹ Lake posits that ‘it helps to regard loneliness as a kind of progressive illness which attacks the personality of people through their communication systems’.³⁰ One text goes as far as to claim that loneliness is ‘actually an affliction of the ego, a problem with the self’.³¹ A definition provided by someone experiencing loneliness describes it as a ‘feeling of being alone and disconnected or alienated from positive persons, places and things’.³²

It is evident from a survey of available literature that loneliness is classified in terms of three principal ideas: illness, disease or condition; behavioural pattern; and psycho-emotional phenomenon. Authors describe these ideas in several different ways.

²⁷ The most influential study concerning loneliness at the time is the UCLA loneliness scale. See Russel et al., 1978.
According to Gaev, loneliness is ‘a feeling of sadness and longing we feel when our need for relatedness with some aspect of our world is frustrated’. Natale offers this definition of loneliness:

Loneliness is a state which involves a conscious lack of friendship, warmth and contact. This is often exacerbated by feelings of being “no good” or “unlovable” and manifests itself by difficulties in forming satisfactory relationships with other people.

Natale suggests that loneliness has received little academic attention for two reasons. First, its presence connotes failure. It is a person-centred affliction for which the individual must take responsibility and remedy. Secondly, only extreme forms of loneliness (particularly in the form of psychosis) are studied by psychologists. Transient loneliness, such as short-term loneliness or solitude, is not seen as a condition by academics and health professionals. Robert Weiss claims that loneliness is ‘separation distress without an object’. Separation distress, as mentioned previously, is the anxiety felt by a child when she or he has not yet formed her or his own identity and momentarily is unaware of her or his mother. Murphy and Kupshik claim that loneliness ‘involves a sense of deprivation in one’s social relationships’.

Irma Kurtz makes plain her inability adequately to describe or define loneliness. She suggests that ‘shame, solitude and romantic delusions are components of our loneliness, that its key is loss – loss of nature, loss of God, loss of each other – and that the apogee of loneliness is loss of self’. Later, she suggests that ‘loneliness is the space within where once there was something or maybe someday there will be something. Nobody can ‘cure’ a space; all we can do is to try to begin to fill it with something sustaining’.

These definitions indicate that loneliness involves separation and loss, and this is a perspective with which I agree. Separation and loss can be caused by geographical, physical or time constraints or by the individual’s sense of identity and self-worth.

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34 Natale, Samuel M. 1986. p. 2. [original emphasis]
Moustakas distinguishes between existential loneliness, which he argues is part of human existence, and self-alienation or rejection, which is characterised by a vague and disturbing anxiety. From this description it can be assumed that existential loneliness is long-standing while self-alienation is transient. It can also be suggested that self-alienation can grow and change into existential loneliness. Alienation is seen as an estrangement from nature; a lack of relatedness between human and human, human and nature, and human and one’s own body. Thus, the more someone resists relationship with other people and nature, the more alienated she or he will feel. The greater the alienation the more likely someone is to feel lonely. The need for union with nature is reiterated in an article by Henry David Thoreau. Gaev concurs that existential loneliness is part of the human experience, but she adds two other categories: pathological loneliness and real loneliness. Pathological loneliness is a chronic feeling of sadness and longing, and the inability to form close relationships with the self and/or others. Real loneliness, according to Gaev, is a type of pathological loneliness. These are states of loneliness that are so severe that people cannot communicate their loneliness. I will return to this idea later in my argument in relation to a discussion of trauma and silence.

Joseph Hartog suggests that ‘two interrelated conditions form the skeletal frame of loneliness: disconnectedness and longing’. Weiss claims that ‘the loneliness of emotional isolation stems from the absence of an attachment figure and that there is a second kind of loneliness, the loneliness of social isolation, that stems from the absence of community’. Disconnectedness thus is a strong predictor of loneliness. Lake proposes that ‘loneliness happens when we cannot judge these values [a person’s value and the value of things that happen to us] as a direct result of having nobody to talk to them about, so that we can never be sure what they mean’. We interpret the world best when we can temper our perspectives via other people. If one

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feels disconnected from others then this opportunity is not available and meaning cannot be made concerning life.

The stages of loneliness throughout the human life cycle are traced by Natale.\textsuperscript{45} This is a trend taken up by a number of researchers on the subject. During infancy and childhood, the first form of loneliness experienced by the individual is separation anxiety. This is the original, basic separation between needs and expectations. Here, Freud’s, and later Lacan’s, theory of the ‘mirror stage’ is pertinent. The mirror stage refers to the period in the infant’s life during which autonomous identity is developed. This occurs when the child sees itself in a mirror, or sees itself represented through a primary caregiver, thereby promoting the development of subjectivity. Woodward points out that the losses that occur at this stage of human development are necessary – they are required for human development and identity formation.\textsuperscript{46} It is only through loss that we gain independence and begin to develop as autonomous beings. Next, in adolescence, the need for intimacy, particularly in friendships, increases. An inability to make friends leads to loneliness. Young adulthood is the period when bonds or friendships are formed to last a lifetime. Two forms of loneliness are more obvious now: emotional isolation and social isolation. Midlife, contrary to general opinion, is not a lonely time since most people are very busy with family and career interests. The mature years – retirement and old age – see an upsurge in existential loneliness at having more years behind one than ahead. According to Woodward, women tend to live longer than men, thus they have longer periods of solitude, yet men feel more lonely than women during retirement. It is clear from these points that age can be a factor that contributes toward loneliness. The characters in Ondaatje’s novel are young (Hana, for example, is only twenty years old) or middle aged, yet they experience loneliness. This suggests that age is not the defining feature of loneliness, but a contributing factor toward the phenomenon.

Lake describes three stages of loneliness\textsuperscript{47} and the first stage involves circumstances that cut people off from contact with others so that they are deprived of mutual

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behaviours. ‘Mutual behaviours’ is the term Lake uses to describe communication behaviours such as talking, listening, touching and looking, that are active and passive in equal amounts, and are equally shared between communication partners. The second stage sees a loss of confidence in the self and others. There is a notable lack of smiling during this stage. Finally, the individual experiences apathy. The giving and receiving of mutual behaviours ceases permanently. Lake also suggests, in a distinctly behaviouristic tone, that shyness ‘is a kind of protection – it helps to cut one off from social failure (appearing clumsy, ridiculous or stupid)’ and that it may be as a result of parents’ lack of affection or even their over-affection.48 Loneliness is a gradual process, and this is observable in Ondaatje’s novel. Hana experiences a long process of withdrawal from society which begins with the loss of her unborn child and stretches through the devastation of the war to the patient’s death.

Several possible elements of loneliness have been discussed above. The question remains: what causes loneliness? This, too, is diverse and contested in the literature. The reasons can be grouped into two categories: those to do with the private self and those to do with the public self and external factors. Causes to do with the private self include an individual’s understanding of the boundary between self and others, self-esteem and personality, personal fear and disappointments, and a struggle with metaphysical meaning and spirituality. Factors to do with the public self include population and social change, as well as migration. Another factor is one’s relationships with others and the resultant circumstances. Gaev offers the most comprehensive set of causes – seven of them, in fact.49 The first is the breakdown of the nuclear family which results in the formation of all kinds of groups, clubs and societies to substitute for the sense of belonging one apparently expects to find within the family. The second cause is to do with the migratory nature of modern life. People move around so frequently that no sense of community is established. Next is population and social change. Population explosion results in fewer shared resources and greater anxiety due to the threat of lack and poor security which makes individuals less willing to share. The fourth cause is attributed to the breakdown of traditional religions. People no longer live (on the whole) with religion as the ordering principle. They seek meaning via alternate spiritual paths or by joining groups which

afford them the same sense of belonging and affirmation. The fifth cause is simultaneously alarming and insightful. Gaev points to an atmosphere of mistrust caused by political disappointments and corruption as a cause of loneliness. Gaev writes this in 1976 America, and it seems a personal and pertinent reaction to whatever his experience was of that time in that country. The sixth cause pertains to self-consciousness about our place in, and relationship to, the world and the universe. The seventh cause, which Gaev decides is the most important, is a pervasive sense of meaninglessness.

It is clear, then, from these seven causes that the interplay between self and the world is a faithful indicator of one’s experience of loneliness. The less one interacts with society in general, the more likely one is to feel lonely. Incremental withdrawal from society is evident in Ondaatje’s novel. The main characters in *The English Patient* withdraw into the safety of the Villa and spend most of their time on their own or with a few other people. This narrative technique helps to reinforce the sense of loneliness that pervades the text. Ondaatje represents lonely characters who lead lonely lives.

Hartog argues that ‘because the boundary of the self is culturally determined, the interface at which loneliness occurs varies among cultures’. In the West, individuality is confined to the body and so politics of the body overrides any sense of relatedness. Later, he argues that both an overload and an absence of external stimulation can lead to loneliness, and that loneliness and alienation ‘are not merely by-products of technology and rapid sociocultural value change, but are really unavoidable components of civilization and the human condition’. Hana chooses to care for the patient in an isolated location because she wants to leave the literal and figurative bombardment of the war. In a sense, she exchanges one form of loneliness for another, and in so doing she exchanges one form of stimulation for another. In the same volume, Jules Henry argues loneliness due to a basis of fear. There is the claim that, often, a relationship with God is seen as the only reliable trust bond because vulnerability brings pain – both allowing or denying love can bring

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loneliness. He suggests that fear in politics and fear of foreign powers fuels economic vulnerability and this results in individual isolation. We are kept perpetually in the shadow of another Great Depression; and, perhaps, war. Physicality, politics and emotion are possible causes of loneliness. I believe that these are three very strong cases and, for this reason, I will delve deeper into these later in this dissertation.

Sermat\textsuperscript{53} suggests another cause of loneliness: the death of a loved one or failure in general or some personal endeavour. Personal trauma such as chronic illness, divorce or estrangement, retrenchment, and disillusionment in goals and dreams come to mind. Even geographical space can be a cause of loneliness: Ilza Veith\textsuperscript{54} points out that American loneliness is caused by great physical isolation as there are considerable distances between places or towns, whereas European loneliness is due to a lack of space and overcrowding.\textsuperscript{55} Lake\textsuperscript{56} points to two main causes of loneliness – circumstance and personality. Circumstance, according to Lake, includes loss of contact with loved ones owing to the end of a relationship, bereavement, old age, or a lack of opportunity to make friends due to money, mobility, career, language, class or race, and cultural barriers. Personality factors include a lack of confidence, a fear of strangers, natural reserve or simply a handicap of some form. Lake also suggests that circumstances may cause loneliness, ‘but it is personality which we have to understand to see why some people are more susceptible to it than others’.\textsuperscript{57} Finally, Robert Weiss suggests that ‘many definitions of loneliness are directed more to the conditions that might produce loneliness than to the phenomenon itself’.\textsuperscript{58}

These definitions are helpful, but in order to better define loneliness I will briefly outline a productive model of it. The model draws heavily on the work of Roland Barthes, who in turn draws from Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of signification and


\textsuperscript{55} One wonders how Veith would explain away loneliness in mega-cities such as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, but the point is historically interesting.


the signification triad: signifier, signified and concept. Barthes uses the concept of signification in a discussion concerning denotation and connotation, which he calls ‘staggered systems’. He posits that any system of signification comprises a plane of expression (E) and a plane of content (C) and that signification co-incides with the relation (R) of the two planes: E R C. Let us now suppose that such a system E R C becomes in its turn a mere element of a second system, which thus is more extensive than the first: we then deal with two systems of significations which are imbricated but are out of joint with each other, or staggered.

The plane of content (C) can be visualised as a vertical axis. This is the diachronic or syntagmatic aspect of denotation, or the first system of signification. On top of this, a horizontal axis should be visualised. This is the plane of expression (E). It is the synchronic or paradigmatic aspect of denotation, or the first system of signification. The point at which these two planes intercept is R – the relation of the two planes, or the point of signification. A second system, exactly the same as the first, should be visualised. This is connotation, or the second system of signification. The first system, denotation, equates to Saussure’s signifier and the second system, connotation, is the signified. The two systems are held together in 3D, inextricably linked and yet two clearly separate, contained systems. Language, then, is the first system of signification (denotation). What it signifies is a little more difficult to name. Perhaps it is thought or concept; it may well be metaphor.

The conceptual framework just elucidated aids in the creation of a model of loneliness. If language is the signifier of thought or metaphor, then it can be argued that metaphor itself is the signifier of emotion, or that which underlies thought. Perhaps it is not the case that some entity lies behind thought, but that emotion is a ‘sister’ to thought – that thought and emotion lie side by side. The image would then change from the two systems lying ‘behind’ each other to three systems lying next to each other on an equal level – in a horizontal equilateral triangle. This would explain how we experience thought or metaphor and emotion outside of language, but that both can be expressed at the same time in and through language.

The final aspect of the model is the concept. It is assumed that thought or metaphor does exist as an autonomous entity, something that really exists in the world, hence the staggered signification systems. This is a convenient conclusion, as it corroborates the idea mentioned earlier that emotion (particularly loneliness) is pre-existent, and does exist as an entity in the world. The concept is relevant to a study of Ondaatje’s novel in that it is a means toward understanding Ondaatje’s style and the writing of emotion into texts.

Much research has gone into this problem within discourse analysis and pragmatics in the field of linguistics and there is some fascinating scholarship to do with cognitive metaphor studies. The basic tenets of the theory include the notion that metaphor is a conceptual phenomenon and not a linguistic one; that is, metaphor as thought. This was first posited by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in the landmark 1980 publication, *Metaphors We Live By*. I will return to this point for further discussion later in the dissertation.

The theoretical frameworks posited above rely heavily on the view of loneliness as emotion. It is prudent however to question this belief. What would have to be the case if loneliness were not an emotion? One answer to this is that loneliness is part of thought and not emotion. Perhaps loneliness is something that is thought, and not something that is felt. It would thus be understandable that loneliness is not something often talked about or acknowledged and individuals may not even be aware of it. Perhaps, at the stage of identity formation that occurs in the first few months of life, awareness of selfhood is so acute that human beings no longer feel connected to anything as strongly as the initial connection to the mother figure. The change is internalised so powerfully (humans become acutely hyper-aware of the self) that one starts to think in loneliness and no longer feels it as a distinct emotion. Of course, the final and rather disturbing proposition is that loneliness does not actually exist. What is termed ‘loneliness’ is merely the coincidence of particular emotions such as melancholy, self-pity and withdrawal, which are mistaken for something that is commonly known as loneliness. The above discussion on the nature of loneliness helps to explain the concept before I move on to an exploration of its place and its representation in *The English Patient*. 
Chapter One

The Villa

_The English Patient_ is the tale of four people involved in, and damaged by, the Second World War. Hana is a Canadian nurse who is tired of being surrounded by death. The identity of the patient she tends is elusive – he is known merely as ‘the English patient’, the title of the novel. His body is completely burnt, he is immobile and close to death. Later Hana and the patient are joined by Caravaggio, a thief-turned-spy, who was a friend of Hana’s father in the past in Toronto where she and her father lived before the war. Kirpal Singh, an Indian sapper for the English army, completes the group. The four characters all come to reside in the Villa San Girolamo in northern Italy. Nikki Singh offers the following description of the Villa:

[Hair]is Italian building, once a convent is exposed and enclosed – many of its shelled walls and doors from the war open into landscape. Our four charred victims (psychologically, and even physically as in the case of the English patient), find shelter in the Villa. The fragmented architecture of the Villa expresses their selves, and its open-cum-closeness, the secrets they begin to share with each other. The war breaks their walls too, and just as the rooms of the Villa open up to the sky and gardens, their secrets and emotions reach out to one another. As their days pass, their wounds begin to heal.\(^6^1\)

We are told that ‘from the outside, the place seemed devastated’ and that Hana and the English patient ‘were protected by the simple fact that the Villa seemed a ruin. But she felt safe here, half adult and half child’.\(^6^2\) The obvious comparison between the Villa and the phenomenon of loneliness is clear. Both appear bleak, inaccessible and unrelenting. The Villa has been left damaged by bombs during the war and the surrounding landscape is barren and inhospitable. The broken building houses broken souls, hence Ondaatje uses the words ‘ruin’ and ‘devastated’ to good effect. The Villa houses lost souls and it is a place of sanctuary and isolation; similarly the body – the contained physical manifestation of an individual’s existence on earth – is the place in which we experience loneliness.

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It may come as a surprise, after the stark and unrelenting image just described, that the Villa has been described as ‘an Eden-like sanctuary, isolated from the horrors of the war that has mutilated the neighbouring countryside and continues to propagate destruction outside of Italy’. In an interview, Ondaatje describes the Villa as ‘an Eden, an escape, a little cul-de-sac during the war’. Eden after all is the perfect place, not somewhere perfect in spite of destruction.

Ondaatje offers the reader four jaded characters: Hana, Almásy who comes to be known as the patient, Kip and Caravaggio. Together, they use the Villa as a refuge from the war and from their pasts. The Villa is expansive. The four individuals have space to move about freely, still interacting with one another but without disturbing one another excessively. With reference to physical proximity, Vello Sermat claims that there is ‘no significant relationship between the degree of physical isolation from other people, and the intensity of lonely experiences’, and that a study showed that ‘more severe loneliness experiences tended to occur in situations where the individual was not lacking human company’. The Villa’s inhabitants have not been completely isolated and they functioned normally in society before and during their time at the Villa. Yet each exists alone in their shared world and each cannot seem to reach through to the other. Ondaatje writes that ‘[a]t night sometimes, when the English patient is asleep or even after she has read alone outside his door for a while, she goes looking for Caravaggio.’ This indicates that the inhabitants choose to be alone even though they are able to spend time together. The assumption that loneliness is hindered by contact with others is rendered fallacious. Theirs is a shared loneliness which cannot be overcome simply through companionship within the Villa.

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64 Roxborough, David. 1999. p. 239.
65 I shall refer to him merely as ‘the patient’ in present tense discussions about him, and when I am discussing his past and he features as Almásy, I will refer to him by name.
66 Sermat, Vello. ‘Some Situational and Personality Correlates of Loneliness’. In Hartog, J., J. Ralph Audy & Y. A. Cohen (eds). 1980. The Anatomy of Loneliness. New York: International Universities Press. p. 308. Perhaps the notion of belonging should be refined. Belonging refers not only to externally identifiable relational links to other people in the form of family, culture, gender or sex, religious community, nationality or any other marker of social connection, but rather to the individual’s personal sense of connection to their own being as well as connection to external people and groups. Perhaps this is Ondaatje’s representation of loneliness: four characters that cannot seem to belong, to themselves or to anyone else.
67 Ibid. p. 34.
I shall argue in this dissertation that loneliness is found in the structure and form of Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. This technique is at work within individual sentences in the text as well as at a global level. A broad analysis of the novel indicates that it is written using a fragmented, episodic, intricate flashback structure which gradually reveals each character’s history and preoccupations. This interfuses an incipient sense of loneliness into and through the text as a whole. An example of this can be found in Kip. The reader first encounters him when he enters the Villa’s library where he finds Hana playing the piano. Kip arrives in his professional capacity as a sapper who is out to discover and defuse bombs left behind at the end of the war. Later in the novel the reader is offered particulars of Kip’s character: his tendency to keep to himself, his love of condensed milk, the ritual of twisting his hair into his turban every morning. Still later in the novel, in the chapter aptly entitled ‘In Situ’, more of Kip’s past is revealed. In this chapter an account of his decision to move to England is given. The story of Kip’s military training is given as well as his increasing awareness of the discrimination he experiences because of his race and culture. In addition, his growing disgust for his adoptive country is indicated. All of these traits coalesce at the end of the novel when Kip witnesses the radio broadcast of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and he realises that his brother’s mistrust of the West is justified.

The following extract exemplifies the manner in which Ondaatje’s style creates a sense of loneliness at a sentential level, both grammatically and metaphorically:

There are stories the man [the patient] recites quietly into the room which slip from level to level like a hawk. He wakes in the painted arbour that surrounds him with its spilling flowers, arms of great trees. He remembers picnics, a woman who kissed parts of his body that now are burned into the colour of aubergine.

I have spent weeks in the desert, forgetting to look at the moon, he says, as a married man may spend days never looking into the face of his wife. These are not sins of omission but signs of preoccupation.

His eyes lock onto the young woman’s face. If she moves her head, his stare will travel alongside her into the wall. She leans forward. How were you burned?

It is late afternoon. His hands play with a piece of sheet, the back of his fingers caressing it.

I fell burning into the desert.

They found my body and made me a boat of sticks and dragged me across the desert. We were in the Sand Sea, now and then crossing dry riverbeds.
Nomads, you see. Bedouin. I flew down and the sand itself caught fire. They saw me stand up naked out of it. The leather helmet on my head in flames. They strapped me onto a cradle, a carcass boat, and feet thudded along as they ran with me. I had broken the spareness of the desert.

The Bedouin knew about fire. They knew about planes that since 1939 had been falling out of the sky. Some of their tools and utensils were made from the metal of crashed planes and tanks. It was the time of the war in heaven. They could recognize the drone of a wounded plane, they knew how to pick their way through such shipwrecks. A small bolt from a cockpit became jewellery. I was perhaps the first one to stand up alive out of a burning machine. A man whose head was on fire. They didn’t know my name. I didn’t know their tribe.

Who are you?
I don’t know. You keep asking me.
You said you were English.68

In the first sentence of this extract a man is described who ‘recites quietly into the room’. This man (who is revealed as the patient later in the narrative) offers stories to a void. He does not recite the stories to an audience or for any apparent purpose. The use of the word ‘into’ is crucial and Ondaatje creates a sense of futility through it. It is as if the room is merely a space for stories. The stories do not have a place in the room but are given up to it regardless. The word ‘quietly’ is equally evocative. The patient and his tales are small in relation to the vast open space in which he is located. The patient is tentative about the stories he has to offer. Perhaps he does not really want anyone to hear what he has to tell; perhaps he is unsure of the value of his words. The stories themselves are dubious as they ‘slip from level to level like a hawk’. Chronology and resolution are not features of these stories, and this generates dislocation both in relation to the stories the patient tells and the narrative itself.

The act of speaking these stories is more significant than the tale itself, and this provides room for the stories to circle and escalate. The image of the hawk contributes a sense of freedom to the tales and the act of storytelling, which the patient sorely lacks in his physically damaged state and for which he must compensate imaginatively. But the hawk is also menacing and predatory, and the patient’s stories have this potential as well. Thus, destabilising phrases and images are stacked one after each other and together a sense of dislocation and fragmentation is created. This

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68 Ibid. p. 4-5.
A similar effect is created in the sentence which reads ‘I fell burning into the desert’. The strong and clear use of the subject ‘I’ places the patient (then Almásy) at the forefront of the reader’s imagination. This is followed by the evocative phrase ‘fell burning’. The words are alarming and destabilising because they pose a physical threat: to fall is dangerous on its own, but to be twice harmed is a reminder of the frailty of the human body. The prepositional phrase that completes the sentence creates a sense of debilitating expansiveness. A vivid image of a single figure falling into a vast area is created by building the sentence from the small and specific to the large and overwhelming. The phrase also introduces a recurring metaphor that Ondaatje employs in the novel. The metaphor creates a parallel between the desert and the sea. Other examples of this can be found in the extract in phrases such as ‘a boat of sticks’, ‘the Sand Sea’, ‘a carcass boat’ and ‘they knew how to pick their way through such shipwrecks’. The parallels between the two natural entities are self-evident. Both the sea and the desert are vast and ever-changing, and can be navigated. They cannot be relied upon and yet the constancy of their presence is evidence of dependency. Ondaatje uses the sheer vastness of these natural elements to foster a sense of loneliness in the novel by presenting individuals pitted against seemingly overwhelming conditions. The characters appear small and incapable of dealing with challenges which are isolating, seemingly inexorable, and dislocating.

The sensual nature of the extract, and indeed of the entire novel, emphasises the primacy of sensory experience as alienating. Phrases such as ‘a woman who kissed parts of his body that now are burned’ and ‘His hands play with a piece of sheet, the back of his fingers caressing it’ draw attention to the phenomenon of physicality. But the references to physicality involve pain – bodies that once felt pleasure but now are damaged. The body can be connected powerfully to other bodies and the world around it, but it can also be cut off from other bodies irrevocably. Other examples in the novel can be found in Hana who loses a child and Caravaggio whose thumbs have been cut off. The awareness of the fickle nature of physical well-being contributes to the evocation of loneliness. The body can be the very entity that separates an individual from others. Illness compounds the sense of alienation, and Ondaatje uses
imagery associated with physical harm to convey a powerful impression of aloneness and separation.

Another technique Ondaatje employs to produce a sense of loneliness in the text is the movement in narrative perspective and time frames. The extract above begins with an objective, third-person perspective and swiftly moves into first person subjective as the patient speaks about the weeks he spent in the desert. The lack of punctuation in the monologue and dialogue sequences contributes to the alienating effect of the text. Paragraphs run into one another and the fluid change in narrative perspective destabilises the text. The subsequent paragraph returns to an objective perspective. This is turned on its head when a first person perspective is resumed, but this time it is Hana’s perspective when she asks the patient ‘How were you burned?’

The shift in time frames within the narrative is equally alienating. The extract begins with the patient’s stories and memories and then it is catapulted into the present with the sentence ‘[h]is eyes lock onto the young woman’s face’. Ondaatje is even more specific when he describes the scene by indicating that ‘[i]t is late afternoon’. As the patient continues to describe the plane crash the narrative returns to the past tense, only to return to the present as Hana questions the patient about his identity. Ondaatje’s stylistic choice to move constantly between individual and shared narratives is both disturbing and alienating, since it forces the reader to question and reinterpret the text.

It is the fragmented form of narrative structure that creates gaps, ‘wastelands’, in the reader’s understanding of the novel. Loneliness resides in the lacunae of signification. Hana asks the patient:

Who are you?
I don’t know. You keep asking me.
You said you were English. 69

This exchange is destabilising and dislocating in several ways. The most distinctly destabilising factor is the patient’s lack of identity. Identity assists in the understanding and categorisation of people and personality types. In short, identity

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69 Ibid. p. 4-5.
makes people knowable. The patient is an unknown entity and this is disconcerting to Hana as well as the reader. The exchange is dislocating syntactically. These four simple sentences seem to be at odds with one another – they say everything and nothing. Hana asks the patient a direct question but he avoids a satisfactory response by indicating that he is unaware of his identity. Ondaatje offers this simple response in order to open up numerous possibilities for the narrative and for an analysis of the patient. Could it be that the patient suffers from amnesia and cannot remember who he is? Possibly, the trauma he has endured has caused him to question what he understood himself to be; perhaps he refuses to assign a particular personality to himself. Ondaatje does not offer the patient’s response after Hana suggests that he is English. This omission – a lacuna – prevents Hana (and through her, the reader) from fully understanding the character of the patient and in so doing Hana (and the reader) is alienated from the ‘truth’ of the patient’s identity. This clearly troubles Hana, as the patient comments that she keeps asking him who he is. The reader cannot feel secure and is denied the consolation of being fully included as an implied witness or auditor in the narrative.

The novel’s characters are never fully known or understood because the reader is not offered a comprehensive and open description of each character or the manner in which the characters are connected. Evidence of this can be found in the quotation which forms the factual basis and the preface of the novel. It reads:

“Most of you, I am sure, remember the tragic circumstances of the death of Geoffrey Clifton at Gilf Kebir, followed later by the disappearance of his wife, Katharine Clifton, which took place during the 1939 desert expedition in search of Zerzura.

“I cannot begin this meeting tonight without referring very sympathetically to those tragic occurrences.

“The lecture this evening ...”

From the minutes of the Geographical Society meeting of November 194-,
London

The phrase ‘very sympathetically’ becomes dramatically ironic as it is the departure point for significant events within the novel. Ondaatje uses the endless possibility offered by the phrase to breathe life into an entire narrative. Interpretation of the

70 Ibid. preface
characters and events in the novel is left to the reader. Because of this, the ‘truth’ and reliability of the characters (and through this, the narrative) is called into question. Because of the gradual and incomplete revelation of each character’s history and preoccupations, the text appears to be fragmented and dislocated. This unresolved reading experience leaves the reader feeling unsure and isolated, ultimately alienating the reader from the text, which in turn reinforces the overriding sense of loneliness present in the novel. Ondaatje creates an ineffable sense of dislocation, awkwardness and, ultimately, loneliness. The cumulative impression of loneliness is not palpable – something that the reader can draw conclusions about and actively construct in the narrative – but persists as a felt presence, something interfused and apprehended, a quality that is just there.  

In the following chapter, I shall consider the Villa as an existential correlative in order to explore the nature and significance of the phenomenon of loneliness in the novel, and will focus on five places in particular: the patient’s room, the library, the kitchen, the hall and the garden. Each of these places relates to a particular characteristic of loneliness, and to its place in each of the character’s lives. I shall begin by exploring the patient’s room and the library.

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71 In works such as *Heart of Darkness*, *Jude the Obscure* and *Wuthering Heights*, loneliness is key to the narrative and themes of the story, but there is no one instance or element that can be identified as loneliness in these novels.
Chapter Two

The Patient’s Room and the Library

The Villa, the building which draws together the central characters in the novel, is in a state of disrepair. The hill town in which it is found was besieged for a month during the war and the building and another homestead were the focus of much of the bombing in the area, as well as the neighbouring chapel and orchards. The hill town is torn apart by fire shells; parts of the Villa’s top storey have crumbled under explosions. No electricity is available and candles are conserved as they are difficult to obtain and are an unwelcome beacon for robbers. The reader is told that a few ‘rooms faced onto the valley with no walls at all. [Hana] would open a door and see just a sodden bed huddled against a corner, covered with leaves. Doors opened into landscape. Some rooms had become an open aviary’.72 A fire had caused the lower steps of the staircase to be lost, which Hana had repaired by placing piles of books from the library in their place. An armchair in the library ‘was left there because it was always wet, drenched by evening storms that came in through the mortar hole’.73

Hana preferred to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock, sleeping sometimes in the English patient’s room, sometimes in the hall ... Some nights she opened doors and slept in rooms that had walls missing. She lay on the pallet on the very edge of the room, facing the drifting landscape of stars, moving clouds, wakened by the growl of thunder and lightning ... She was restless after the cold months, when she had been limited to dark, protected spaces ... She was living like a vagrant, while elsewhere the English patient reposed in his bed like a king. From outside, the place seemed devastated. An outdoor staircase disappeared in midair, its railing hanging off. Their life was foraging and tentative safety ... They were protected by the simple fact that the Villa seemed a ruin. But she felt safe here, half adult and half child ... She would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good. She would care only for the burned patient.74

Ondaatje captures a lonely landscape in the description of the Villa and Hana in it.

There are several key features that contribute to the impression of loneliness conveyed

73 Ibid. p. 13.
74 Ibid. pp. 13-14.
by the scene. One such feature is Ondaatje’s use of language. The phrase ‘the drifting landscape of stars’, for example, is both disconcerting and dislocating. The stars above Hana are transmuted into an earthly vista and transformed into a ‘landscape’ – a domain that can be traversed – but this landscape is unreliable because it drifts. The sky above her is defamiliarised by the use of the word ‘landscape’, an alienating perceptual transposition which conveys an impression of dispossession and dislocation. Other such phrases which are alienating and dislocating are ‘limited to dark, protected spaces’ (particularly the word ‘limited’), ‘from outside’ and ‘foraging and tentative safety’. These words reduce the agency of the characters, and this causes them to seem less able to stand up to the challenges of life in the Villa. Doubts as to their resilience lead to doubts about their emotional strength, intimating a pervasive sense of vulnerability and fragility.

It is said that ‘the Villa seemed a ruin’. The word ‘seemed’ is crucial here as it suggests that the Villa has been so damaged by the war that it can no longer perform its intended function, which is to house and to protect. It is interesting that Hana chooses the Villa as a place of refuge when others choose to leave it amid fears that it will bring greater harm than good. Yet, the Villa’s ruined condition is paradoxically self-protective. Its damaged state prevents it from use, and this means it can be let alone. The parallels to Hana’s situation are evident: by keeping to herself Hana does not have to expose her vulnerability and, while this isolates her, it also protects her. The isolation generated by the image of the Villa as a ruin reinforces a dominant impression of loneliness.

At the start, the Villa houses only Hana and her patient. The pair seems lost in a cosmos of space and they seem small and insignificant in comparison to the needlessly vast space, considering that the patient is immobile and Hana’s movements are restless and ‘nomadic’. This points to an existential sense of loneliness as the subtle suggestion is made that they are out of place, that their existence has no meaning in a broader context. Moreover, the Villa and its inhabitants endure extreme conditions because of the state of the building. The Villa is a near ruin, with entire walls missing and an outdoor staircase which is useless. It does not fulfil its purpose, which is to protect, contain and bring comfort. The war-ravaged house reflects the nature of loneliness, its impotency and dangerous vulnerability.
The second chapter of the novel is entitled ‘In Near Ruins’ and it is by the end of this chapter that we have met all four characters who are in ruins: damaged, both psychologically and physically. Hana, for example, is in ruins because she has been overexposed to need, misery and violence. The patient is physically in ruins. Caravaggio shares physical ruin due to the loss of his thumbs and his morphine addiction, but spiritual ruin too because of his negative experience of the war. Kip is damaged because his sense of place and identity is challenged.

Hana and the patient share the extremity of the ravaged building and the emotional space between them. Hana does not have a fixed domain that is hers and she exists in the liminal spaces of the house. She moves about at night and she sleeps on the very edge of rooms without walls, in thrilling but dangerous locations, as if the war has taught her to gravitate toward danger. Just as her loneliness keeps her at the edge of society, so she keeps herself at the edges of the building. Hesitantly, she explores her world, physically and psychologically, and she is accustomed to a considerable level of threat, having been on the frontline of the war – indeed, she has become numbed by the rawness of her war life – and she feels the need to push herself further to feel with intensity. She sleeps ‘in rooms that had walls missing. She lay on the pallet on the very edge of the room’.75 The reader is made aware, at various points in the novel, of the life Hana had before the war – the childhood Caravaggio was a part of, of her lover and her unborn child. Hana knows a different life in which she had the capacity to feel. She has not always been so numb and indifferent to the concerns of others. At one time she loved a man and was happy in her circumstance. Now, she uses dangerous situations to resurrect the emotional life she has learnt to suppress. She chooses, for example, to establish herself and the patient in an abandoned Villa despite the danger. She does not go to great lengths to protect herself whilst in the Villa: she moves around the house without securing it first and she actively seeks dangerous situations. The risk creates a heightened sense of awareness of the physical world around her. By sleeping at the very edge of the floor, at the edge of the man-made structure, Hana is close to the stars, clouds, thunder and lightning. Her senses prickle with the rawness of nature, just as her mind churns with the rawness of her

75 Ibid. p. 13.
internal experience. She sympathises with the broken state of the Villa since it echoes the brokenness of her soul. This draws her closer to nature. Here, Ondaatje uses a favourite literary technique of the Romantics, prosopopeia, where the emotional life of a character is indicated by events in nature such as a thunderstorm to indicate inner turmoil.

The ravages of the war have made Hana unwilling to carry the burden of responsibility for others. She has been drained of compassion and willingness to serve society because of the unrelenting atrocities she witnesses during the war. We are told that ‘[s]he would not be ordered again or carry out duties for the greater good. She would care only for the burned patient’.76 She withdraws from this hopelessness into herself. It is easier for Hana to take herself out of the situation that causes her pain than it is to continue to give of herself without authentic compassion. Her loneliness protects her from what she has seen: at the Villa ‘she felt safe ... half adult and half child’.77 As a ‘half child’, Hana renounces her responsibilities and allows herself a simple life; as a ‘half adult’, she ruminates over the adult experiences she has had and finds the intellectual space to synthesise these traumas. One day during the war, Hana began to cut her hair, not concerned with shape or length, just cutting it away – the irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind – when she had bent forward and her hair had touched blood in a wound. She would have nothing to link her, to lock her, to death. She gripped what was left to make sure there were no more strands and turned again to face the rooms full of the wounded.

She never looked at herself in mirrors again. As the war got darker she received reports about how certain people she had known had died. She feared the day she would remove blood from a patient’s face and discover her father or someone who had served her food across a corner on Danforth Avenue. She grew harsh with herself and the patients. Reason was the only thing that might save them, and there was no reason. The thermometer of blood moved up the country.78

It is clear from this passage that Hana had to grow up very quickly. She sees that the worse the war gets (‘the war got darker’) the worse the effect it has on human beings as it begins to affect more and more people. She comments that ‘[e]very damn general

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76 Ibid. pp. 13-14.
78 Ibid. p. 49-50.
should have had my job. Every damn general’. Hana must do whatever she possibly can to survive and to help her patients stay alive. Her way of doing this was to grow harsh with herself and her patients. Eventually, Hana decides that ‘till the nuns reclaimed it she would sit in this villa with the Englishman. There was something about him she wanted to learn, grow into, and hide in, where she could turn away from being an adult. There was some little waltz in the way he spoke to her and the way he thought’. She wishes to be nurtured again as she was when she was a child. Her innocence is lost and she grieves for it. This is a lonely position indeed. Hana wishes to turn away from the harshness she has experienced around her and move toward ease and a lack of responsibility once again.

The patient lives in physical and psychical extremity too. His body is burnt beyond recognition and he is in constant pain, for which Hana injects him with regular doses of morphine. This is his physical extremity: the frailty of his body. He is the quintessential body in ruin. Physical illness is an exceptionally lonely experience – it distances us from others because it is felt that the experience is not properly understood by them. Pain of varying intensity must be endured alone. It cannot be spoken and it cannot be taken away. The patient is virtually immobile as his organs slowly begin to fail inside his body. He is simply waiting to die and morphine is his transient saviour. Toward the end of the novel, as Caravaggio becomes increasingly keen to find out the truth about the patient’s identity, he administers heavier doses of the drug in order to coax the patient into divulging his past. Ondaatje writes:

All day they have shared the ampoules of morphine. To unthread the story out of him, Caravaggio travels within the code of signals. When the burned man slows down, or when Caravaggio feels he is not catching everything – the love affair, the death of Madox – he picks up the syringe from the kidney-shaped enamel tin, breaks the glass tip off an ampoule with the pressure of a knuckle and loads it.

... Each swallow of morphine by the body opens a further door, or he leaps back to the cave paintings or to a buried plane or lingers once more with the woman beside him under a fan, her cheek against his stomach.  

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79 Ibid. p. 84.
80 Ibid. p. 52.
81 Ibid. p. 247.
It is particularly cruel of Caravaggio to use the one thing that brings the patient comfort in order to extract the truth of the patient’s history and identity. But it is a helpful tool because it ‘opens a further door’ which assists Caravaggio in his quest to overcome his loneliness by connecting events in his life, thereby creating meaning for his experience during the war. Unfortunately, Caravaggio’s gain is the patient’s loss since Caravaggio ‘travels within the code of signals’ and the patient increasingly is removed from reality in order to inhabit the realm of his memory.

The patient’s history and identity are contentious issues within the novel because of the character’s elusiveness. A large part of the novel is spent debating whether or not the patient in fact is Almásy, a Hungarian desert explorer. In relation to the patient’s identity, Penner asserts that there is

\[\text{a profound tension between the terms “English patient” and “Almásy.” While it is not difficult to locate the English patient “as” Almásy, the correspondence is not strictly equivalent. There is a profound shift in agenda between the storytelling “Englishman” and the navigator and geographer whose narrative he relates.}\]

The patient’s apparent lack of history and identity throws him into turmoil. This turmoil is a kind of loneliness which stems from the inability to feel connected to something greater than the self. The ability to associate one’s self with a group or heritage is a way of avoiding loneliness. Because of the blackened state of the patient’s body, there is no clue as to his identity and

\[\text{therefore to the “origin” of the discourse of which he is the source. He is an unreadable enigma, with “all identification consumed in a fire” (3), whom the inhabitants of the Villa must nonetheless translate into their own narratives.}\]

The patient’s state is extreme in that he is both trapped in, and, in a special sense, free of, his body. He is trapped in his body because the burns he received in the accident have left him immobile and unable to perform basic functions such as eating and washing himself. Paradoxically, however, his inability to perform basic tasks frees him because he is forced to remain sedentary and to allow his imagination to wander and explore ideas, a circumstance which opens his mind to ponder thoughts he would


\[\text{83 Penner, Tom. 2000. p. 78.}\]
otherwise have dismissed. While his body is dormant and useless, his mind is constantly active. He talks incessantly and insists on engaging in complex and impassioned conversations. Ondaatje writes:

That summer the English patient wore his hearing aid so he was alive to everything in the house ... The English patient within a few days of the young soldier’s [Kip’s] arrival had thus become aware of his presence around the house, though Hana kept them separate, knowing they would probably not like each other.

But she entered the Englishman’s room one day to find the sapper there. He was standing at the foot of the bed, his arms hung over the rifle that rested across his shoulders ...

The Englishman turned to her and said “We’re getting along famously!” ... Kip, hearing from Caravaggio that the patient knew about guns, had begun to discuss the search for bombs with the Englishman. He had come up to the room and found him a reservoir of information about Allied and enemy weaponry. The Englishman not only knew about the absurd Italian fuzes but also knew the detailed topography of this region of Tuscany. Soon they were drawing outlines of bombs for each other and talking out the theory of each specific circuit.

“The Italian fuzes seem to be put in vertically. And not always at the tail.”
“Well, that depends. The ones made in Naples are that way, but the factories in Rome follow the German system. Of course, Naples, going back to the fifteenth century ...”

It meant having to listen to the patient talk in his circuitous way, and the young soldier was not used to remaining still and silent. He would get restless and kept interrupting the pauses and silences the Englishman always allowed himself, trying to energize the train of thought.

... 
Did I tell you my concept of Virgilian man, Kip? Let me ...
Is your hearing aid on?
What?
Turn it –
“I think he’s found a friend,” she [Hana] said to Caravaggio.84

The patient’s mind is surprisingly nimble for someone in physical distress and drugged up on morphine. Even in this state, he converses articulately about warfare, geography, history and philosophy. For all his cerebral playfulness, however, his mind is as wounded as his body.

Katharine Clifton (a woman who was his lover and the wife of a work colleague) is introduced late in the narrative – almost halfway through the novel in the chapter entitled ‘South Cairo 1930-1938’. Ondaatje writes,

The Cliftons were on the last days of their honeymoon. I left them with the others and went to join a man in Kufra and spent many days with him, trying out theories I had kept secret from the rest of the expedition. I returned to the base camp at El Jof three nights later.

The desert fire was between us. The Cliftons, Madox, Bell and myself. If a man leaned back a few inches he would disappear into darkness. Katharine Clifton began to recite something, and my head was no longer in the halo of the camp’s twig fire.

There was classical blood in her face. Her parents were famous, apparently, in the world of legal history. I am a man who did not enjoy poetry until I heard a woman recite it to us. And in that desert she dragged her university days into our midst to describe the stars – the way Adam tenderly taught a woman with gracious metaphors.

... That night I fell in love with a voice. Only a voice. I wanted to hear nothing more. I got up and walked away.

She was a willow. What would she be like in winter, at my age? I see her still, always, with the eye of Adam. She had been these awkward limbs climbing out of a plane, bending down in our midst to prod at a fire, her elbow up and pointed towards me as she drank from a canteen.

A few months later, she waltzed with me, as we danced as a group in Cairo. Though slightly drunk she wore an unconquerable face. Even now the face I believe that most revealed her was the one she had that time when we were both half drunk, not lovers.  

It is evident from this passage that the patient’s thoughts and memories regarding Katharine are scattered and directionless. Detail is sidelined in some sections (such as the description of the waltz) and elsewhere he supplies extremely intimate details in other sections (such as the description of the poetry recital). He recounts arcane conversations with Katharine and offers specific, sensuous descriptions of her. Yet he never really comes to know her outside of the exotic, removed and unreal landscape of the desert and its towns. While he is with Katharine, he cannot read her: she wears an ‘unconquerable’ face and he is unsure of her, having to rely on facial expressions that most reveal her. The patient does not feel he knows Katharine even after his role as her lover – he believes the face that most revealed her was the one she wore when they were half drunk, not lovers – and this leaves him feeling isolated and destabilised.

The subsequent chapter is entitled ‘Katharine’, and is an attempt to explore her character. Ondaatje writes this about Almásy:

He sweeps his arm across plates and glasses on a restaurant table so she might look up somewhere else in the city hearing this cause of noise. When he is without her. He, who has never felt alone in the miles of longitude between desert towns. A man in a desert can hold absence in his cupped hands knowing it is something that feeds him more than water ...

He lies in his room surrounded by the pale maps. He is without Katharine. His hunger wishes to burn down all social rules, all courtesy.

Her life with others no longer interests him. He wants only her stalking beauty, her theatre of expressions. He wants the minute and secret reflection between them, the depth of field minimal, their foreignness intimate like two pages of a closed book.

He has been disassembled by her.86

Almásy is angry and afraid because he has allowed someone into his soul and that trust has been betrayed. Katharine calls off the affair in fear of her husband discovering it. The loss Almásy experiences creates a sense of isolation about his character.

Almásy is a profoundly private man who does not permit many attachments in his life. He let his guard down for a short time and his frustration is the expression of his pain. The novel describes how, after the affair has ended, he goes off the rails, so to speak. He attends parties drunk and is awkwardly loud and inappropriate in Katharine’s company. Almásy desires the very possession (here, of a person and her body) that he rejects elsewhere in the novel, such as his comment that the desert ‘could not be claimed or owned’ 87 He tells us that ‘[e]verything I have loved or valued has been taken away from me’.88 As a result, the patient does not behave autonomously. His loneliness grows as he feels less able to master his world. It is painful to speak of such realisations, which is a possible explanation for his reticence concerning his past.

It is logical to begin a discussion of the patient’s room with a description of the physical surroundings as well as the patient who occupies it. The patient lies on a bed

86 Ibid. pp. 154-5.
87 Ibid. p. 138.
88 Ibid. p. 257.
of cotton sheets that surround him like a cocoon. He lies flat on his back with no pillow. There is a window behind him, facing out onto the valley. The image of the patient cocooned in white reinforces the theme of isolation or loneliness in the novel. The whiteness intimates absence and emptiness; he is surrounded by nothingness. The wall and ceiling opposite him contain a tromp l’oeil, and the patient spends his time ‘looking up at the foliage painted onto the ceiling, its canopy of branches, and above that, blue sky’. Hana calls this ‘the room which is another garden’. The image of the Villa as Eden mentioned earlier takes on additional significance when read in relation to this mural. It appears as if the patient has returned to Eden, an Eden represented in paint on a ceiling, but a false Eden. And, like Adam and Eve after their transgression in the biblical version of the Fall, this Eden becomes for the patient a place of loneliness and isolation.

The English patient and his room embody and represent loneliness, offering a way of exploring the nature of existential isolation and prompting questions regarding the meaning of existence, human relation (if any) to a higher being, relation to cultural and/or spiritual symbols and patterns, and personal experience of the world. As Penner describes him, the patient is ‘an unreadable enigma’. Without history and identity, all of the elements just mentioned are thrown into confusion. The patient is without identity as he is merely a scarred and burned shell of a human being. Without history, he is no longer part of that reality.

The reader is prompted to reconsider what it is that makes up history and identity. Identity is a multi-faceted concept which includes naming, heritage, sex, race, physical appearance, personality and abilities, amongst other attributes, characteristics, and circumstances. History is made up of all that one experiences and the manner in which one carries these experiences physically and psychologically. Ondaatje writes:

He speaks in fragments about oasis towns, the later Medicis, the prose style of Kipling, the woman who bit into his flesh. And in his commonplace book, his 1890 edition of Herodotus’ Histories, are other fragments – maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books. All

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89 Ibid. p. 4.
90 Ibid. p. 3.
that is missing is his own name. There is still no clue to who he actually is, nameless, without rank or battalion or squadron. The references in his book are all pre-war, the deserts of Egypt and Libya in the 1930s, interspersed with references to cave art or gallery art or journal notes in his own small handwriting.  

Even without a definable identity, the patient has a rich pool of knowledge and interests upon which to draw. He does not need to have his own history in order to know what he knows, so to speak. He simply brings to his situation all that he is at that moment, and that is enough. The patient’s lack of name, ‘rank or battalion or squadron’ is disturbing but it does not prevent the other characters in the novel (as well as the reader) from developing a sense of his character. In this way, history and identity as fixed and definable entities is challenged.

The three inhabitants (Hana, Kip and Caravaggio) go to the patient’s room for emotional healing. Hana offers the patient relief – a form of healing – for his physical pain. The patient heals himself by reliving and interpreting his past. Reliving his past is a way of re-entering the real world, of re-entering history and being less lonely. This is a painful but necessary task. By addressing one’s past, it can be reinterpreted, and he can let go of emotions associated with past experiences, loneliness being one of these. The patient offers the following image:

“There’s a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. David with the Head of Goliath. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness in the picture. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one’s own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David.”

The patient uses Kip to address the history he is able to piece together. In so doing, he reinterprets this history and he is able to release the past. Hana is the healer in the patient’s room, and yet she too goes to the patient for healing. He is a point of focus for her. In the midst of war, atrocity and pain, she is able to care for one human being in a dignified and satisfying manner – she needs this to regain herself and a long-

92 Ibid. p. 96.
93 Ibid. p. 116.
forgotten sense of calm. Hana calls the patient her ‘despairing saint’\(^\text{94}\) and she goes to him for spiritual nourishment. Caravaggio finds healing in the patient’s room as he pieces together the patient’s true identity. Caravaggio also needs to heal the wounds of his removed thumbs by laying the blame for the amputation with the cause of it: the patient. He wants the patient to know that it is his (the patient’s) fault.

Kip also finds healing in the patient’s room. He breaks his companionship with loneliness when he sits reading to or talking with the patient or when he sits with Hana. Kip goes to the patient because he represents the British world by which Kip was seduced and eventually disgusted. Kip seeks to come to terms with a rapidly changing world, and the collapse of a set of political illusions he holds while seeking support from a Western Eurocentric ideology upon which he has built his life. He explains:

> I grew up with traditions from my country, but later, more often, from your country. Your fragile white island that with customs and manners and books and prefects and reason somehow converted the rest of the world. You stood for precise behaviour. I knew if I lifted a teacup with the wrong finger I’d be banished. If I tied the wrong kind of knot in a tie I was out. Was it just ships that gave you such power? Was it, as my brother said, because you had histories and printing presses?\(^\text{95}\)

Kip realises that this ideology is failing him, and he goes to the only member of the small party who represents that ideology (the patient) in order to make sense of what is happening around him. Eventually he realises that he cannot continue living a lie and so he turns his back on the Villa and the world he adopted.

The patient’s beloved copy of *The Histories*, which he nicknames Herodotus, represents the futility of knowledge and progress without lived experience. The work, written by the Greek historian Herodotus, is an attempt to trace the origins of the Greco-Persian Wars that occurred in 490 and 480-79 B. C. The patient returns to the text repeatedly, probably because of its Classical basis and the symbolism of the histories contained in it. The tales from Herodotus are useless to the patient in his current condition. They simply remind him of occurrences in his life. By pasting his

\(^\text{94}\) Ibid. p. 3.
\(^\text{95}\) Ibid. p. 283.
own cuttings, pictures and maps into the text, Almásy engages in an act of writing himself into history. This is a human need to be immortal, to know that life contains meaning and worth. By creating a kind of scrapbook, he is creating an identity for himself, thereby disavowing loneliness and reaching out into history and to people, notably Hana. This is a way of dealing with loneliness.

It is noteworthy that the patient is forced to spend the last period of his life unable to see the natural world. He must study, in the *tromp l’oeil*, a replica – a representation – of lived reality outside his current experience. He is not permitted to experience the real but must accept a substitute for it, just as loneliness offers him a diluted version of life. The allusion to Plato’s cave is clear: the occupants of the cave wile away their lives staring at the back wall of the cave in the mistaken belief that this scene is the only version of reality available. They do not see the wall to which they are chained and the light above this wall, which is their artificial sun. They have become slaves to their surroundings. In the case of Plato’s inhabitants, one assumes that the slavery is as a result of ignorance. In the patient’s case, perhaps it is because he knows too much. He is not free because he is burdened by the weight of all that he knows and this leads him into silence and isolation. He is no stranger to substitutes for lived experience and is comforted more by books than by real interaction with human beings. His nationality is sometimes English and sometimes Hungarian and he also is content with being a substitute lover to Katharine instead of an equal, free to love her without reserve. Ondaatje writes:

> Women want everything of a lover. And too often I would sink below the surface. So armies disappear under sand. And there was her fear of her husband, her belief in her honour, my old desire for self-sufficiency, my disappearances, her suspicions of me, my disbelief that she loved me. The paranoia and claustrophobia of hidden love.
> “I think you have become inhuman,” she said to me.
> “I’m not the only betrayer.”
> “I don’t think you care – that this has happened among us. You slide past everything with your fear and hate of ownership, of owning, of being owned, of being named. You think this is a virtue. I think you are inhuman. If I leave you, who will you go to? Would you find another lover?”
> I said nothing.
> “Deny it, damn you.”96

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96 Ibid, p. 238.
Almásy neither fights for Katharine nor denies her. He is comfortable on his own but this prevents him from developing meaningful and lasting relationships. He is not connected to the world. The patient substitutes anonymity for identity, which allows him freedom but denies him belonging.

The patient’s character is richly layered. He loves singing, historical narratives, and plums, which Hana skins for him, but he is

[a] man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him.  

Identity and the evasion of fixed identity are central ideas in the novel. As mentioned previously, a sense of identity is a means of overcoming loneliness, since one is able to feel connected to others if one has found one’s ‘fit’.

One method of identity creation is the process of naming. Ondaatje uses the character of the patient to investigate identity through naming and the possession that is inherent in naming something. The patient does not know, or pretends not to know, his own name. At the start of the novel, he tells Hana of the aeroplane accident which caused his injuries. He tells her how he was treated by a Bedouin tribe. In conversation with Hana he says,

They didn’t know my name. I didn’t know their tribe. Who are you? I don’t know. You keep asking me. You said you were English.  

Hana cannot pin down the patient’s identity and he refuses to help her do this. The patient begins to tell Caravaggio of his relationship with Geoffrey and Katharine Clifton and Ondaatje creates these remembered scenes and narrates them in the third person. Because of this, the reader is constantly denied a fixed identification for the patient. The patient does not say ‘I did this’ and so the reader cannot develop a clear
understanding of his identity and thus his agency in the narrative. Almásy begins to speak of himself in the third person and when questioned about this, the patient replies: “Death means you are in the third person”.

Caravaggio is surprised by this man who speaks sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third person, who still does not admit that he is Almásy.

Caravaggio’s own name bursts with innuendo. Caravaggio (the original is a Renaissance painter) understands that the most terrible war imaginable is that which occurs within the self:

“David Caravaggio – an absurd name for you, of course ...”
“At least I have a name.”
“Yes.”

There’s a painting by Caravaggio, done late in his life. *David with the Head of Goliath*. In it, the young warrior holds at the end of his outstretched arm the head of Goliath, ravaged and old. But that is not the true sadness in the picture. It is assumed that the face of David is a portrait of the youthful Caravaggio and the head of Goliath is a portrait of him as an older man, how he looked when he did the painting. Youth judging age at the end of its outstretched hand. The judging of one’s own mortality. I think when I see him at the foot of my bed that Kip is my David.”

The painting of David and Goliath acknowledges the loneliness that comes from mistrust and insecurity of the self. The complexity of Caravaggio’s name is deeper even than this, and Ondaatje uses connection points and allusions in a sophisticated manner to create several layers of meaning. One layer is the connection between Caravaggio the character in the novel and Caravaggio the painter. Both of these figures are masters of the sleight of hand – in theft and in brushwork respectively. Another layer is the connection between the young and old self which is portrayed in the painting and the resultant judgment of ‘one’s own mortality’. There is also the link between David Caravaggio and the biblical David who is portrayed in the painting. One other connection worth noting is the link between the patient and Kip as they relate to the young and old David in the painting – that is, the patient who sees a younger version of himself in Kip. In the novel, Caravaggio’s thumbs are cut off by Ranussio Tommasoni, a member of the Italian army, and Caravaggio the painter was

99 Ibid. p. 247.
100 Ibid. p. 247.
101 Ibid. p. 16.
accused of murdering a man named Tommasoni. The connection here between Caravaggio the painter and Caravaggio the character is made via a third, insignificant character.

Each of the characters uses the Villa and the patient to explore her or his existence. Each of the four main characters comes to the Villa – withdraws from the broader society – in order to regain equilibrium. They withdraw to a place of loneliness and isolation from their worlds, just as the world itself is full of isolated communities following the disruption of war. Any concept of a just, loving and compassionate God must seem severely remote at the end of a world war. At the Villa they try to regain and retain their identity, which is always defined in relation to one another. The dominant implication is that one has no identity if one is lonely. One is only significant in relation to others.

The character Caravaggio in the novel is a young, fresh mind in the body of an older man, facing the demons and transgressions of his past. It is his task to understand how he has come to be thumbless in a run-down Villa thousands of kilometres away from his home. Despite his lifetime of deception and theft, he is not able to deceive himself. Caravaggio goes to the patient because he understands that the patient’s process of retelling his story is exactly the same process he needs to engage in himself if he is to make sense of his life and to find healing. The following extracts exemplify this process:

I know the devices of a demon. I was taught as a child about the demon lover. I was told about a beautiful temptress who came to a young man’s room. And he, if he were wise, would demand that she turn around, because demons and witches have no back, only what they wish to present to you. What had I done? What animal had I delivered into her? I had been speaking to her I think for over an hour. Had I been her demon lover? Had I been Madox’s demon friend? This country – had I chartered it and turned it into a place of war?

It is important to die in holy places. That was one of the secrets of the desert. So Madox walked into a church in Somerset, a place he felt had lost its holiness, and he committed what he believed was a holy act.

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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.

Almásy’s face fell to the left, staring at nothing – Caravaggio’s knee perhaps.

“Do you want some morphine now?”
“No.”
“Can I get you something?”
“Nothing.”

The patient narrates his story but reflects on it as he tells it. He questions his treatment of his lover, his friend and his work. This indicates that he is interpreting his experience as he accounts for it. In so doing, the patient makes sense of his experiences, and Caravaggio would do well to follow suit.

Caravaggio is not the only character who engages in an examination of his previous self: in Kip, the patient sees the part of himself that once believed in a particular Western culture, vocation and way of life. Kip keeps to himself and yet he drinks from those around him constantly. He keeps himself distant in order to understand his world accurately. Kip is separated from his peers; he is ‘lonely’, because of his race and heritage, whereas the patient has used his nationality and demeanour to keep others at arm’s length. This distance can be interpreted as loneliness, since it is an act of distancing the self from others, be it voluntarily or due to circumstance.

Naming and identity in relation to loneliness can be read in a broader context. Almásy describes the group of explorers (of which he, Katharine and Geoffrey Clifton are part) working together in the desert:

We were German, English, Hungarian, African – all of us insignificant to [the Bedouin]. Gradually we became nationless. I came to hate nations. We are deformed by nation-states. Madox died because of nations ... The places water came to and touched ... Ain, Bir, Wadi, Foggara, Khottara, Shaduf. I didn’t want my name against such beautiful names. Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught these things by the desert.
The patient refuses to own up to his name because he has learnt the power of names. Names are given to individuals and objects and can also be given to nations. The same power which operates on names of people acts upon names of nations as well. Almásy’s good friend and colleague, Madox, dies because of nations – it is Madox’s understanding of nationhood that leads him to be so tortured by guilt that he commits suicide. Madox was led to believe that Almásy had been a German spy during their entire vocational tenure. He cannot comprehend Almásy’s betrayal of his friendship and his country. He is struck by the futility of war and life outside of war. He returns home to Somerset where he ‘a month later sat in the congregation of a church, heard a sermon in honour of the war, pulled out his desert revolver and shot himself’. A crisis of identity leads to a loss of meaning in Madox’s case and, tragically, to his death.

Names and nations robbed the patient of his lover too. After his accident, the patient takes Katharine into the Cave of Swimmers. She is hurt and he must return with help. At the outskirts of the settlements, English military jeeps surround him and ignore his pleas for help. They do this because the patient supplied the wrong name – he called Katharine his wife and supplied his own name, Count Ladislaus de Almásy. He is taken for a spy and arrested, and as a result of this Katharine dies. He is unable to forgive his heritage and his name. Words and names have connotations, and these are acted upon as is depicted in the situation just mentioned. Because Almásy’s surname seems to fit the profile of the perceived enemy, he is treated with hostility, and this results in Katharine’s death. Cook draws attention to the way in which characters and events generate a deferral of meaning:

[C]haracters and events in The English Patient are depicted at times as having a fictional source or inspiration, and thus as representations of representations ... As a result, meaning or being or identity is always deferred or displaced. The English Patient should be regarded, then, not so much as a representation, than as a simulacrum: a system of signs which, in Baudrillard’s words, is “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (Simulacra 6) ... the present is actually only a replica or reenactment, and that genuine identity or meaning is always to be found elsewhere, in some experience remembered from the past, some sort of “original pattern” or prototype.

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105 Ibid. p. 240.
Kip does not evade the problem of naming. In fact, his name brings an entirely different set of dynamics to the novel. When Kip arrives in England he is renamed, using an English version of his own name, Kirpal, as it is more familiar and easier on the English tongue. Losing his name must have been an isolating event for Kip as it is a form of attack on his identity. It is as if he is baptised into his new life in ‘civilised’ company. He recalls the event:

> The name had attached itself to him curiously. In his first bomb disposal report in England some butter had marked his paper, and the officer had exclaimed, “What’s this? Kipper grease?” and laughter surrounded him. He had no idea what a kipper was, but the young Sikh had been thereby translated into a salty English fish. Within a week his real name, Kirpal Singh, had been forgotten. He hadn’t minded this. Lord Suffolk and his demolition team took to calling him by his nickname, which he preferred to the English habit of calling people by their surname.107

Toward the end of the novel, Kip sits in his tent paralysed with horror listening to the devastating events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki via his headphones, holding the only photograph he has of his family. He gazes at it and states that his ‘name is Kirpal Singh and he does not know what he is doing here’.108 Kip reclaims himself at this point and uses his full given name as a tool of self-empowerment.

One last point regarding naming and identity needs to be made, and this is to do with the title of the novel. Although Ondaatje’s novel is entitled *The English Patient*, only a limited part of the narrative is concerned with the English patient himself. The novel is spread equally between the four central characters; the patient is merely the figure that draws these personalities together. Ondaatje creates four lonely characters by creating narratives that appear dissonant. The characters seem to be drifting in space and Ondaatje uses this lack of rootedness to create a sense of emptiness. Hana, who is disillusioned and numbed by war, elects to tend to one patient, not to many, as she did during the war. She has a past she struggles to come to terms with, and the arrival of Caravaggio complicates this as she is not sure how she should deal with this figure from her past. Caravaggio knew her as a girl but now Hana is a woman and the power dynamics in their relationship have changed. She now must delve into who she was

107 Ibid. p. 87-8.
108 Ibid. p. 287.
before the war, as a child in Toronto, as well as the woman she has become in and because of the war.

Kip, the Indian sapper, comes across the Villa almost by accident and chooses to use it as his base camp. He later becomes involved with Hana and develops a strangely gentle relationship with the patient. Caravaggio’s arrival at the Villa is enigmatic. Hana, thinking of Caravaggio, states that a ‘man she knew had come all the way by train and walked the four miles uphill from the Village and along the hall to this table just to see her’. The relationships between the characters ensure that the narrative retains a sense of disconnection which emphasises the overriding theme of loneliness.

Caravaggio’s path toward Hana is as fraught as hers. He first overhears from doctors about a nurse and her patient, then hears her name and insists on information about the identity of her patient. One of the first things he asks Hana when he arrives at the Villa is if her patient is with her and whether he can see him. Ondaatje delays the revelation of the link between the patient and Caravaggio until almost the end of the novel. Caravaggio insists on pinning the patient down to a particular identity in order to hold him accountable for the patient’s (inadvertent) deeds. Identity is required to make sense of events, and meaning helps us to avoid loneliness, as identity is clearly defined in relation to and because of others.

Ondaatje takes the issue of identity even further by making intertextual links in The English Patient. Garvie \(^{110}\) reports that ‘Hana and Caravaggio ... made an earlier appearance in minor roles in Ondaatje’s In the Skin of a Lion as the young daughter and friend of Patrick Lewis’s. Intertextuality is significant here as it lifts identity from the local to a wider plane. No longer do characters have a stable identity within a single text, since they are present within groups of texts.

The final issue to be discussed here concerning the patient and his room has to do with existential loneliness. For Almásy, the desert is the space through which he interprets the world; he feels the desert teaches him, that it has a soul. Hillger suggests that ‘the desert represents a different kind of cognitive space: the space of nomad

\(^{109}\) Ibid. p. 31.

thought, a space which ... has always been neglected by Western philosophy’. Almásy’s identity shifts like the desert – it is not fixed and unitary. Almásy attempts to negotiate Western maps, relationships and wars using a method of thought ignored by the Western tradition. This contributes to the failure of meaning he experiences. A parallel can be drawn with Hana’s nomadic tendencies within the Villa: she chooses to sleep in different places, at the edges of rooms, and she does not arrange a fixed bedroom or bed for her tenure at the Villa. Instead, she chooses to have the freedom to move about constantly where she finds ‘rest as opposed to sleep the truly pleasurable state’. She also selects dubious locations – at the edge of rooms she runs the risk of falling from the damaged building – yet she seems to prefer the constant movement. This shifting tendency in Hana’s character is nomadic, just as Almásy’s identity shifts like the desert.

The need for, indeed the value of, loneliness is summed up perceptively by Moustakas:

To love is to be lonely. Every love is eventually broken by illness, separation, or death ... In the absence of a loved one, in solitude and loneliness, a new self emerges, in solitary thought.

All love leads to suffering ... Every person is ultimately confronted with the pain of separation or death, with tragic grief which can be healed in silence and isolation. When pain is accepted and felt as one's own, at the centre of being, then suffering grows into compassion for other human beings and all living creatures ... Loneliness enables one to return to a life with others with renewed hope and vitality, with a fuller dedication, with a deeper desire to come to a healthy resolution of problems and issues involving others, with possibility and hope for a rich, true life with others ... To be worthy of one’s loneliness is an ultimate challenge ...

The lonely sufferer helps himself to a fuller realization of self, not by reducing his sense of pain and isolation, but by bringing its full extent and magnitude to consciousness.  

Each major character in the novel has a loss to grieve. Hana grieves for the unbearable violation of the sanctity of human life she has witnessed as a nurse. She also mourns the loss of the child she apparently aborted or miscarried. Obviously, the patient

112 Ibid. p. 48.
grieves the loss of his lover Katharine. He also mourns the futility and mess of the
decisions he made during the war. Caravaggio grieves his past and the life he has led.
He reflects that he ‘has been the man who slips away, in the way lovers leave chaos,
the way thieves leave reduced houses’. Kip struggles with his past as well. He
comes to terms with his brother who is jailed because he refuses to engage with the
notion of the West as inherently prestigious and a model to be emulated.

Hana and the patient share a loss of faith, and because of this, a loss of meaning and a
sense of loneliness, evoked clearly by Adam and Eve in the biblical Garden of Eden.
Once they transgress they are cut off from God and are isolated and alone. The
closing lines of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* reflect this idea: ‘They hand in hand with
wandering steps and slow / Through Eden took their solitary way’. When Madox
leaves Almásy for the last time, he offers his usual farewell: ‘May God make safety
your companion’, to which Almásy replies ‘There is no God’. In extreme
situations, fundamental beliefs are questioned. This is existentialism. If previously
held notions or beliefs no longer signify, the self is destabilised and this can lead to
loneliness. It would appear that Almásy has succumbed to existential doubt. One
night, as Kip lies with Hana in his tent, he reflects: ‘Hana is quiet. He knows the depth
of darkness in her, her lack of a child and of faith. He is always coaxing her from the
edge of her fields of sadness’. The war has created a crisis of moral meaning for the
nurse and her patient, and they struggle in darkness to comprehend the devastating
psychological attack.

Loneliness can also be seen as a failure of meaning. If it is no longer possible to
appeal to an objective set of ethics, meaning is lost and the individual withdraws into
oblivion, drifting in psychic space as she or he attempts to rebuild reality in an
accessible and comprehensible form. Loneliness may occur as a result of a breakdown
in human understanding of reality as it is understood in terms of space and time.
Psychological states can be so extreme that time and space no longer exist in an
identifiable form. Intense psychological states such as these can produce intense
feelings of isolation and loneliness. Cook asserts that

114 Ibid. p. 116.
117 Ibid. p. 271.
one indication that the English patient has somehow managed to extricate himself from the grip of time is the fact that he is more or less immune to the genealogical compulsion which drives the other characters. Hana, Kip, and Caravaggio are so preoccupied with time and genealogy, with memories of their childhoods, their homelands, or their lost fathers, because they are still committed to a phenomenal, time-bound sense of identity that nullifies the past, robbing them of whatever meaning or substance they have been able to accrue. Haunted by feelings of psychic fragmentation and alienation, by the “mood of a lost reality” (Baudrillard, Writings 155), they are always searching for some way of containing or reassembling themselves, some way of reversing the flow of time and getting back to the “inviolable identity of their origin”.  

Hillger raises a point (regarding the return to one’s roots) similar to Cook’s sentiments above:

Ondaatje’s use of The Odyssey as an intertext is of particular interest here, for the Homeric myth has been viewed by some Canadian literary nationalists as a text which best exemplifies the finding of one’s roots and origin ... [and] as an archetypal expression of the quest for both personal and national identity.

Language is a means of creating and expressing personal and national identity, thereby connecting with one’s origins. The exploration of one’s origins and one’s current identity can lead to the creation of a newer, more authentic identity which encompasses one’s origins as well as current conceptions of self. Interestingly, Hana, Kip and Caravaggio seldom articulate language in their interactions but instead resort to other more silent and less tangible forms of communication such as touch and small gestures of kindness, such as Kip’s decorations for the spontaneous birthday party for Hana. Lernout asserts that

except for the English patient, who cannot stop talking, the three characters are silent at first. Shut off from the rest of the world, they begin to talk, to share their past with each other; secrets are uncovered, wounds healed, until the sapper hears of a bomb that is too large to do anything about.

Their isolation is almost complete, and goes as far as an absence of vocal expression. Caravaggio suggests that ‘[t]alkers seduce, words direct us into corners,’ while the patient insists that Caravaggio talk to him, asking if he (the patient) is merely a book to be read. The importance of silence is continued through Hana who knows that ‘if [Kip] were in danger he would never turn and face her. He would create a space around himself and concentrate. This was his craft’; each morning he left the Villa without greeting any of them, ‘as if language, humanity, would confuse him’. Kip does this when he hears of the atomic bomb attacks. He retreats into silence and refuses to engage with any of the other characters. Loneliness, then, becomes a space that is free of words and language. The patient comments that Hana ‘was distant from everybody. The only way I could get her to communicate was to ask her to read to me’. Silence is a powerful means towards – and consequence of – solitude; and protracted silence leads the individual into isolation that no other character feels permitted to break. By the time the individual has realised her or his solitary state, implacable loneliness has set in.

Novak, following the work of Cathy Caruth (a leader in the field of trauma studies), offers an interesting discussion on trauma, meaning and language that can be applied here to *The English Patient* and the patient’s isolation. She claims that ‘*The English Patient*, while a novel about each character’s traumatic experiences during the war, is also a text about the trauma of History’. During traumatic events, an individual will block out the horror of the event in order to protect herself or himself. A paradox results: the individual later may wish to bring forth and give meaning to the event, while memory seeks to repress any flashbacks so as to avoid enduring the overwhelming traumatic anxiety of the experience again. The individual is haunted by the ghost of the past. The novel therefore represents the struggle between containing the past through memory and the return of the past that cannot be contained. It ‘stages the struggle to bring forth and give meaning to that which escapes our ability to know and comprehend’ and that the ‘patient’s memory, in translating the past into the
present, attempts to draw the silent ghost of the past into language’. This struggle is the site of loneliness. Novak suggests that the ‘trauma of the event can only be approached by listening for what is silent or unspeakable’ and that ‘only by refusing a stable and singular narrative structure can the present come close to listening to these silences [of the past]’.

Hana finds solace in one of the quietest places in the Villa, the library, and Ondaatje offers the reader insight into this enigmatic character through her time spent there. We are told that the library is oval shaped and that the space inside seemed safe except for a large hole at portrait level ... The rest of the room had adapted itself to this wound, accepting the habits of weather, evening stars, the sound of birds. There was a sofa, a piano covered in a grey sheet, the head of a stuffed bear and high walls of books.

Books are a weighty symbol in the novel. Ondaatje seems to suggest through his characters that books create access to knowledge; that they are to be used and explored like a kind of geography; that we write and rewrite history and ourselves through narratives. Not long after Caravaggio arrives and tells Hana why his hands are bandaged up, she opens a copy of *The Last of the Mohicans* to the back page and writes,

> There is a man named Caravaggio, a friend of my father’s. I have always loved him. He is older than I am, about forty-five, I think. He is in a time of darkness, has no confidence. For some reason I am cared for by this friend of my father.

She takes the book to the library and conceals it in one of the high shelves. It is significant that Hana cannot speak these words aloud. It as if she finds it impermissible to admit that she feels tenderness toward Caravaggio. Thus, Hana inscribes the words into a book – something tangible – but then hides it away on one of the high shelves. The choice of text is interesting, too, as the story of *The Last of the Mohicans* tells of just that – the last of a dying clan. This suggests increasing

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130 Ibid. p. 11.
131 Ibid. p. 61. original emphasis.
isolation and loneliness. Hana’s tendency to write herself into history is reminiscent of the patient’s copy of Herodotus in which he collects artefacts from his life.

Later, once Hana has become involved with Kip, she inscribes the back flyleaf of a book again, but this time the book she chooses is Kipling’s novel *Kim*. Kip reads to the patient occasionally and he happens to read out of the same book. This novel deals with discrimination based on race – a relevant choice in relation to Kip and his place in *The English Patient*. Ondaatje chooses this novel very carefully because of the significance of its author: Kipling was a member of the colonising force that was the British Empire of the nineteenth century. Kipling, from a white, English perspective creates tales about India, his adoptive country. Kip is Indian and (to corrupt a phrase coined by Edward Said) he reads back to the empire in the figure of the patient. Kip, an Indian, reads a book about India written by a coloniser, to a coloniser, and both of them are in isolation, stranded in the middle of a country at war.

Hana stops mid-way through her inscription of *Kim*, closes the novel and hides it on a ‘high, invisible shelf’. This is the same act of creating tangible evidence of her experiences as she performs using the copy of *The Last of the Mohicans*. Hana repeats the process on another occasion once she has come to know Kip more intimately. She walks into the library, eyes closed, pulls a book out at random and ‘finds a clearing between two sections in a book of poetry and begins to write there’. This, like the patient’s inscription of his text, is an attempt to reach out, to identify, to connect with oneself and others. She writes about trivialities she has discussed with Kip. The sentiments are forgettable, yet the very ordinariness of the words suggests a familiarity which occurs only in comfortable relationships. She is becoming used to Kip and she writes this intimacy into a textual mode known for its intimate nature – poetry. Hana makes a choice to leave isolation and loneliness by actively writing herself into books, which are communication devices, sources of history and sources of pleasure and knowledge.

Hana reads to the patient from *The Last of the Mohicans*, which is about a different kind of ‘Indian’ from the Indian represented in *Kim*, but still a marginalised group and

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132 Ibid. p. 118.
133 Ibid. p. 209.
still a book written by Western author. One other work of fiction mentioned in the narrative is *The Charterhouse of Parma*, which echoes Kip and Hana’s relationship because it tells of an inter-racial tryst. Hana reads the following passage:

“If I ever get out of my difficulties,” he said to Clelia, “I shall pay a visit to the beautiful pictures at Parma, and then will you deign to remember the name: Fabrizio del Dongo.”

The del Dongo character is marginalised because of his race and the problem this presents in the story, hence he feels he is not memorable but should be. One of the pages the patient pastes into Herodotus is a tale of another king, this time King David, and a woman he seduces.

Books are not the only form of expression and entertainment upon which Ondaatje draws. There is a keen sense of fun in his writing, and he often includes music as elements of the narrative. The patient is fond of ditties such as those of Duke Ellington and the Gershwins, which he periodically belts out. Hana also sings songs from her youth. The profusion of genres in the novel reflects the mixture of Ondaatje’s influences.

The library is a place in which Hana can find release and allow herself to be vulnerable – a room of hope, a room of her own. She allows herself to relax and to be caught up in other worlds and stories. Here, she allows herself to be healed – to be something other than what she has become and Hana tries to use music, as well as language, to connect with some part of her identity and past. One evening, Caravaggio is out and Hana is uncomfortable in the patient’s room. She walks down to the library, opens the French doors for fresh air and uncovers a slightly damaged piano. She begins to play it, trying desperately to remember her childhood lessons and her mother cleaning the piano in their house. For Hana, this room is a place of imagination, fun and creativity. It is a place to see the world as something other than the hell it has become. As she plays, a thunder storm begins and, during this frenzy of music and thunder, Kip and Hardy (Kip’s fellow sapper) walk in. The spell is not

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134 Ibid. p. 222. original emphasis.
broken until Hana is ready. She invites the pair in, and Caravaggio returns to find the living arrangements at the Villa changed.\textsuperscript{135}

Ondaatje skilfully weaves all these narratives (Hana, the patient, Kip and Caravaggio’s) together to reinforce the complex nature of literature in history and memory. History is to the community what memory is to the individual. The patient’s narrative is intertwined with myriad other narratives, real and imagined. These narratives include the events at the Villa as well as sub-plots such as the one concerning Katharine and Geoffrey Clifton. The telling of these narratives is not linear but (as discussed previously) is episodic and revelatory. The novel offers increasingly more as it continues in terms of the revelations concerning the patient’s life before and during the war. Novak\textsuperscript{136} asserts, in relation to the revelatory nature of the text, that the patient’s remembering propels the narrative and the other characters with him “into the well of memory”. Hence, his remembering functions at two levels in the novel: structuring his own discourse in the story, as well as the narrative as a whole.

The patient represents a well-educated, well-read member of the Westernised elite and his narrative is made up of scenes and events from other places and times. It can be said that his memory is his history. History connects us to a group of people or a set of events and this in turn confers identity. Identity is an important hindrance to loneliness because we identify ourselves in relation to others and are therefore not in isolation. The patient experiences isolation when he loses almost everything in the fire of his plane crash, including his physical identity. Because of the extent of his loss, his memories are what constitute his existence; what he turns to for proof of who he is or was. Memory, therefore, is an important tool in the creation and sustenance of identity and (as I have discussed previously) identity is intimately and intricately related to loneliness.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid. p. 62.
Amongst the cuttings the patient has added to his copy of Herodotus are notes related to Katharine and documents passed between the two. Hana glimpses a few of these. The first is a diary-type entry from July 1936 written by Almásy:

There are betrayals in war that are childlike compared with the human betrayals during peace ... This is done with nervous or tender sentences, although the heart is an organ of fire. A love story is not about those who lose their heart but about those who find that sullen inhabitant who, when it is stumbled upon, means the body can fool no one, can fool nothing – not the wisdom of sleep or the habit of social graces. It is a consuming of oneself and the past.\textsuperscript{137}

The second is a postcard without a date or name attached to it (assumed to be written by Katharine):

Half my days I cannot bear not to touch you.
The rest of the time I feel it doesn’t matter
if I ever see you again. It isn’t the morality,
it is how much you can bear.\textsuperscript{138}

The language used in these documents speaks of isolation. The sentence ‘[t]his is done with nervous or tender sentences, although the heart is an organ of fire’ is exemplary. The reticence of the phrase ‘nervous and tender sentences’ is juxtaposed with the power of the phrase ‘the heart is an organ of fire’. The juxtaposition suggests the barriers that humans place between true desires and social graces or acceptable behaviour. This leads to isolation because these true desires cannot be satisfied, which results in insecurity and a sense of discomfort. Another example of dislocation occurs in the description of the ‘sullen inhabitant who, when it is stumbled upon, means the body can fool no one, can fool nothing’. By ‘it’ Ondaatje supposedly means love.

Here, Ondaatje describes the destabilising nature of love. The body does not lie when it has found love (sleeping patterns are disturbed and one’s behaviour around others changes) and this can be isolating and dislocating because it forces the lover to acknowledge a desire for, and a reliance on, another. Self-sufficiency allows humans to avoid (or avoid acknowledging) a sense of loneliness, but the desire to be vulnerable to another opens the self to being aware of loneliness. These sentiments are

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid. p. 97. original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid. p. 154. original emphasis.
demonstrable in the second excerpt (from the postcard) where Katharine points to the love dichotomy: she claims that half the time she craves Almásy and the other half of the time she does not care if she sees him again. This constant internal struggle is dislocating as the lover must evaluate her or his independence. This can lead to a heightened sense of loneliness. As Katharine succinctly puts it: ‘it is how much you can bear’.

A reader comes to a love story with certain expectations. Love stories are about how much we can bear to be separated from each other, how much in isolation we are prepared to live. The links could not be more obvious between Anna Karenina (the novel Madox, Almásy’s colleague and friend, reads obsessively) and the world of betrayal involving Almásy, Katharine and her husband that Ondaatje creates. Tolstoy’s classic is a novel about a woman who follows her heart instead of her marriage. Madox would never consider an affair, in comparison with Almásy himself, who has one with Katharine. All three parties involved in the affair are left lonely: Katharine, because she has betrayed herself and must choose between her husband and her lover; Almásy because he must choose himself or Katharine, and Geoffrey Clifton, because he must choose between vengeance toward his wife (and her lover) or non-action. Betrayal causes greater separation from others, leading to greater loneliness.

Literature is the search for meaning behind events. This search for meaning may suggest the desire to become whole again. Penner suggests that for

[Almásy] a text will reveal the physical world existing outside writing, while for [Katharine] a narrative reveals as much about the teller/reader as the tale. In this, she is paralleled closely with Hana, who seeks signs of herself both within the texts of the library and in the anonymous tabula rasa to whose death watch she has dedicated herself ... Her triple role as reader, writer, and inscribed text suggests an interplay within the process of signification, an interplay that the Author Function seeks to shut down.139

Almásy uses literature to understand the world around him, while Katharine uses literature to portray as well as to interpret the world:

Then she [Katharine] began to read from The Histories – the story of Candaules and his queen. I always skim past that story. It is early in the book and has little to do with the places and period I am interested in. But it is of course a famous story. It was also what she had chosen to talk about.

This Candaules had become passionately in love with his own wife; and having become so, he deemed that his wife was fairer by far than all other women. To Gyges, the son of Daskylus (for he of all his spearmen was the most pleasing to him), he used to describe the beauty of his wife, praising it above all measure.

“Are you listening, Geoffrey?”
“Yes, my darling.”

He said to Gyges: “Gyges, I think that you do not believe me when I tell you of the beauty of my wife, for it happens that men’s ears are less apt of belief than their eyes. Contrive therefore means by which you may look upon her naked.”

There are several things one can say. Knowing that eventually I will become her lover, just as Gyges will be the queen’s lover and murderer of Candaules. I would often open Herodotus for a clue to geography. But Katharine had done that as a window to her life. Her voice was wary as she read. Her eyes only on the page where the story was, as if she were sinking within quicksand while she spoke.140

Almásy uses literature, and in this case Herodotus, as ‘a clue to geography’ while Katharine uses it ‘a window to her life’. For both Katharine and Hana, literature is both descriptive and expository. They both use tales to justify their own behaviour and to tell their stories. Reading from Kim,

Hana’s voice [was] slow when wind flattened the candle flame beside her, the page dark for a moment.

*He squatted in a corner of the clanging waiting-room, rapt from all other thoughts; hands folded in lap, and pupils contracted to pin-points. In a minute – in another half second – he felt he would arrive at the solution of the tremendous puzzle ...*141

This passage is reminiscent of other passages in the novel which describe the ‘solution of the tremendous puzzle’ which in this case is Kip’s work as he defuses bombs. Hana offers the story as a diversion but it also comes to describe her world

141 Ibid. p. 111.
and her experiences. She then writes her experiences into other novels, such as *The Last of the Mohicans*. Thus Hana takes up, as Penner puts it, the ‘triple role as reader, writer, and inscribed text’.

*The English Patient* can be seen as Ondaatje’s textual attempt to come to terms with his own history and memory. History is a troublesome topic for Ondaatje, who is Sri Lankan by birth. He immigrated with his family to England when he was a child and again to Canada not long after. Ondaatje’s mix of influences has brought him some criticism from literary circles. He has been chastised by Sri Lankan literary critics for writing within the Western canon and by Western critics for not fitting neatly into the same canon. In Ondaatje’s early novels he did not address the topic of literary categorisation but subsequent works, *The English Patient* in particular, face the problem squarely by using race, culture and displacement as themes.

Ondaatje is known for writing characters who have migratory heritages, meaning that their history is not fixed in one country. Each of the major characters in *The English Patient* has a history spanning three different countries and continents: the patient is Hungarian, having lived in England and worked in Africa; Hana is French-Canadian and works in Italy; Caravaggio is Italian-Canadian and worked in Germany; Kip is Indian, trained in England and works in Italy. The significance of such varied heritages is that it gives Ondaatje an opportunity to create a link between identity and loneliness. Each of these characters struggles with a sense of belonging, hence a struggle with loneliness.

A return to the discussion concerning the isolated quality of the characters in the novel is worthwhile. Each of the major characters is very much physically alone. Hana’s mother died during Hana’s childhood and her father is killed during the war. The only family she speaks of is an aunt, Clara, whom she writes to about her father. Caravaggio, as discussed earlier, is restless and cannot be permanently attached to other people though at one time he was married. It is easy to assume that the patient has always kept to himself owing to the nature of his work and temperament. Kip struggles to deal with his estranged brother and the shame and difficulty the brother has brought into the family. It is not surprising, then, that these four people find one another during possibly the darkest and most difficult time of their lives. They form a
strange kind of bond because of their isolation, and even in their loneliness they are not alone because they are, paradoxically, united in loneliness.

The characters are, however, united by more than their loneliness. The patient’s narrative shares textual space with Caravaggio’s and Kip’s narratives, just as Caravaggio and Kip share living space with the patient. Hana is the character that holds the group together and her narrative is part of the three men’s narratives. Ondaatje quotes the following excerpt from Herodotus\(^\text{142}\) which is eerily similar to the war the group have just come through:

\[
\text{I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what Man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds manifested by both Greeks and Barbarians ... together with the reason they fought one another.}
\]

Ondaatje seems to be suggesting that even after all these stories have been written, even after we have all this history and memory to learn from, we still fight wars without reason. We appeal to greatness and the necessity of war yet we continue to seek meaning in the face of such abomination. Caravaggio has very few resources to deal with the lack of meaning that has led to his presence at the Villa and he desperately wants to create a narrative in order to create meaning around the loss of his thumbs. The loss of his thumbs is significant as opposable thumbs are one of the major biological features that set humans apart from animals. Caravaggio becomes not only more dependent on others but also more like an animal because of the loss. He desires to appropriate the patient’s memory and history and manipulate it into a form that will release him from the dark night of his soul.

History and memory may not only be a cause of loneliness but a result of it too. An individual may remember and hanker after a time in her or his history when life was better than it is currently, which can result in the individual appearing to be lonely when in reality she or he is merely caught up in thought. Memory, however, can be deceptive, as Novak\(^\text{143}\) suggests:

\[^{142}\] Ibid. p. 240. original emphasis.
[t]he patient’s memory performs an act of translation by bringing forth into the language of the present the absences of the past. But, as it translates the events of the past into an image in the present, it does not reveal the past as it really was.

Hana, Kip, Caravaggio and the patient each have a history on which they dwell. That history, that past, must be part of the present and their present loneliness.

Novak argues that the past is represented in a memory that is experienced in the present, and that memory is not ‘a full embodiment of the past that the [sic] can be conjured up to occupy the present’. Thus,

[t]he meaning of the past that comes to us through the patient’s memories escapes totalization because, severed from its fixed point of origin in the past, there is no referent that can ground meaning ... past and present bleed into one another, and meaning comes only through a sliding and shifting play of signification, which threatens to destabilize it.144

Because the patient does not offer solid facts, the reader never knows the truth and must rely on the patient’s memories. These bleed into the present, thereby shifting their meaning. Meaning is not to be found in the present moment or a memory from the past. It is through the movement between past and present moments that signification is attained. Here, ‘[m]emory offers not a linear movement from past to future, but instead, offers a vision of the past as ruin’.145

Novak also makes some interesting points about memory and the style of The English Patient. She suggests that the retelling of the narrative by way of memory is not intended to replace the linear, historical narrative but to act as a supplement to it – indeed to interrupt the comfort of a conventional narrative. Discontinuous moments in the narrative progression contribute to the fluid quality of the novel, ‘the sense that it escapes definitive meanings and singular interpretations’.146

Narrative is treated in other ways through the importance of the library and books, which is summed up lovingly in the novel. Ondaatje tells us that

[Hana] entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams.¹⁴⁷

This passage indicates that literature affects individuals in real and meaningful ways, even to the extent that the effect is physical. Hana uses the stories to enter into something unconscious and eternal, something greater than her daily struggles.

This chapter has considered loneliness as it is found in physical and psychical extremity and the quest for healing which this loneliness prompts. The four main characters in the novel are wounded and initially this drives them apart. The time they spend together in the Villa allows each to heal in an appropriate manner. Issues of identity, history and memory suggest that we cannot, and do not, exist in isolation. History forms part of our identity (be it lived or literary), and memory is what binds that identity together. Identity is a major hindrance to loneliness. Each character must redefine her or his identity in relation to other characters in order to be set free from isolation.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 12.
Chapter Three

The Kitchen, the Garden and the Hall

Just as the patient’s room signifies dislocation and disorientation, so too do other rooms in the Villa. One is the kitchen, a place of intimacies. The characters, particularly Hana, communicate (and remain silent about) very deep, personal struggles in this space. It is also a meeting place for them physically, ideologically and emotionally. The initial reacquaintance between Hana and Caravaggio, which is awkward, takes place in this room.

In Chapter II, Hana is seated at the kitchen table in the dark. Caravaggio in his old habit as thief and spy approaches the kitchen stealthily. He walks almost soundlessly toward her. Hana turns up the wick on the oil lamp, sits very still and waits as he crouches next to her. She is surprised by his reticence – it is ‘somehow familiar and comforting to her, that he could approach this privacy of hers and the English patient’s without loudness’. Caravaggio is the first outsider to join the patient and Hana at the Villa. Perhaps even more unexpected is their first exchange of words: Caravaggio asks Hana to tell him what a tonsil is; he then offers muddled ideas concerning the patient and his journey to find her to which Hana does not reply. She then shows Caravaggio into the hall. She is completely silent yet she trembles as she returns to the table and her half-finished book. She cannot believe that he made the arduous journey just to see her.

Hana has created an identity during the war which has allowed her to privilege certain parts of her personality and her past. The sudden but seemingly purposeful arrival of someone from her past interrupts this pretending and she is forced to address the comfortable lie she has created. She finds it difficult to process the shift in reality of the arrival of her father’s friend and with it her past and the loss of her father whom she is trying to forget. The arrival of Caravaggio is a catalyst in the healing process for Hana. She can no longer delude herself about her past and so she must begin to address that past thereby finding a way to acceptance and healing. In the kitchen she

148 Ibid. p. 30.
finds ideas that she must digest and sustenance for her soul. This can be linked to loneliness in that Hana is confronted with her own isolation and the loneliness of the persona she has created for herself. Caravaggio threatens that loneliness and through memory and shared intimacies reaches out to her.

Caravaggio and Hana meet again in the kitchen but this time Hana is a woman, not a girl. When Hana was a child Caravaggio witnessed her singing and dancing in the family kitchen with her father, but now Hana lives on her own, adult, terms. Hana sits hunched over with her head on the kitchen table. She is half-dressed with her back and shoulders naked. In a particularly emotive and unsettling passage in the novel we meet Hana and Caravaggio at their most vulnerable:

Caravaggio stood there. Those who weep lose more energy than they lose during any other act. It was not yet dawn. Her face against the darkness of the table wood.

“Hana,” he said, and she stilled herself as if she could be camouflaged by stillness.

“Hana.”

She began to moan so the sound would be a barrier between them, a river across which she could not be reached.

He was uncertain at first about touching her in her nakedness, said “Hana,” and then lay his bandaged hand on her shoulder. She did not stop shaking. The deepest sorrow, he thought. Where the only way to survive is to excavate everything.

She raised herself, her head down still, then stood up against him as if dragging herself away from the magnet of the table.

“Don’t touch me if you’re going to try and fuck me.”

...“Hana.”

“Do you understand?”

“Why do you adore him so much?”

“I love him.”

“You don’t love him, you adore him.”

“Go away, Caravaggio. Please.”

“You’ve tied yourself to a corpse for some reason.”

“He is a saint. I think. A despairing saint. Are there such things? Our desire is to protect them.”

“He doesn’t even care!”

“I can love him.”

“A twenty-year-old who throws herself out of the world to love a ghost!”

Caravaggio paused. “You have to protect yourself from sadness. Sadness is very close to hate. Let me tell you this. This is the thing I learned. If you take someone else’s poison – thinking you can cure them by sharing it – you will instead store it within you. Those men in the desert were smarter than you.
They assumed he could be useful. So they saved him, but when he was no longer useful they left him.”
“Leave me alone.”

This extract illustrates and exemplifies the anatomy of loneliness. Three points concerning the phenomenon present themselves in this passage. The first is to do with darkness. Loneliness is popularly described as darkness – a feeling of being unable to orientate oneself, to see clearly. Dark times of the day are when one is most aware of a sense of loneliness and aloneness if only because one cannot physically see anyone else. This scene occurs before dawn literally and metaphorically since Hana has not yet resolved (and made peace with) her experiences. She rests her head on the dark wood of the table. All she can see, and all she can identify with, is darkness. She has taken up with what Caravaggio refers to as a ‘ghost’, an image which implies the perceived darkness of death.

The second point concerns distance. Hana distances herself from the others in her grief. She weeps in private and she attempts to camouflage her pain. When she does allow herself to express her unfathomable sorrow she does this so loudly and primally that she creates a barrier – ‘a river across which she could not be reached’ – and does so when she is alone. She also creates distance through her mistrust of Caravaggio’s intentions. He is uncertain of extending a hand, the natural human tendency to comfort (physically) someone in distress. She rejects his advances in case they are sexual. She chooses isolation over the connection with another human being, possibly a sexual connection, which would result in a joining together, not isolation.

The third point concerns solitude. As has already been argued Hana is isolated in her grief. Her torment is a weariness of the world: she has suffered too much and she has seen too much suffering. She is caught in a state where she is mistrustful, angry and tired, and searches for constancy and comfort as a refuge from a changeable world. She desires company so little that she chooses a dying man with whom to share her days. But he is not a companion – he is an object of adoration to Hana, a religious icon even, to which she can devote herself out of fanatical zeal. Perhaps she believes her sacrificial service will redeem her from the hell in which she finds herself. When

149 Ibid. pp. 44-5.
150 Ibid. pp. 44.
Caravaggio warns her about sadness he is really warning Hana about wading into loneliness so deeply that it becomes self-pity. This would be incapacitating for Hana and she reacts by withdrawing further into solitude.

Late in the novel’s narrative, the effects of Hana’s healing become evident. One night, on Hana’s birthday, Kip prepares dinner on the terrace. He assembles an enormous, indulgent meal complete with red wine. He also fills numerous tiny snail shells with oil and uses them as candles. The resulting scene is one of the most spontaneous, romantic and joyous of the novel. As they wait for Kip to finish his preparations Caravaggio enters the kitchen and announces that he wishes to tell Hana a small story but she does not want to hear it if it is to do with her father Patrick. She claims that she still is not ready for such tales. This may be a refusal to discuss the subject yet now she is able to verbalise her feelings regarding her father’s passing. Caravaggio, his usual blunt self, tells Hana that ‘“[f]athers die. You keep on loving them in any way you can. You can’t hide him away in your heart” ’. Caravaggio may be lacking empathy but his words are kindly meant as they require Hana to face reality and to embrace it in spite of the torment it may bring. Continuing the spirit of freedom, the trio converse freely over dinner hinting at their past selves. Caravaggio tells the story of a time when Hana sang the ‘Marseillaise’ and Kip suddenly attempts a version but Hana stops him saying that he should sing it out. She climbs onto the table between the snail shells and sings out into the darkness. Hana sings as if she is echoing the tentative circle of light around her in the darkness. She was singing it as if it was scarred, as if one couldn’t ever again bring all the hope of the song together. It had been altered by the five years leading to this night of her twenty-first birthday in the forty-fifth year of the twentieth century. Singing in the voice of a tired traveller, alone against everything. A new testament. There was no certainty in the song anymore, the singer could only be one voice against all the mountains of power. That was the only sureness. The one voice was the single unspoiled thing.

Hana is no longer tortured by her singularity. The evening with the two men reaffirms her presence as part of something, part of someone. In sharing the music with them she overcomes her loneliness and isolation. Dawson asserts that ‘Hana’s rendition of the ‘Marseillaise’ ... testifies to her attempt to renegotiate the relationship between

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151 Ibid. p. 266.
152 Ibid. p. 269.
citizenship and subjectivity in light of the violence she has seen waged in the name of nationhood’. By this, Dawson means that Hana sings the ‘Marseillaise’ with gusto out of a personal experience of a war her nationhood has caused her to endure. She suggests through her song that there is a person behind the citizen and that that person will endure regardless of the violence that surrounds her. Hana is empowered to move on, sure of the necessity and uniqueness of her being. She has begun to ease into the darkness. She has begun to heal.

Hana is not the only entity that endures the war despite the destruction. The Villa’s garden – a central image in the novel – is damaged but survives. Although the garden is not strictly a part of the physical Villa building, it shares a sympathetic relationship with it and falls victim to the ravages of the war in a similar manner to the building:

Behind the Villa a rock wall rose higher than the house. To the west of the building was a long enclosed garden ...

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. 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 like further rooms. She worked along the edges of them aware always of unexploded mines. In one soil-rich area beside the house she began to garden with a furious passion that could come only to someone who had grown up in a city.

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.

The condition of the garden landscape echoes the physical state of the Villa’s inhabitants. Reportedly, the limbs of most of the statues have been blown off. This is reminiscent of Caravaggio who has lost parts of his limbs and Kip who lives with the constant threat of losing limbs while defusing a bomb. The liminal boundary between the damaged building and the burned earth is echoed in the character of the patient who is also damaged and exists somewhere between a fulfilled life and that of an invalid. The instinct to repair and make whole can be seen in Hana who tends to the earth ferociously in spite of the futility of the act just as she cares for her patient, indeed all the men, who share the Villa with her. She cares for all of them by interacting with them despite her self-imposed commitment only to the patient.

The garden carries symbolic resonances for two further reasons. The first concerns the *tromp l’oeil* found in the patient’s room and the library. A textual connection can be drawn between the physical exterior and interior of the Villa as well as a connection between the physical condition of the grounds and the psychological state of its inhabitants. Nature resides outside the building and, in this case, a battered garden and building exist. A similar pattern applies to the disrepair of the building and garden and the brokenness of the characters living inside the building. By being painted onto the walls, the *tromp l’oeil* brings nature into the building. The artificial representation of nature signifies its limitations as always an imitation. Nature, it proclaims, will always be outside and it will always be distant.

The second reason for the garden’s significance is to be found in the evoked correspondence between the Villa San Girolamo and Paradise or the Garden of Eden. The Villa is described as an Edenic place, a refuge for the characters. The image of a garden is intrinsically linked to the original Garden (Eden) and the events which occurred there. In that garden the progenitors Adam and Eve are completely at one with each other and with God. They have everything they could need and live harmoniously. The first act of disobedience – the decision to give in to temptation – results in everlasting pain, suffering and exile from Paradise and infinite loneliness or separation from God. For the characters in the novel, however, the Villa is more of a reverse Eden. The characters, instead of transgressing and enduring subsequent banishment, return to the Villa to find healing and a closer bond with nature and the creator. They come from pain and suffering to this garden to rebuild harmonious relationships and to relinquish the ever-present spirit of betrayal which surrounds them.

The garden acts as a symbol elsewhere in the novel. When Hana first arrives at the Villa she creates a seedbed. In order to protect her crops she carries the six-foot crucifix from the chapel and uses it to create a scarecrow.155 The image is alluring as it crystallises Hana’s internal, dynamic struggle between death and life. She plants the seeds of recovery and regrowth in her own life by choosing herself and the patient...

over her obligations as an army nurse. Yet she struggles to heal because of the crisis of meaning concerning war, death and life that she experiences. As Hana internalises the horror of the war and her personal experiences during it, she is faced with her own scarecrow crucifix in that she must begin to identify what it is that protects her.

The character most easily associated with the garden is Kip – Kirpal Singh. Kip is always on the outside of the group observing from the sidelines. He bivouacs in his army-issue tent and refuses to accept Hana’s invitations to live with the others inside the Villa. He chooses isolation and an ascetic lifestyle over the relative comfort of the Villa. His loneliness is represented as the loneliness of the Other. Ondaatje seems to indicate that he, as a younger man in India, did not fit in. Kip describes how

“Those accepted filled up the courtyard. The coded results [of medical tests performed on enlisting men’s bodies] written onto our skin with yellow chalk. Later, in the lineup, after a brief interview, an Indian officer chalked more yellow onto the slates tied around our necks. Our weight, age, district, standard of education, dental condition and what unit we were best suited for.

“I did not feel insulted by this. I am sure my brother would have been, would have walked in fury over to the well, hauled up the bucket, and washed the chalk markings away. I was not like him. Though I loved him. Admired him. I had this side to my nature which saw reason in all things. I was the one who had an earnest and serious air at school, which he would imitate and mock. You understand, of course, I was far less serious than he was, it was just that I hated confrontation. It didn’t stop me doing whatever I wished or doing things the way I wanted to. Quite early on I had discovered the overlooked space open to those of us with a silent life. I didn’t argue with the policeman who said I couldn’t cycle over a certain bridge or through a specific gate in the fort – I just stood there, still, until I was invisible, and then I went through.156

Kip is an independent spirit who seeks to fulfil his goals at whatever cost. He is not concerned with acquiescing to his father’s wishes regarding his vocation and he does not share his brother’s concern for politics. He feels a strong need to explore the world on his own terms. Enlisting in the military to fight on the side of the English is part of this tendency and this allows him to be part of something greater than himself, to exist not in isolation but as part of something. The desire to belong to a group and an idea outweighed the predictability of a routine life for Kip; ‘he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like

156 Ibid. p. 200.
Kip experiences two forms of loneliness in his situation. First, he suffers ideological loneliness – a separation from a defined belief system – in his alienation from his own community and culture. He experiences loneliness both in nationality and ethnicity and in broad and specific ways. He feels lonely within his adoptive country: not only is his localised, everyday life uncomfortable but his national life is unsatisfactory too. Kip does not identify with the people around him, his local community, nor does he identify with the idea of belonging to India as a nation. Secondly, he experiences geographical loneliness. He desires to live elsewhere than India in a land he has been taught to believe is superior to his own. He hankers after an ideal that he has never experienced – the West – and desires a change in his life so badly that he volunteers to fight in a war that is not his own. Ironically, once he has seen the atrocities of the war that his adoptive country is a champion of he comes to reject the very ideological and geographical belonging he initially adopted. This awkwardness of place, the condition of perpetual exile, leads to the loneliness of dislocation in the Other.

If the Other is able to wrench free of the ‘master’, the Other must suffer another form of loneliness: transition. Children must experience the pain of separation from their parents in whose ideals and style of life they are brought up. Similarly, Kip must witness an horrendous act, generated by the very people he respects, before he is shocked out of complacency. After the events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki he cannot remain in the world he revered as civilised and right. He is unable to comprehend the events and changes and his reaction reflects this. Almost instantaneously, he drops his army paraphernalia, takes up his rifle and marches to the patient’s room (who represents the English) where he points the firearm at the patient and demands that the patient listen to the radio. This is described as follows:

If he closes his eyes he sees the streets of Asia full of fire. It rolls across cities like a burst map, the hurricane of heat withering bodies as it meets them, the shadows of humans suddenly in the air. This tremor of Western wisdom.

...
Now his face is a knife. The weeping from shock and horror contained, seeing everything, all those around him, in a different light. Night could fall between them, fog could fall, and the young man’s dark brown eyes would reach the new revealed enemy.

My brother told me. Never turn your back on Europe. The deal makers. The contract makers. The map drawers. Never trust Europeans, he said. Never shake hands with them. But we, oh, we were easily impressed – by speeches and medals and your ceremonies. What have I been doing these last few years? Cutting away, defusing, limbs of evil. For what? For this to happen?158

Kip is disgusted and ashamed that his brother’s mistrust of the West was accurate and that he has betrayed himself and his country by following a futile dream. Later, in conversation with Caravaggio, Kip says:

When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. ...

He has not eaten food or drunk water, is unable to swallow anything. Before the light failed he stripped the tent of all military objects, all bomb disposal equipment, stripped all insignia off his uniform. Before lying down he undid the turban and combed his hair out and then tied it up into a topknot and lay back.159

Kip discards the markers and symbols of his adoptive country as he rejects all that these mean. He returns to a natural, authentic version of himself. Early the next morning he climbs onto his motorcycle and drives away. He uses the route along which he came and has an accident in the rain during which he and his motorcycle are plunged into a river. It is the baptism Kip needs. He recreates his identity and turns away from loneliness.

Kip is simultaneously part and yet not part of the Villa’s foursome. He ‘seems casually content with this small group in the Villa, some kind of loose star on the edge of their system’:

This is like a holiday for him after the war of mud and rivers and bridges. He enters the house only when invited in, just a tentative visitor.160

This is indicative of the loneliness of the Other mentioned earlier. Hana, Caravaggio and the patient hail from the West and they have fairly similar cultural practices and

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159 Ibid. pp. 286-7.
160 Ibid. p. 75.
knowledge. Kip arrives with a wholly different worldview in terms of culture, race and religion. He is Sikh Indian, rather than Christian; he is dark-skinned rather than Caucasian; he comes from an Eastern background rather than a Western one. He assimilates into his adoptive country, England, quickly and well and is fascinated by the eccentricity of the people. He is fond of English cuisine (particularly condensed milk) and appreciates the ordered, private way of life. Yet the markers of his difference precede him: his dark skin and his turban. The gravity of Kip’s awareness of his difference is described below:

He knew he was for now a king, a puppet master, could order anything, a bucket of sand, a fruit pie for his needs, and those men who would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak to him when they were off duty would do what he desired. It was strange to him ... But he knew he did not like it. He was accustomed to his invisibility ... The self-sufficiency and privacy Hana saw in him later were caused not just by his being a sapper in the Italian campaign. It was as a result of being the anonymous member of another race, a part of the invisible world. He had built up defences of character against all that, trusting only those who befriended him.161

Kip as the Other builds up defences against apparent disregard from his peers. This puts into place a cycle of Otherness. The Other has an implacable sense of being different and behaves accordingly by retreating and putting up defences which result in being misunderstood by others or in being distanced from others, isolated. The sense of otherness, of perpetual banishment, reinforces the loneliness that comes from feeling misconstrued or misunderstood.

The reader is never assured of Ondaatje’s attitude toward the representation of race and ethnicity in his own writing. It can be argued, however, that in giving a member of the ‘invisible world’, an Other, a space to become visible Ondaatje acknowledges the need to give a voice to his own silence on the topic. Eleanor Ty asserts that ‘[t]he sapper’s body and the burned body of the patient, both dark skinned, are juxtaposed in Ondaatje’s novel’.162 The patient is a white man with black skin. He is supposedly English, yet he is not in a position of power; he is not the coloniser. He is helpless and relies on others (the Bedouin tribe, who rescue him in the desert, and Hana) to care for him: ‘Kip’s isolation and his dark skin are emphasized several times in the novel ...

Initially, he feels that his race is a negative factor in England ... People tend to ignore him, and he feels excluded because of his otherness'.

Ty suggests that these factors ‘contribute to a sense of dislocation and a questioning of traditional concepts of nation, identity, and race’ in the novel. It could be argued that the sense of dislocation prompts a heightened awareness of loneliness and from this stems the questioning of traditional concepts of nation, identity and race. It is a self-perpetuating cycle: the more one questions one’s place in the world, the more one tends to feel lonely, the more one questions one’s place in the world. Concepts of nationhood, identity and race are factors that prompt questions regarding one’s place in the world.

Race is intertwined with notions of identity, evident in the manner in which Kip’s identity is decided for him by his coloniser. In the novel ‘whiteness is supreme. Kim is recruited as a spy for the British because of his ability to pose as a member of any race or caste. This skill, shared by Almásy, is a product of his “white” blood, which repeatedly distinguishes him from the exotic rabble around him’. Race can become a barrier to meaningful interaction with others and it therefore predisposes one to loneliness in a situation where race is the basis for discrimination. Novak writes:

Kip is relegated to the margins of this group of characters. Within the Western world in which the other characters live, Kip is denied status as a knowing, speaking subject. As a colonial subject, Kip resides in the margins between competing cultures and ways of knowing ... he is forced to bear the identity provided him by Western culture, rendered visible insomuch as he resembles Indian characters in a British novel. Within this colonial framework, he has no stable “I.” He does not know and name the world, but rather is marked and known by it.

Kip remains distant from the group, a silent witness to their histories. His own memories ‘confined by the logic of Colonial history, remain primarily in the third person [and unheard] ... Kip is refused the possibility of positioning himself as a

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163 Ty, Eleanor. 2000. ‘The Other Questioned: Exoticism and Displacement in Michael Ondaatje’s The English Patient.’ International Fiction Review. 27(1/2): 13. Ty refers to Homi Bhabha’s notion that the scopic drive, or ‘pleasure in seeing’, plays a significant role in one’s formation of the Other, and that ‘skin, because it is so visible, becomes the “fetish of colonial discourse” ’ (p. 10).


stable “I” who might speak and interpret the events of his own past.167 Dawson has this to say concerning Kip’s silence after the bombings:

By choosing to register Kip’s realization of his own sub-alternity with silence, Ondaatje acknowledges that the self-consciousness of the subaltern subject cannot be articulated outside of that discourse which also provides the hierarchies of value that denigrate the subaltern’s race and ethnicity.168

This suggests that the discrepancy between inferiors and superiors is reinforced by the subaltern via her or his silence concerning that discrepancy. By Othering themselves, subalterns distance themselves from their superiors and distance themselves from each other by remaining silent. This distance fosters loneliness since identity is destabilised. The lack of a stable identity – the fluid ‘I’ – Novak goes on to suggest, is exactly what renders Kip a dangerous entity. Kip’s ‘ability to penetrate the borders of the colonial world disrupts the division between the Western and non-Western world, threatening the stability of colonial logic’.169 Kip slips through the cracks of the West and the narrative. He challenges the other characters and the reader to see themselves for what they are: spuriously superior. Kella, however, appears to disagree by suggesting that

[t]he colour of his burned skin simultaneously races and deraces Almásy. In the logic of much of the text, skin color is a characteristic subordinate to other markers of nationality and, finally, of humanity. Nationality uneasily encompasses racial difference, and, ultimately, the family of man subsumes both racial and national differences as merely external and contingent.170

Interestingly, Kip is guilty of prejudice himself. He seizes the chance not long after he arrives in London to volunteer himself into a unit of engineers set up to deal with delayed-action and unexploded bombs. This is how he comes to be involved with his beloved mentor Lord Suffolk. At the entrance test Kip waits apprehensively in an office with the other candidates. He keeps to himself and occupies himself by reading the spines of books on a shelf. He stands opposite an austere woman who appears suspicious. Kip

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turned and saw the woman’s eyes on him again. He felt as guilty as if he had put the book in his pocket. She had probably never seen a turban before. The English! They expect you to fight for them but won’t talk to you.  

Later Kip discovers that the woman is Miss Morden, Lord Suffolk’s secretary, of whom he becomes very fond. She mentions that she had selected him for the unit even before he took the examination based simply on his character. This episode indicates that Kip has internalised the shame the West has intended him to feel. He is represented as a savage, inherently devious and untrustworthy. Worst of all, he believes that this is so since he is conscious of the gaze of the West continually on him. Kip perpetuates the rule of power by judging others on the grounds on which he feels he is being judged. This suspicion breeds mistrust and sets him apart, which renders him enigmatic but ultimately alone.

Race, culture and ethnicity are pertinent issues for Ondaatje and he uses his characters to explore the import of these issues in the context of human interaction and relationships. Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka in 1943, moved to England when he was 11 and to Toronto when he was 19 years old. His early poetry and novels (particularly Running in the Family) deal with highly personal experiences of the world and especially his family. The English Patient was published in 1992. It is Ondaatje’s most global text and the work that explores his South Asian heritage in the form of the character Kip. It explores heritage and race generally through the narrative which suggests a simultaneous investigation of what draws humans together and what drives them apart.

Ondaatje has come under considerable fire for his apparent unwillingness to engage with his ‘mixed’ heritage and his resultant position as a postcolonial writer – a label he rejects. Canadian journalists and reviewers of South Asian origin claim that Ondaatje is ‘ignoring the pressing social and political issues of his native country. Some attacked him in print accusing him of being politically naïve’.  

Ondaatje did not appreciate the critics’ desire to categorise him and replied:

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171 Ibid. p. 188.
As a writer I don’t think I’m concerned with art and aesthetic issues, any more than I would want to be just concerned with making the subject of being Sri Lankan in Canada my one and only subject. I go to writing to discover as many aspects of myself and the world around me as I can. I go to discover, to explore, not to state the case I already know.\textsuperscript{173}

Despite the erudite rebuttal above Ondaatje seemed to bow under the pressure, using the character of Kip to investigate his heritage. Nevertheless, critics continue to harangue him about the character of Kip and Kip’s part in the narrative. Ty suggests that

\[\text{through Kip, Ondaatje comes closest to writing about the experience of the ethnic other. In the past, Ondaatje has been criticized by other South Asians of writing in a “universal” rather than a distinctly ethnic voice, and for sacrificing his regionality and his background. Kip’s ethnic origin, his Indian identity, is conspicuous, and through him Ondaatje raises issues of race and racial prejudice in a predominantly Western culture.}\textsuperscript{174}\]

Singh, however, praises Ondaatje for the symbol of Kip. She writes that

\[\text{Ondaatje’s finale gradually builds up to the Other questioning Us. \textit{The English Patient} may be a novel produced in the West by a Dutch-Sri Lankan, but the readers look into the novel and see an Asian, a Sikh looking at the West ... Kip offers urgent reflections for western readers. In his Punjabi accent, he makes them examine their attitudes towards the Other. He embodies the famous Rushdie statement: “... the empire writes back to the Centre” (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin). Ondaatje presents him as an authentic Indian voice protesting loudly and clearly against the racial superiority and technological savagery of the West.}\textsuperscript{175}\]

National identity is one factor used to avoid or overcome loneliness. By belonging to something greater than oneself, in this case a shared geographical location and heritage, one can feel connected to others and this dissipates feelings of isolation or dislocation. The reverse is true: if this sense of belonging is challenged, doubts regarding one’s place in the world can foster a sense of loneliness. Ondaatje initially rejects an explicit literary exploration of his heritage but, as the arguments above indicate, he cannot but engage with nationality and heritage in \textit{The English Patient.}

Kip is the character he performs this exploration through and he uses Kip as a

\textsuperscript{173} Jewinski, Ed. 1994. p. 120.
comment on the alienation and dislocation produced by differences in culture and nationality.

Other criticism of the novel generally involves the ending – the bombings and Kip’s departure. Critics, particularly Americans, have been incensed by Ondaatje’s insinuations concerning the atomic bombs. The problem lies in the perceived innocence of the Asians whom Kip imagines dying in such a barbaric fashion. Critics suggest that the Second World War was necessary and that many British and American soldiers fought justifiably and heroically. To associate Kip with the ‘brown races of the world’ and these races in turn with the Japanese is an unforgivable oversight and a crude polemic.\textsuperscript{176} Both these races have committed their fair share of atrocities. Race may be inherently divisive but it should not be used as a tool to drive people apart.

In Ondaatje’s defence, he did not produce a two-dimensional character in Kip. The character allows the reader to examine both forced and elected loneliness. The following description of Kip illustrates the cultural conflict represented in and through him:

\begin{quote}
When he steps into the seemingly empty Villa he is noisy. He is the only one of them who has remained in uniform. Immaculate, buckles shined, the sapper appears out of his tent, his turban symmetrically layered, the boots clean and banging into the wood or stone floors of the house. On a dime he turns from a problem he is working on and breaks into laughter.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

Kip displays exceptional attention to detail, a trait he possibly picked up in his daily work with bombs, yet he is larger than life in his whistling and laughter. He is a living contradiction. He continually seeks to create meaning out of his experiences and to reconcile himself to the two different worlds he psychologically straddles (these being the West and the East) as well as his intensely focused and dangerous work and his natural ease. By narrowing the gap between these extremities Kip is able to avoid fragmentation in his mind which in turn helps him to avoid being consumed by loneliness. At the end of the novel, after the atomic bomb incident, Kip realises that it

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid. pp. 74-5.
is impossible to reconcile these disparate parts of himself. He must admit that his ignominious, jailed brother is right in his distrust of the English and their wars. This realisation produces such an intense sense of alienation in Kip that he turns his back on his new home and returns to his roots repulsed by the depravity of humans, particularly those in positions of power, but touched by the personal encounters he has had during the war.

Kip’s war does not only involve humans – it is also with Nature. Ondaatje uses Kip’s character and the garden to investigate the effect of war on nature and vice versa. Kip disposes of bombs which are, on the whole, located in the open. He must spend time in mud, ditches, rivers and fields securing the area. The land Kip works, indeed the Villa’s garden, has been shelled and destroyed. He struggles to connect to the earth and recognise it as an ally since it conceals too many secrets and he struggles to connect with the new land in which he finds himself – first England and then Europe.

Land can be an ally but it can also be a transient friend. The real heroine of *The English Patient*, according to Lernout, is the Libyan Desert. The desert is a dynamic and productive symbol of change; it is an unfinished companion. It is also a wide open space of nothingness, of isolation and loneliness. In fact, Hillger (following Deleuze and Guattari) suggests that Ondaatje, inspired by the desert, departs from a sedentary sense of self and puts forth a concept of self with no fixed identity, wandering about, being born of the states that it consumes and being reborn with each new state. Deleuze puts it as follows: ‘We are deserts ... The desert, experimentation on oneself, is our only identity, our single chance for the combinations that inhabit us’.

Hillger’s argument is based on the notion of ‘nomad thought’ mentioned earlier in this dissertation. Fundamentally, this philosophy holds that process is paramount in thought. Thus ‘the nomad philosopher seeks to comprehend what is involved in the very process of thought’s encounter with the world outside’.

The above idea accounts for the nomadic tendencies of the characters in the novel. The four main characters (and Katharine) are geographically nomadic. Each is in a

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place far from her or his birthplace. There is constant physical movement by each character and there is incessant movement in the novel within and across narratives in terms of location and time. Hana moves about the Villa constantly. Even her vocation does not permit her to rest – she constantly tends to her patients. Caravaggio’s career is by necessity nomadic. He continually seeks new objects to steal and later he steals secrets. He does not have children and sees himself as forever a bachelor even though he has been married for some time. Kip is nomadic in his cultural allegiances. The English patient, as Almásy, is the quintessential nomad. His life was grounded upon temporary settlement in his capacity as a desert explorer and cartographer for the London Royal Geographical Society. It is interesting, then, that he commits places to paper permanently but is rootless himself. Katharine is a reluctant nomad because of her husband’s assignment in the Saharan desert. She is also nomadic in her relationships. She moves between her husband Geoffrey and Almásy, unable to settle on one, desiring the opportunities of both. It is ironic that Katharine, the character with the strongest sense of home and an equally strong desire to return to it, should die in a cave far from her home, alone and in pain.

A comparison can be drawn between the desert and the Villa’s hall as a space of perpetual movement. The reader is told that in the Villa ‘[t]here were few beds left. [Hana] herself preferred to be nomadic in the house with her pallet or hammock’. Hana must move through the hallway to reach the patient’s room, the library and the kitchen. Caravaggio and Kip must do the same. The hall, then, is also a liminal space connecting different spaces and destinations – a place in transit. Hillger claims that because of her constant movement, ‘Hana achieves the “reworking of space” ... which entails a new concept of self’. Moreover, Hillger suggests that Hana reworks traditional notions of the space of identity in two ways. First, she introduces additional texts into the primary text – the novel – and in so doing opens up an intertextual space in which the reader is able to perceive how difference operates. Secondly, she conceptualises a sense of home which is not rooted but mobile.

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181 Ibid. p. 13.
The notion of family and home is a theme which haunts Ondaatje’s writing. An absent or imagined father figure is present in most of his novels.\textsuperscript{184} In \emph{The English Patient}, Caravaggio is such a character for Hana and the patient is a kind of benevolent father figure to those around him because of his knowledge and (largely) self-imposed authority. Jewinski argues that

Ondaatje is still looking for the father figure he lost in his youth. With \emph{The English Patient}, his mind was seized by a vision of an unnamed man, disfigured, aflame in the desert. He is, in part, the figure that always haunts Ondaatje, the unrecognized, displaced individual who is wrenched out of his home and his environment.\textsuperscript{185}

Jewinski also reports that Ondaatje described himself at one time as a ‘very displaced person’ who really envied roots.\textsuperscript{186} By 1980, as his own marriage was collapsing and he was involved in an extramarital affair (not unlike the one between Almásy and Katharine) family stability became increasingly important to him. Ty asserts that, in \emph{The English Patient}, the characters ‘are dislocated and displaced from their origins. They are war-damaged wanderers [and] ... each of them seems more comfortable without home, without possessions, and without traditional kinds of attachments’\textsuperscript{187}. These characters are thrown together and they attempt to salvage what pleasure and comfort they can find in their makeshift situation. Thus, in the novel, Ondaatje ‘portrays a remarkable number of scenes of bonding and communion’ where ‘[f]amilies in the non-traditional sense are created’.\textsuperscript{188}

The haphazard nature of war is reflected in the game of hopscotch that Hana enjoys in the hall.\textsuperscript{189} One night, by candle light, Hana etches out the grid using chalk. She leaps and lands with great thuds, caught up in the frenzy of the game. Eventually she blows out the candle but continues to play. She still lands perfectly within the boundaries of the blocks, slamming onto the floor so that the Villa is filled with noise. The return to a childhood game reflects her deep internal need to order her world and express

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{184} Ondaatje’s father became an alcoholic early in Ondaatje’s life, and it was his drunken, violent outbursts and the financial woes that ensued which finally caused Ondaatje’s mother to immigrate to England. Ondaatje never really came to know his father. \\
\textsuperscript{186} Jewinski, Ed. 1994. p. 112. \\
\textsuperscript{188} Ty, Eleanor. 2000. p. 17. \\
\textsuperscript{189} Ibid. p. 15. \end{flushleft}
herself freely again. It also reflects the migratory nature of hallway traffic. This is a space of movement, of a going to or a coming away from. The four main characters wish to move away from the past but they are not sure of the future they are moving towards and so they pace between the two.

Ondaatje’s writing style can also be considered nomadic. He initially composes with pen and paper. Jewinski reports that the text is then cut up and manipulated into suitable syntax. This is then typed into a word processor to search out word echoes and patterns. Finally, each section is read into a tape recorder to ‘hear the poetry’. For Ondaatje, words are not dead units to be placed in random order – each is placed in an important location in the geography of the page: a spot to be visited.

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Chapter Four

Emotion, Metaphor, Cognition and Representation

How loneliness is written into texts, and how we recognise loneliness in texts, is of paramount importance for this study. Loneliness is an abstract concept and its status as a distinct emotion is disputed.

In his notion of the hypostasis of the self, the European Talmudic philosopher Emmanuel Levinás offers a useful starting point for a resolution of this dispute. Levinás conceives of the hypostasis of the self as the ‘coming to be’, perhaps by one’s own efforts or (more generally) by self-determination or self-actualisation. For Levinas, human beings must continually wrestle to be and to become themselves, to create and live with an identity or sense of self with which they are comfortable. Loneliness may be an absent presence in Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, but in its absence it is overwhelmingly present.

Although it is difficult to point out concrete instances of the characters experiencing loneliness as a distinct emotion in *The English Patient*, they all experience a wide range of related emotions that, taken together, can be understood and interpreted as *symptoms* of loneliness. The text abounds in narrative events and utterances that suggest sadness, frustration, desire and jealousy and the text moves and changes continually through these different emotions, resulting in a diffuse but pervasive atmosphere of loneliness. The above sentiments are succinctly summarised by Hutchens who offers the following précis of Levinás’s writings:191

> The self’s solitude consists in the unity of the existent and its work of existing ... It erupts from the ‘there is’ to become ‘something that is’ and strives to empower itself to escape the impersonality of the ‘there is’. Thus, hypostasis is the event whereby an indeterminate being in anonymous existence becomes a unique and present self ... It comes to being out of itself ... Yet it is still aware of the ‘murmuring’ and ‘rumbling’ of the anonymous existence it cannot completely leave behind. It must take a stand in this anonymity, assuming determination by being vigilant over itself ... The self is in flux, but never

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loses itself in flux ... The self finds that it is itself an other, it is anxious about itself or enjoying itself, but always ‘stretching towards itself’. In grasping at itself, it never completely possesses itself.

In this chapter, the phenomenon of loneliness as it relates to lived experience and to textual representation will be explored in relation to the body since the body is what connects and divides humans. It is the site where loneliness is experienced, and the site through which loneliness is articulated and rendered palpable.

Bodies, embodiment and the relation between embodiment and consciousness\(^{192}\) are special concerns for Ondaatje in *The English Patient*, and the expression of physicality appears to hold a particular fascination for him. In the novel he offers a provocative passage describing an incident the patient experiences as he is taken across the desert by the Bedouin after he is burnt:

> They had passed wells where water was cursed. In some open spaces there were hidden towns, and he waited while they dug into nests of water. And the pure beauty of an innocent dancing boy, like sound from a boy chorister, which he remembered as the purest of sounds, the clearest river water, the most transparent depth of the sea. Here in the desert, which had been an old sea where nothing was strapped down or permanent, everything drifted – like the shift of linen across the boy as if he were embracing or freeing himself from an ocean or his own blue afterbirth. A boy arousing himself, his genitals against the colour of fire.

> Then the fire is sanded over, its smoke withering around them. The fall of musical instruments like a pulse or rain. The boy puts his arm across, through the lost fire, to silence the pipe-flutes. There is no boy, there are no footsteps when he leaves. Just the borrowed rags. One of the men crawls forward and collects the semen which has fallen on the sand. He brings it over to the white translator of guns and passes it into his hands. In the desert you celebrate nothing but water.\(^{193}\)

The body is the primary means of interpreting the world and it is also the primary means of self-expression. The boy in this passage experiences his surroundings (the desert, fire and music) through his body and makes his mark on this world through his dance. Another sumptuous passage is set in the Cave of Swimmers once Almásy has moved Katharine from the wreck of the plane:

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\(^{192}\) Two conceptions of the body and embodiment deserve mention. The first relates to the body of literature and the second to the physical human body.

\(^{193}\) Ibid. pp. 22-3.
He looked up to the one cave painting and stole the colours from it. The ochre went into her face, he daubed blue around her eyes. He walked across the cave, his hands thick with red, and combed his fingers through her hair. Then all of her skin, so her knee that had poked out of the plane that first day was saffron. The pubis. Hoops of colour around her legs so she would be immune to the human. There were traditions he had discovered in Herodotus in which old warriors celebrated their loved ones by locating and holding them in whatever world made them eternal – a colourful fluid, a song, a rock drawing.194

Ondaatje’s language is visceral and transcendental and the description of Katharine’s body is disarming. Through this, Ondaatje indicates the significance of bodies and how they come to represent immortality or, as in Katharine’s case, mortality. Almásy creates an object of worship out of Katharine’s body and the act described above is both disturbing, as he performs it on a dead body, and sacred, as it is a gesture of his love. Almásy, to his utter grief, must accept that corporality, the existence of the body on this earth, is temporary. This is an alienating process as it forces the subject to acknowledge her or his profound separation from other people – here, that Almásy cannot save Katharine’s body; that bodies are not infinite. The realisation that mortality is a fundamental constraint of physical existence results in a deep sense of fragmentation and loneliness.

As a cartographer, Almásy is accustomed to making decisions about the earth as a being and about the land and its divisions and where it is divided to determine different spaces and territories. He would be familiar with the idea of the earth as a body, something to be explored. We are told that at one time ‘mapmakers named the places they travelled through with the names of lovers’.195 Almásy even describes a particular rock formation in terms of the shape of a woman’s body. Perhaps, in the above quotation, for the first time in his life he understands the desire to make human existence immortal just as he has made divisions of the land eternal with his maps and as ancient civilisations have done by painting on rock in caves. The land, as a soul, needs to be held sacred just as the body of a lover is held sacred. By painting Katharine’s body, he marks it out and apportions it according to his own tastes and ends. Almásy, therefore, makes a map of Katharine’s body – a sum of all the places she has been to, people she has met and life lessons she has experienced and learned.

194 Ibid. p. 248.
195 Ibid. p. 140.
Almásy is not the only character to be fascinated with the body: Hana too is fascinated by her lover’s body. For Almásy, the body is a territory to be mapped, but for Hana and Kip the body carries ideological significance:

She was pouring milk into her cup. As she finished she moved the lip of the jug over Kip’s hand and continued pouring the milk over his brown hand and up his arm to his elbow and then stopped. He didn’t move it away.196

Later,

[Hana] learns all the varieties of [Kip’s] darkness. The colour of his forearm against the colour of his neck. The colour of his palms, his cheek, the skin under the turban ...

She loves most the wet colours of his neck when he bathes. And his chest with its sweat which her fingers grip when he is over her, and the dark, tough arms in the darkness of his tent, or one time in her room when light from the valley’s city, finally free of curfew, rose among them like twilight and lit the colour of his body.197

Ondaatje, through Hana and Kip, exposes the politics of Kip’s skin: his race, gender and sexuality.

The body, while it appears to be a constant entity, is continually regenerating itself. Cells continuously grow and are discarded. The body is in a perpetual flux of regeneration and healing and thus is anything but constant. Understandings of how loneliness is experienced in the body and possible conceptions of loneliness as a pre-existent entity are generated by understanding the way in which thought occurs about, in, and through the body. The ‘body’ is self-contained: it creates a form and simultaneously creates limits for that form. Theories of the body and embodiment seek to do the same; that is, to explore the body in thought and thought in the body. Indeed, many psychological models concerning the body stem from phenomenological ideas.198

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196 Ibid. p. 123.
197 Ibid. p. 127.
198 Philosophers suggest a discomfort with the conception of the self as a unified, constant being and these sentiments are shared by psychologists. The problem of defining the body is integral to understanding the mind and, in turn, to comprehending the phenomenon of loneliness.
Loneliness cannot be ameliorated by medication. The patient in Ondaatje’s novel receives regular doses of morphine but these do not destroy the past and his memories – the elements that condition and incite his sense of loneliness. It can be argued that his anguish increases the more he is prompted by the inhabitants of the Villa to remember the past. Remembering is the wilful act of reliving part of the past in and through the body. Another means of remembering is writing. Writing is a means of making permanent that which would otherwise have been lost to time and choosing to represent ideas and events.

Writing loneliness is an attempt to represent that which resists representation. According to Rotenstreich, the word alienation (alienatio) appears in Latin as the translation of the Greek term alloiosis which in turn corresponds to another Greek term ekstasis. Just as ekstasis connotes the state of being transported or rapt out of one’s self, so alienatio denotes the transformation of a man who has passed beyond himself. This merging of meanings underlying the term alienatio or alloiosis came to signify a change arising from a process in which a man is alienated from himself after having risen above himself to become submerged in God or in the One.199

The soul, then, needs to be lifted out of its own realm in order to reach a higher state of being with which it can merge. This is true contemplation and it means that the soul needs to be alienated from itself in order to belong to something greater than itself. Ondaatje writes the character of the patient as beyond himself in that the patient is a spectral version of his former self and because of this he has agency to create any version of himself he so desires.

The transition from Almásy to the patient is never explained, yet the fire which harms the patient creates narrative space for him to become a commentator on his own life, which in turn allows him to enter the state of ecstasy suggested by Rotenstreich. The patient can project any persona he chooses because he has become physically unrecognisable. This freedom allows him to become an idea – something not limited by bodily constraints, thereby overcoming his sense of isolation. Heidegger makes almost exactly the same claim with the notion of Dasein’s open-to-beingness where subjectivity must be overcome in order to commune with Being. Breaking free of the

limitations of earthly existence facilitates communion with the eternal and communion with the eternal transmutes loneliness into a creative phenomenon.

Both these positions come uncannily close to the principles of Eastern philosophy and spirituality. There is a tendency in Western thought systems to segregate mind, body and spirit: the body is physical matter, the mind contains processes and ideas that can be reasoned out and the spirit is simply that part of us that questions the meaning of life. The Cartesian mind-body-spirit split evident in Western models of the body is cast aside in Eastern thought. The Eastern conception of the body is more generous than the Western rationalist perspective. Here, the spirit is a fundamental part of the physical body and both affects, and is affected by, it. The mind equally partakes in the relationship between spirit and body.

There is, however, a definite and common understanding in both the Western and Eastern traditions that the relationship between mind, body and spirit is fragmented in human experience. This is addressed in Ondaatje’s novel. The characters in the novel do not find comfort in physical reality or in abstract analysis. They seek to overcome themselves – to be beyond themselves – in order to interpret the world. Kip uses his army training and his world knowledge to make sense of the carnage of which he is a part. Ultimately, he rejects this as it does not provide the answers for which he searches. Answers come in many forms – meditation being one of these.

Arewa offers an interesting perspective on embodiment, wholeness and ecstasy that is applicable here:

In contemporary societies, the felt experience of wholeness has all but paled into insignificance. We need to re-establish the cosmic, devotional experience of being in the body. This I refer to as true embodiment – being here, now, rejoicing in a physical body. Ecstasy is not an out-of-body experience, but a heightened sense of existing in the body ... As we retune to our physical vehicle and come to know embodiment, we automatically move towards enlightenment.200

Eastern belief brings with it two very important terms: the aura and the chakras. The term *chakra* means ‘wheel’ in Sanskrit and refers to a cone-shaped vortex which spins and vibrates within what is known as the energy body. Arewa writes that [t]he chakras are energy centres. They draw energy in from the universal energy field and distribute it out into the energy pathways – known as nadis in the traditional Indian yogic system, meridians in the traditional Chinese healing system – and from here energy radiates out into the aura. The energy thrown off by the chakras manifests in different densities. At the most subtle level are the five elements (earth, water, air, fire and ether), the deities, and *ka* – the Eternal Spirit. These energies travel through the nadis and inform the mind, and the nervous system, which works closely with the endocrine glands (hormonal system). The most gross level is, of course, the physical body.\(^{201}\)

As the chakras revolve, they create an electromagnetic energy field which penetrates and surrounds the physical body. This personal energy field is known as the aura. Perhaps, subject to further research, it could be suggested that psychological and spiritual maladies manifest themselves at this energetic level. This would account for physical symptoms of a non-physical ailment. The third, physical heat layer of the aura is associated with the emotional body. This layer is crucial to the reading of Ondaatje’s novel.

Fire is a recurring image in *The English Patient*. Almásy, for example, does not realise the prophetic power of his own words from an entry written into his copy of Herodotus which claims that ‘the heart is an organ of fire’.\(^{202}\) He is a stoic and detached man before he meets Katharine and he has very nearly removed himself from society. He prefers to spend his time in the desert, another entity associated with fire. The fire that scars him has all but removed his physical existence and identity. It is as if he has been consumed by the emotional body – by fire. It is the work of his heart which caused him to be consumed by fire physically and emotionally.

Kip is another character linked to fire since his work as a sapper brings him face to face with bomb blasts. He distances himself from others in order to protect himself, using the excuse that there is no point in being involved too deeply with others

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\(^{202}\) Ibid. p. 97.
considering the instability of war. There is a sense in which he uses the fire of his profession as a barrier for the fire of his passion. Ondaatje writes,

[The successful defusing of a bomb ended novels. Wise white fatherly men shook hands, were acknowledged, and limped away, having been coaxed out of solitude for this special occasion. But he was a professional. And he remained the foreigner, the Sikh. His only human and personal contact was this enemy who had made the bomb and departed brushing his tracks with a branch behind him.]

There is no glory for Kip; he simply does what is required of him and moves on to the next task. The devastating fire of the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima is the final straw for Kip. He imagines the mutilation and torture of countless innocent people and this prompts him to abandon the war effort. A removed incident is required in order for Kip to make himself vulnerable enough to align with his strong emotion and, figuratively, to ‘blow up’.

The assertions above consider the body, physicality, emotions and energy from an Eastern perspective. Empirical conceptions suggest alternative understandings of embodiment. A more clinically-based conception of the body is asserted by Maxim I. Stamenov, amongst others. This model discusses body image, body schema and mirror neurons. Body image, as defined by Freud, refers to ‘a mental projection of the surface of the body representing supericies of the mental apparatus’ or as Stamenov describes it, ‘explicit mental representations of the body and bodily functions’. Stamenov argues that body image is fragmented and is made up not of a single, unified structure but a set of fragmentary patterns. This corresponds to the fragmented nature of loneliness since the experience of loneliness can be described as the perception that one is made from several parts that do not seem to fit.

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203 Ibid. p. 105.
205 Stamenov, Maxim I. p. 21.
206 Stamenov, Maxim I. p. 21.
Recent research indicates that there may be two areas in the body dedicated to
different tasks in relation to recognising bodies. One area in the brain – the Mirror
Neuron System – codes the performance of an observed action of a common
intentional object, particularly the visual stimuli provided by tasks performed by or
around the hand or mouth; another area codes a collection of body images. Stamenov
argues that it may be the case that the brain does not actually differentiate between
who performs the action and who observes it. Somehow the two areas connect and
during cognitive processing an individual can perform an action either because she or
he enacts it or because she or he can imitate the behaviour observed. These findings
have direct bearing on conceptions of loneliness. If it is the case that the brain sees in
‘layers’ then it can be suggested that mismatching of these layers would render a
misrepresentation of actions and agents of action. This misrepresentation leads to
confusion and dislocation which in turn results in a sense of loneliness. It may be the
case that loneliness is literally fragmentary. Also, a case for emotional transferral can
be derived from Stamenov’s argument. Emotion perhaps is the entity that is displayed
or observed and the brain ‘sees’ the particular emotion in question and decides to
whom the emotion belongs.\textsuperscript{207} Thus loneliness may be alienating because it can be
misattributed to either body involved in the action, which leads to the dislocation
mentioned previously.

One final reading of the body concerns signification. Nancy asserts:

\textit{Body} is the total signifier, for everything has a body, or everything is a body
(this distinction loses its importance here), and \textit{body} is the last signifier, the
limit of the signifier, if what it says or would like to say – what it would have
liked to say – is nothing other than the interlacing, the mixing of bodies with
bodies, mixing everywhere, and everywhere manifesting this other absence of
name, named “God,” everywhere producing and reproducing and everywhere
absorbing the sense of sense and of all the senses, infinitely mixing the
impenetrable with the impenetrable.\textsuperscript{208}

Nancy’s conception of the body echoes the argument concerning energy presented
earlier. Just as energy is in, of and through all things, so too is the body a continual,
dynamic flow of meaning. Signification cannot exist outside of body. Interestingly,

\textsuperscript{207} Further discussion related to the representation of emotion in literature will occur later in this
chapter.
\textsuperscript{208} Nancy, Jean-Luc. ‘Corpus’. In MacCannell, Juliet Flower & Laura Zakarin (eds). 1994. \textit{Thinking
this flow of meaning, according to Nancy, everywhere manifests God, the other absence of name. Nancy appears to be suggesting that, while shapeless, body is limited, as is God, and both are beyond comprehension. They feed off and into one another in a constant ebb and flow of Beingness. It would also appear that Nancy is asserting that body is the ‘perfect’ sign – it is signifier, signified and sign simultaneously. The word ‘body’ limits itself; body is limited and body exists in (or as) everything. Later in the article, however, Nancy goes on to contradict himself by suggesting that ‘it is after all the body that requests ... the kind of writing that would enable it not to signify (not to turn into either a signifier, a signified, or self-signification)’.²⁰⁹ According to this reading, body exists outside the system of signification. Body then should not become a sign but an incarnation. The patient’s body is an example of this. His charred body has the boundary of skin yet that body resists interpretation because the lively and complex being inside does not correspond with the burned and diseased skin outside. His body does not mean itself and so it rests beyond signification.

One of the most traumatic and disturbing body-related moments in Ondaatje’s novel is the removal of Caravaggio’s thumbs. His thumbs (or rather the wound remaining after their removal) become a sign which prompts Caravaggio continually to push the patient to admit that he is Almásy. The force – the desire for truth and connection with another human to end his loneliness – which drives Caravaggio’s interrogation is the same force which drives the reader’s desire to determine the true identity of the patient. Tomiche suggests that ‘the forces that (de)construct the body and the forces that (de)construct the text are the same’.²¹⁰ Language cuts as bodies can be cut. The pen no longer is mightier than the sword – it is the sword. The cut becomes a wound and all attention is directed to the wound. The wound then becomes the body. Nancy writes:

> [t]o the extent that the body is a wound, the sign is also nothing but a wound ... The wound closes the body. It multiplies its sense, and sense gets lost in it.

... [t]o write the sign of oneself that does not offer a sign, that is not a sign.
This is: writing, finally to stop discoursing. To cut into discourse ... A body is what cannot be read in a writing.\textsuperscript{211}

Caravaggio cannot read the patient’s body; the reader cannot read Caravaggio’s body. The dismemberment described above is also discernible in the episodic structure of Ondaatje’s novel. The characters’ narratives are interplayed and the chronology is jumbled. Revelations about each character are delayed which creates complexity and surprise in the narrative. For example, Kip’s difficult relationship with his brother is hinted at early in the novel but it is only clarified toward the end as Kip comes to agree with his brother’s political sentiments. A correlation exists between the structure of the novel and the characters’ psychological states: the characters live in fractured states. Hana resorts to the quiet ritual of caring for the patient rather than continuing her travels through the war territories. She slowly heals herself by caring for the patient and through her relationships with Kip and Caravaggio. The discordant relationships between the Villa’s inhabitants is reflected in the episodic nature of the novel and the way in which it returns to ideas and situations repeatedly, revealing increasingly subtle meaning each time.

The physical hurt of loneliness, then, can be regarded as the psycho-spiritual pain caused by a lack of understanding. Nancy’s sentiments echo the Derridean suspicion of the authority and transparency of writing as described in ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in \textit{Dissemination}. Tomiche reports that ‘[i]n Kant’s definition the beautiful arises as a \textit{without}, a \textit{sans} ... The being cut off from the goal – absolutely cut from an end – is an absolute interruption, “a pure cut”. This cut is reminiscent of another cut, the first cut. Lacan’s concept of the mirror or imaginary phase contains the joy (\textit{jouissance}) of the initial mistaken belief in the possibility of a whole unified Self. It also accounts for the subsequent feeling of lack (or alienation) as the individual realises that an Other exists and that wholeness is always impossible. While this realisation is a necessary step toward subjectivity and normal human development, it is nevertheless traumatic.

Loneliness, it can be argued, exists as a result of this first cut. Separation must exist before the pain of separation can be felt. A pure cut is an absolute interruption and the

sense of being alone is an absolute interruption from ever feeling connected meaningfully to something else. Loneliness, then, may be read as a ‘pure cut’ because it is an absolute interruption from a feeling of connection. Hana, in The English Patient, refuses to look into mirrors. We are told that she ‘has removed all mirrors and stacked them away in an empty room’. She crops her hair, refuses to think about her clothing and resists her physical appearance. She denies her physicality generally in this way anddevotes herself to caring for the patient. These actions reflect her general weariness of society and the unspoken grief from her past which she needs to heal. She has experienced deep trauma personally through the loss of her unborn child and she has been over-exposed to human depravity throughout the war. She does not wish to be connected to any group or idea because of the inevitable betrayal by these entities. By refusing to see an image of herself represented in a mirror, by refusing to acknowledge herself in the world, Hana attempts to regain a unified sense of Self – to feel jouissance again.

Ondaatje describes the patient when he was taken up by the Bedouin tribe who discover him in the desert as

[a] man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. Parts of his burned body and face had been sprayed with tannic acid, that hardened into a protective shell over his raw skin. The area around his eyes was coated with a thick layer of gentian violet. There was nothing to recognize in him.

Such a description of a body is arresting and difficult. Ondaatje does not offer much perspective on the patient’s physical state through the other main characters.

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212 Ibid. p. 23.
213 Ibid. p. 48.
214 A restriction of the body exists – that concerning the representation of bodies, particularly bodies in abjection. Susan Sontag, in her insightful work on photography entitled Regarding the Pain of Others, challenges the reader’s understanding of the acceptable representation of tortured bodies, violent bodies and dead bodies. It should be noted that representation of visual images is treated differently from such images in literature. It is taboo to print a photograph of a dying body that clearly identifies the person concerned because this questions our ethical boundaries and it is a sign of disrespect for the person concerned and her or his family. However, literature allows vivid descriptions of bodies and, it can be argued, even encourages the subversion of the taboo. Yet we seem to crave images of violence because we only believe what we can see. Representations of bodies mangled in battle, in paintings by ancient masters, are lauded; yet, a similar composition is considered reprehensible as a photograph. The fact that censorship still exists indicates that, while bodies may behave as they wish to, what is allowed to be shown of those bodies is restricted. As Nancy puts it, in the face of ‘deported, massacred, tortured bodies ... the body loses its form and its sense – and sense has lost all body’ [Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1994. ‘Corpus’. In MacCannell, Juliet Flower & Laura Zakarin (eds). Thinking Bodies. Stanford: Stanford]
The combination of the patient’s body and his personality – his spirit – seemingly is of more importance. Hana uses the patient’s physical brokenness to amend her own need for healing through caring for others. Caravaggio is obsessed with the patient’s identity, which includes what the patient looks like and what he has done. For Kip, the patient is a symbol of his adoptive home and its rulers because of the colour of his (the patient’s) skin and his ideology. The reader must construct an image of the patient lying in his sick bed but the reader can only glean an impression of the patient’s physical state via Ondaatje’s and the characters’ descriptions of him. Therefore, the patient is always a construction of himself and his identity is as rootless to the reader as it is to the Villa’s inhabitants. The effect is destabilising.

Because human beings exist in communities, the influence of individual bodies on each other (and on a group as a whole) is significant. Physical isolation can cause loneliness just as a lack of personal space can cause loneliness. A significant collection of work has developed that focuses on the social, cultural and political ramifications of human physical embodiment. Durkheim was one of the first contributors to this field. In his paper on Durkheim’s thoughts concerning embodiment, emotion and social order, Shilling indicates that Durkheim considered embodiment as integral to, and sometimes co-terminous with, social action. In Durkheim’s writings on *Homo duplex* the paradox of the physical body is asserted. The paradox refers to the notion that individuals must deny part of what is essential to their bodily selves, such as independence, in order to enter into the symbolic order of society yet need this social order if they are both to survive and flourish. The symbolic order here refers to collective representations or the signs, myths, ideas and beliefs characteristic of the conscience collective of the group. Shared symbols and beliefs serve to unite groups of people in community which hinders a sense of loneliness. If one feels part of something bigger than oneself, a sense of loneliness is diminished. The converse is also true: the less one feels part of a greater whole, the greater the sense of loneliness experienced. The four main characters in *The English Patient* each have ideologies and memories which provides each of them with varying
perspectives on the world based on culture, race and gender. These differences should be what causes loneliness in them and should drive them apart yet the opposite occurs. The four individuals appear to be drawn closer into community by the very fact that they are unconnected.

Durkheim studied totemism as a model for his conception of society, and it can be argued that the four characters in the novel have isolation and fragmentation as their totems. Totemism is ‘a mode of ritual religious practice which has at its centre the symbolic equation of a clan or tribe with an animal, plant or other object most frequently found in its place of ceremonial meeting’. According to Shilling, ‘it is possible to derive from Durkheim’s writings a theory of the physical, emotionally expressive and experiencing body as a crucial multi-dimensional medium for the constitution of society’. Bodies possess this status for three reasons: they are a major source of these symbols, they constitute a major location for these symbols and they provide the means by which individuals transcend their egoistic selves and become energetically attached to the symbolic order of society. Isolation and fragmentation is what unites the four characters and what constitutes their society. They are the source of their loneliness in that each chooses to isolate themselves from one another physically or psychologically by hiding past identity or personal pain; each is a locus of loneliness because of the isolation she or he experiences and together they are subject to the decision to overcome their independence in order to create a society at the Villa. Loneliness is what draws them together and what keeps them apart.

In totemism, the first reason – the major source – for the body as a medium of social construction occurs because it unites individuals around a system of symbols (which organise thought) and an associated system of morals (norms and prohibitions which organise ritual action). Thus, the body is a source of the symbolism through which social life is expressed. The body itself becomes a symbol of the morals of the group. The patient’s body is a marker of this: his very lack of identity caused by the damage done to it becomes a moral issue in that it raises questions concerning truth, reliability

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217 Shilling, Chris. 2005. p. 212. [original emphasis]
and meaning. His body disavows the moral code shared by the group because it does not conform as a symbol to the stereotypical human body. Durkheim elevates the body from the profane world of nature by suggesting that the body conceals in its depth a sacred principle that erupts onto the surface in particular circumstances which affirm the communion of individuals in a shared moral whole. This sacred principle is manifest via cutting, scarification, tattooing, painting and other forms of decoration. Such acts often are considered antisocial or acting against the group – physically expressing a sense of isolation, it can be argued – when actually these acts may be reinforcing ties to the community. Blood becomes a privileged symbol for life: when one bleeds one also transgresses the boundary of the body becoming fluid and interchangeable with one’s surroundings. Human bodies literally and willingly come together in order to form a group. The net effect of this is that, essentially, through the physical form of the totem, the group worships itself.

The second reason indicates that the body is a medium for the constitution of society by virtue of its status as a primary location for symbolism. Individuals united by the totem – totemic bodies – almost instinctively are led to physically mark their bodies (perhaps through tattooing) as a means of identification (and a reminder of common life) with the group. The third and final reason refers to the body as a means to inhabit and be positively attached to totemic life. In this conception, Durkeim suggests that the body is infused with certain emotional properties which mean that the very act of bodily congregation is an exceptionally powerful stimulant that physically affects members of the group. Members literally feed off of one another’s energy and these emotions are known as ‘collective effervescence’. These ideas relate to the community that is formed at the Villa in The English Patient. The four characters ‘feed’ off each other by providing one another with the tools to overcome their isolation. Hana’s relationship with Kip is an example of this as it brings her out of herself. She uses him to explore the world, particularly romantic relationship, in a way that refreshes and heals her war-induced, negative perspective on life. Kip feeds off the whiteness and cultural differences presented by his fellow inhabitants; it challenges and changes his opinions. Caravaggio seeks resolution of his strife about

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the meaning of the war and of the violence inflicted on his hands through the patient and his history. The patient is literally fed by Hana while his memory is stirred by each of the other three characters. This collective energy is harnessed and directed through rituals common to group life and it is this energy that allows individuals to be incorporated into the collective moral life (the symbolic order) of the tribe or clan. This energy is also what prompts individuals to reach outside themselves (to have sympathy for all that is human) as a means of adding to the energy they possess.219 Reaching outside one’s self is a means of overcoming loneliness two-fold: in one instance it is a means of connecting with others and in the second instance it brings the individual more group energy and the attendant security of community that this provides.

The aim of social life, then, is to overcome the individual body in order to be absorbed into the social body. By overcoming the individual body one is connected to others and so one is not lonely. Even though each character in the novel is distinct from the other, by being together they overcome this separation and thereby their loneliness. Durkheim is careful to make it clear that totemism is more than the sum of its individual bodies. Hence, the ‘absorption of individuals into the symbolic order of society also enables humans to fulfil their social and moral capacities by liberating the agent from the enslavement they suffer from the asocial pole of their Homo duplex nature’.220 The nastier side of social life is accounted for as well in the corollary of this theory. Difference based on factors such as race, class and gender is explained: the ‘body serves not simply as a source of and location for symbolism, but carries social inequalities deep into the very core of an individual’s bodily experience and expression’.221 Grounds for discrimination such as race, gender and class are entrenched in our very bodies.

Bodies, then, give us meaning. An individual (be it fictional) is represented in a body in a work of literature and the reader comes to the text in a body. That body carries many codes and ideas which inform the interpretation of a text. As discussed previously bodies are not only physical, they also have mental, spiritual and emotional

dimensions. In *The English Patient*, loneliness lives in the body in that each character is physically, psychologically and spiritually distant from the others. It also acknowledges that human physiology affects conceptions of emotional meaning. Since a tenuous but important link exists between emotion and language, understanding this link is key to the interpretation of texts. In *The English Patient*, therefore, the link between the emotions of the characters and the language Ondaatje attributes to each one is key to the interpretation of the novel. Because bodies are physical and can be described it is possible to write them into existence in the imagination. Other dimensions are more difficult to convey.

According to Kövecses there are five types of theories regarding emotion.\(^{222}\) The first type views emotion as a form of physical agitation or bodily disturbance. The theories that belong to this group include psychoanalytic theories and many behaviourist theories. Motivational theories (which emphasise the organising and functional properties of emotion) make up the second group. In these theories, emotion is a kind of force or drive that impels the person to respond. Also, in these theories emotion is perceived as a state of readiness to respond in characteristic ways to a certain class of environmental stimuli (for example, the desire to perform a certain action as a result of an emotion). The third set of theories treats emotion as physical sensation – that is, emotion is a learned response to sensation in the body. Emotions as instinctive reactions form the fourth group of theories. This set of theories holds that emotions are remnants of biological evolution common to ‘lower’ animals and humans. Emotion here is a dangerous, savage thing. The final set of theories is the ‘cognitive’ theories of emotion. Emotion is considered a form of non-rational judgement in this group. Non-rational includes a variety of forms such as intuitive judgements (being on a high), magical transformations of the world (being tricked) and evaluative judgements (insanity). Kövecses indicates that there is a long-standing tradition in the literature of emotion that operates with a distinction between primary, or basic, and secondary, or non-basic, emotions. The claim is that there are a small number of basic emotions (such as anger, sadness, fear, joy and love) from which all non-basic

emotions are compounded. It may be the case that loneliness is a non-basic emotion which is made up of several basic emotions such as sadness, anger and fear.

Mood Dependent Memory (MDM) is a model of cognition which posits the notion that events encoded in a certain state of mood or affect are more retrievable in the same state than in a different one. Traumatic memories can be repressed and so forgotten, as can the attendant emotion(s). Kihlstrom et al report from studies that ‘subjects can display emotional responses attributable to some event in their past that they do not remember’, hence the assertion that emotional states are unconscious or implicit. This idea may be used to explain feelings of loneliness and physical symptoms attributed to it. For example, when Hana forms a relationship with Kip the motivation is to overcome her loneliness, but these intentions are unconscious because she does not seek out his presence at the Villa or force the attraction. Rather, it is almost as if the relationship is stumbled upon when Kip finds Hana playing the piano in the library. Kihlstrom points out that the proposition that people can be unaware of their emotional states themselves seems to contain an internal contradiction: emotions must be felt and feeling is taken as a conscious experience; yet environmental stimuli must be felt and cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience are gradually accepting that percepts can be unconscious just as they earlier agreed that memories can be unconscious. Thus,

[i]f there is a cognitive unconscious, in which percepts, memories, and thoughts influence experience, thought, and action outside of phenomenal awareness, then why can there not be an emotional unconscious as well? The answer depends on how one defines emotion. If emotion is a conscious feeling state, an emotional unconscious is precluded. But if one defines emotion differently, the question could be answered through empirical evidence.

Kihlstrom reports that, based on observations of several studies, a multiple-system theory of emotion exists as proposed by Lang. According to this theory, every emotional response consists of several components – a verbal-cognitive response (the subjective feeling state), an overt motor or behavioural response (for example, escape

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or avoidance) and a covert physiological response mediated by the autonomic or skeletal nervous system (for example, a change in heart rate or skin conductance). These systems are partially independent though they interact with each other. When all three systems act together an individual experiences intense emotional arousal. It follows that in ‘the emotional unconscious, one may be consciously aware of his or her emotional state yet unaware of its source in current or past experience’.  

This explains why loneliness can be identified but the reason for that loneliness may elude the person experiencing it. It may also help us to understand the loneliness experienced by the characters in the novel. Each character has lived through a very difficult period during the war. The loneliness the characters experience is sourced in the experiences of the war and the experiences of the past. The patient is the quintessential case: he cannot remember his past and his identity but his isolation is evident. Caravaggio mentions that ‘“[t]he Englishman left months ago, Hana, he’s with the Bedouin or in some English garden with its phlox and shit. He probably can’t even remember the woman he’s circling around, trying to talk about. He doesn’t know where the fuck he is’.”  

Kip’s isolation is voluntary and it may stem from the distance he felt from his brother, his nation and his adoptive home. He chooses to be alone yet, arguably, he does not know why. It would be reasonable to assume that Hana’s loneliness stems from the atrocities of war that she has been exposed to and exacerbated by the loss of a child. However, much of Hana’s past is called into presence in the novel by Caravaggio and this may contribute to her loneliness. Caravaggio’s loneliness stems from his past as well: by being at the Villa he must deal with his past in Toronto concerning his wife and Hana and his present through his interrogation of the patient. He has several possible causes of his loneliness yet it is nebulous. Thus, the characters may know that they feel dislocated or distanced from each other yet not be fully aware of the cause of the emotion.

Bazan and Van Bunder seem to corroborate the theory of an emotional unconscious. Their argument, however, is taken from the perspective of language and the Freudian conception of the unconscious. Bazan and Van Bunder’s approach is based on three fundamental arguments. Firstly, in a state of high emotional arousal, linguistic fragments (syllables, phoneme sequences) are cognised in a decontextualised way and

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228 Ibid. p. 122.
these isolated phoneme sequences are able to carry emotional affects quite independent of their actual meaning. Secondly, language processing – be it producing, receiving or imagining – is a motor event; in other words, whether speech is articulated or not the relevant cognitive domains and motor system articulators produce linguistic segments. Thirdly, isolated speech fragments (phoneme sequences) are considered as objects which (like non-linguistic objects) undergo emotional conditioning and establish an idiosyncratic linguistically structured emotional memory. It is suggested that

in each individual, language matures with a particular emotional history … this emotional linguistic memory is more than only culture specific. It is an idiosyncratic linguistic memory and is colored [sic] by important circulating “signifiers” in the history of the individual and of its family.

Thus,

it is proposed that phonology, by the biology of its circuitry and of its maturation, acquires a particular emotional significance in each individual, that is thought to be stored in an emotional memory system and codes for the need for recruitment and intervention of bodily (autonomic) systems upon activation (by hearing, speaking and/or internal ruminating) of these phoneme sequences.

During ‘an individual’s particular history, specific phoneme sequences or speech fragments acquire a specific affective valence, which is encoded in an emotional memory system’. If the individual comes close to accessing the emotionally loaded phoneme sequence, the emotional memory system will avoid the stress of intense (unwanted) emotional arousal by substituting the censored phoneme sequence with another cognitively non-threatening but phonemically similar sequence. This is what Freud calls the “substitutive word presentations associated with the repressed presentations”. Thus, one literally may be unable to speak about a sense of loneliness one may be experiencing. As indicated in Caravaggio’s comment, the patient having ‘left his body’ does not know where he is and this renders him unable

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to speak of his experiences. The same can be said of the other characters considering the way in which loneliness alienates individuals. Kövecses suggests that the ‘isolation and description of emotion language is just the beginning in the process of uncovering the significance of this language in human conceptualization. The more difficult problem is to deal with the question of meaning’. Kövecses, Zoltán. 2000. Metaphor and Emotion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 6. 234 Language, then, can misrepresent the meaning of an emotion. This relates to the point made above – words may be unable to express an emotion such as loneliness adequately and any attempt linguistically to encapsulate it fails and is a misrepresentation.

Ondaatje creates situations in the novel in which the characters are often solitary in their pursuits or share their experiences with one another, such as Hana roaming the Villa or writing in books in the library, Kip who defuses bombs on his own and Caravaggio who travels alone because of his thieving. Ondaatje does not tell the reader that these characters are lonely but indicates it through each character’s tendencies, thereby making it clear to the reader that these characters are isolated and dislocated from a greater whole. The effect of writing the characters in isolation is one of cumulative and increasing isolation, and the relationship between cause and effect is reproduced in what may be termed a geometry of loneliness, a continuous circle, which permeates the novel with a sense of separation and loss.

The issue of what constitutes the meaning of ‘emotion words’ is a hotly debated topic. Several distinct views have emerged. Kövecses, Zoltán. 2000. pp. 6-14. The first is the label view. This view maintains that the meaning of emotion terms is simply an association between a label (such as a word) and some real emotional phenomena (such as physiological processes and behaviour). This is the simplest lay view of emotional meaning based on the theory that meaning is merely the association of sounds and things. The second is the core meaning view. Core meaning refers to denotative or conceptual meaning, whereas peripheral meaning refers to connotative or residual meaning. This view seeks to distinguish meaning using the smallest possible number of components and assumes that emotional meaning is composed of universal semantic primitives. Connotations are assumed to be culture specific but some researchers argue that certain connotations (such as evaluations like good versus bad) are universal. The

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dimensional view is the third type. This view asserts that emotional meaning is constituted by values on a fixed set of dimensions of meaning. Various emotions are made up of various groupings of the dimensions. The aim is to reduce the meaning-experience gap. Peripheral meaning is the point of departure in the fourth view – the implicational view. In this view, meaning is culture specific and to study what something means is to study what it suggests or entails to those who understand it. The prototype view is the fifth view. When the structure and content of a basic, or lower-level, emotion can be specified then one is dealing with the prototype view. In this view, the sequence of events make up the structure and the particular events associated with the sequence make up the content. Next is the social-constructionist view. In this model, emotion concepts are seen as social constructs. It is highly dependent on culture and society. The final view is the embodied cultural prototype view. In this view, social constructions are given bodily basis and bodily motivation is given social-cultural substance. Kövecses prefers this view since it is culture-free and applies universally, yet allows for culturally-defined variation in emotional experience. This view relates to major points raised in this dissertation, such as the notion of the Other and the role of the body in relation to loneliness.

Kövecses asserts two reasons for the apparent universality of the conceptualisation of emotion. The first is that ‘there are certain conceptual metaphors that are at least near-universals and that their near-universality comes from universal aspects of bodily functioning in emotional states’. He adds that embodiment restricts the kinds of metaphors that emerge as viable conceptualisations of emotions. Thus, the metaphors are universal or near-universal simply because these metaphors best describe an emotional state that occurs as a result of bodily functioning. The body, then, determines the figurative language we use. A physical feeling of dislocation lends itself to language that is open and fragmented in the same way.

This quality can be found in Ondaatje’s style in *The English Patient* which contains unfinished and ungrammatical sentences. The following passage is exemplary:

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Hana is quiet. He knows the depth of darkness in her, her lack of a child and of faith. He is always coaxing her from the edge of her fields of sadness. A child lost. A father lost.\textsuperscript{237}

The repetition of the word ‘lost’ in the final two phrases reinforces the irrevocable separation Hana endures. Elsewhere in the novel, the patient ruminates:

How did Odysseus die? A suicide, wasn’t it? I seem to recall that. Now. Maybe the desert spoiled Madox. That time when we had nothing to do with the world. I keep thinking of the Russian book he always carried. Russia has always been closer to my country than to his. Yes, Madox was a man who died because of nations.\textsuperscript{238}

The scattered nature of the patient’s thoughts indicates the dislocation at work in his mind, reinforcing the dislocation which produces the overriding sense of loneliness in the novel.

The second reason is that ‘this way of thinking about the issue [the concept of universality] also leaves room for cultural variation’.\textsuperscript{239} There is a fair amount of debate around the significance of metaphor in theories of emotion. Lakoff and Kövecses (1987) claim that metaphor largely constitutes cultural models (or folk theories) whereas Quinn (1991) asserts that metaphor reflects cultural models.\textsuperscript{240} Language (and, underlying this, metaphor) in The English Patient helps to indicate variations in cultural models of emotion. Kip’s reaction to the war is one of disgust – as is Hana’s, for example – but the reason for this disgust varies according to character. Kövecses asserts (in relation to the use of metaphor in literature) that ‘creative’ users of language use similar conceptualisations of emotion, but that this language appears to differ from the language of ‘ordinary speakers’.\textsuperscript{241} Thus, literature uses particular language to express metaphor and to embody emotion.

Kövecses’ fundamental argument regarding the use of metaphor in language is that speakers of a language (in this case English) use a large number of metaphors (or more precisely, metaphorical source domains) to understand their emotions; but that

\textsuperscript{237} Ibid. p. 271.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid. p. 242.
\textsuperscript{239} Kövecses, Zoltán. 2000. p. 139.
\textsuperscript{240} Kövecses, Zoltán. 2000. p. 115.
\textsuperscript{241} Kövecses, Zoltán. 2000. p. 22.
these specific-level metaphors are merely instantiations of a generic-level (or master)
metaphor EMOTION IS FORCE.242 This process of reduction is universalising. The
specific-level metaphors include PRESSURE INSIDE A CONTAINER (‘I wanted to
explode from anger’), FIRE (‘He was consumed by passion’), DANGEROUS
ANIMAL (‘He couldn’t hold back his feelings’), OPPONENT (‘I was gripped by
emotion’), INSANITY (‘She is mad with desire’), NATURAL FORCE (‘I was swept
off my feet’), SOCIAL FORCE (‘Her whole life is governed by passion’), MENTAL
FORCE (‘His emotions deceived him’), BURDEN (‘She is weighed down by
sadness’), HUNGER/THIRST (‘I’m starved for affection’), PHYSICAL
AGITATION (‘I’m all shook up’) and PHYSICAL FORCE (‘That was a terrible
blow’, ‘It was an electrifying experience’, ‘Her whole life revolves around him’, ‘He
is attracted to her’).

The metaphor of FIRE243 is worth exploring in detail since it is closely associated
with the representation of loneliness in The English Patient. In this metaphor type, the
response is seen as being caused by emotion itself. Intensity in general is commonly
conceptualised as heat, thus many states and actions that have an intensity aspect are
comprehended via that concept, including anger, romantic love, desire and sexual
desire. The metaphor reflects the intense energised state experienced by the individual
undergoing the emotion. It also reflects the damage done by the individual’s inability
to control her or his emotions just as damage is done to the object(s) mentioned in the
metaphor. The patient’s character is written using fire and metaphors of fire such as
‘the heart is an organ of fire’.244 The reader experiences the intensity – the heat and
energy – of Almásy’s relationship with Katharine and the heat of being physically
burnt through Ondaatje’s vivid descriptions of the crash and the patient’s injuries. He
writes

The undercarriage [of the plane] brushes the top of a palm and he pivots up,
and the oil slides over the seat, her body slipping down into it. There is a spark
from a short, and the twigs at her knee catch fire ... He is flying a rotted plane,
the canvas sheetings on the wings ripping open in the speed. They are carrion.
How far back had the palm tree been? How long ago? He lifts his legs out of
the oil, but they are so heavy. There is no way he can lift them again. He is

242 Kövecses, Zoltán. 2000. p. 17. The use of capitals follows Kövecses’ annotation. It is used to draw
distinction between master metaphors and specific-level metaphors.
244 Ibid. p. 97. original emphasis.
old. Suddenly. Tired of living without her. He cannot lie back in her arms and trust her to stand guard all day all night while he sleeps. He has no one. He is exhausted not from the desert but from solitude. Madox gone. The woman translated into leaves and twigs, the broken glass to the sky like a jaw above him.

He slips into the harness of the oil-wet parachute and pivots upside down, breaking free of glass, wind flinging his body back. Then his legs are free of everything, and he is in the air, bright, not knowing why he is bright until he realises he is on fire.245

A sentence which speaks to notions of intensity and damage can be found in the excerpt above: ‘He is exhausted not from the desert but from solitude’. Here, it is made clear that loneliness is what finally breaks Almásy’s spirit – not his surroundings. It is not that survival in the desert has become impossible or that the war has made the desert unsafe to remain in, but that ‘[h]e has no one’. Loneliness, the loss of everything dear to him, is the fundamental reason for Almásy’s despair.

Emotion, metaphor and cognition blend in order for emotion to be represented in literature. It would appear that an emotional unconscious exists. Human beings draw on this emotional unconscious personally within their lives and as part of a group whether it is a linguistic, cultural or social group. Bodies (regardless of linguistic, cultural or social group) experience the world in similar ways because of the restrictions of human physiology. Universal conceptions to do with the cognition of emotion and metaphor exist; metaphors are used in language to express emotion according to the body’s experience of that emotion.

Writers use these metaphors or metaphors based on similar types in order to express emotion textually. Thus, a novel such as Ondaatje’s The English Patient can be read and experienced as ‘sad’ and the reader may have compassion for the characters. Ondaatje’s style – his ability to reduce metaphors to their raw, vivid, visceral state – attests to his skill as a poet. At one point Hana ‘breaks the tip off an ampoule and turns to him with the morphine. An effigy. A bed. He rides the boat of morphine’.246

The image of the effect of morphine on the body as a boat is both accurate and evocative, bringing into prominence the unpredictability and alternately menacing and pacifying nature of the drug.

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245 Ibid. p. 175.
246 Ibid. p. 161.
Ondaatje’s sentences are clean and succinct. The language and imagery he uses is sensuous and often centred around elemental entities, particularly those concerning the body and nature. He writes the following about Kip and Hana:

Everything is gathered by him as part of an altering harmony. He sees her in differing hours and locations that alter her voice or nature, even her beauty, the way the background power of the sea cradles or governs the fate of lifeboats.247

The compounding of phrases into long sentences produces a generous, fluid and gentle style; the prose is unhurried and detailed. The use of the word ‘background’ is particularly apt here as it indicates the subtle nature of the notion of ‘an altering harmony’ and the subtlety of the language and the image. A similar pattern is found in the following passage:

As the Englishman wakes she bends over his body and places a third of the plum into his mouth. His open mouth holds it, like water, the jaw not moving. He looks as if he will cry from this pleasure. She can sense the plum being swallowed.248

The attention to detail – the third of the plum, his open mouth, the unmoving jaw – marks Ondaatje’s style. The immediacy of the image of the plum being swallowed draws the reader in and holds her or his attention. Simplicity is what gives the image its strength.

247 Ibid. p. 219.
248 Ibid. p. 45.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

The introduction to this dissertation began with a description of the origins of loneliness as a field of study and presented instances of loneliness in literature. The representation of loneliness in literature has its origins in mythology, both religious and Classical. Pandora, Psyche and Gilgamesh are examples of Classical and Near-Eastern mythological figures. In English literature loneliness is represented in literature from the medieval period through to the present. The Bible is a bountiful source of lonely characters as are the medieval and miracle plays. The theme continues in Elizabethan literature. Dickens, amongst others, followed in the Victorian era with some of the most accurate and devastating depictions of loneliness in literature. He inspired several Russian and Slavic writers such as Dostoevsky, Kafka and Tolstoy. The Romantic and Modernist poets brought loneliness and the lonely figure to the fore, privileging – and exulting in – the isolated figure. George Orwell, writing in the twentieth century, offers a bleak and uncompromising perspective of a lonely world in his prophetic (and surprisingly accurate) tales of the future such as 1984.

In essence, the introduction investigates the nature of loneliness. The seemingly interchangeable use of the terms ‘loneliness’, ‘solitude’, ‘solitary’, ‘isolation’ and ‘alienation’ is examined. I argue that these terms are not synonymous and that loneliness can be a complex combination of all of these. In the early days of study concerning loneliness within the field of psychology, loneliness was not an empirical topic.

Loneliness can be categorised into three main areas: illness, disease or condition, behavioural pattern and psycho-emotional phenomenon. Several stages of loneliness can be delineated. These include existential loneliness, pathological loneliness and ‘real’ loneliness, loneliness according to the life cycle, as well as emotional isolation and social isolation. I argue that a combination of these leads to a complete sense of the complexity of loneliness and that Ondaatje presents a combination of all of the
complexities of loneliness in *The English Patient*. The causes of loneliness are many and varied. In terms of the private, loneliness can be caused by the boundary created between the self and an other, by self-esteem or the lack of positive self-esteem, by fear and disappointments and by a struggle with spiritual meaning. In terms of the public, loneliness can be caused by population change, social change (particularly the breakdown of the nuclear family) and by migration while external loneliness can be caused by (poor) relationships with others. Loneliness may also be caused by the death of a loved one or failure in some personal endeavour. There is a tendency to conflate and oversimplify the concept of loneliness, even though several factors usually work concomitantly, rendering loneliness a complex and layered state.

A theoretical model concerning loneliness related to Saussure’s system of signification is asserted in this dissertation. Saussure suggests that two planes, content and expression, exist. The point of intersection of these two planes is the point of signification on the denotative level. On the connotative level it is the point of figurative expression. This model is adapted to suit the purposes of this dissertation where the denotative level can be read as the level of language and the connotative level as the level of metaphor. It is suggested that a third level exists alongside these and this is the level of emotion into which loneliness fits.

In Chapter One the symbol of the Villa from *The English Patient* is introduced as a framework that is representative of loneliness, and the four main characters are briefly identified. I argue that loneliness is found in the structure and style of a novel and Ondaatje employs several techniques both at the level of individual phrases and across the entire narrative to achieve this effect. At sentential level, destabilising phrases and images are stacked one after each other and together a sense of dislocation and fragmentation is created. Discussion within the chapter of the sentence ‘[t]here are stories the man recites quietly into the room which slip from level to level like a hawk’ indicates this. It is through this technique – of compounding isolating phrases and images – that a sense of loneliness is made present in the novel. A fragmented, episodic, intricate flashback structure is used in the novel which gradually reveals each character’s history and preoccupations. Kip’s narrative is an example of this: at the start of the novel Ondaatje offers very specific but disconnected details concerning Kip and it is only later in the novel that his character and history is explored. These
flashbacks reveal the character slowly and in a fragmented way, which produces a sense of loneliness in the novel. Awareness of physicality and sensuality introduces the notion of sensory experience as alienating. The frailty of life is indicated through the patient’s injuries, Hana’s abortion, Kip’s dangerous occupation, and the damage done to Caravaggio’s hands. Loneliness is a result of physical isolation caused by the separate nature of bodies.

Another technique Ondaatje uses is movement in narrative perspective and time frames. Passages of text may begin with an objective third-person perspective and then swiftly move into first person subjective, as demonstrated by the extract discussed in the chapter where the patient speaks about the weeks he spent in the desert after the plane crash. Lack of punctuation in speech sequences contributes to the alienating effect of the text. Paragraphs run into one another and the fluid change in narrative perspective destabilises the text. Ondaatje’s stylistic choice to move constantly between individual and shared narratives is alienating since it forces the reader to question and have to reinterpret the text continually. The alienating effect of this technique produces the sense of loneliness which can be found in the novel.

The second chapter begins with a description of the state of ruin in which the reader finds the Villa. This prompts a discussion of the psychological and physical ruin of each character in the novel. Hana, the nurse, is broken by the unrelenting war and the resulting tidal wave of death. The patient’s body has experienced total destruction and he is constantly in pain. His lack of identity causes destruction as well – for himself and his fellow inhabitants of the Villa and the reader is isolated too by the lack of a calling name for the patient. His room, however, is a place of honesty and healing for the inhabitants. Kip contests racism and politics and these undo his certainty of the world. Caravaggio is ruined by his secrets and the pain he suffers after the loss of this thumbs. He is disconnected.

Also within Chapter Two, identity and naming are presented as issues of importance. Is it Almásy lying in the sick bed or is he ‘the patient’? His identity is forgotten and he resists a fixed identity so he is isolated. Caravaggio’s name is gleaned from the Renaissance painter Caravaggio, which itself produces an intertextual play with history and identity. Caravaggio’s name and identity take on deeper meaning when
read in relation to the painting by Caravaggio which the patient describes. The meaning is alienating as it hints at the internal struggle associated with the loneliness of age. Kip is Kirpal Singh who becomes Kipper who becomes Kip, a name which stems from a jibe about kipper grease. The nickname fundamentally is offensive and carries political force as it renders him as Other. Kip uses his difference to keep his distance. The novel suggests that names create boundaries and enemies. Madox believes he is betrayed by his friend Almásy who helps the Germans towards the end of the war under the guise of his name and this contributes to Madox’s eventual suicide. Katharine dies as a result of names: Almásy offers his name in order to expedite the rescue operation not realising that this would kill his lover. Names bind us to an identity, which helps us to avoid feelings of dislocation and loneliness, and the corruption or loss of names intensifies these feelings.

The patient’s room becomes a symbol of existential loneliness. This is discussed in the second chapter. The desert as a soul is discussed as it relates to Almásy and his grief for Katharine. Hana experiences existential loneliness in her search for meaning despite all the death in war and the child she loses. Kip questions his family, heritage and political ideals and this leads to existential contemplation. Caravaggio represents the older person who examines the loss of his past life and the meaning of it. With a loss of faith comes a loss of meaning, and loneliness can be understood as a failure of meaning. Loneliness lends itself toward silence, and silence is self-appointed isolation. Trauma can lead to silence since the absence of memory is a protection mechanism in the body.

The library is a room associated with silence and it is the room most easily associated with Hana. In the novel, books are symbols of knowledge and narrative. These can be explored like geography and like people. The library is a space of honesty and healing for Hana and suggests a dual relationship: literature as history and history as memory. The patient contains his history in his copy of Herodotus and this is linked to the tales of Gyges from Herodotus that Katharine tells. Literature is used in the novel as a political tool. Kip, for example, is associated with Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* which deals with the politics of race. *The English Patient*, it appears, is Ondaatje’s attempt to come to terms with his history and memory. The novel is structured through the narratives generated by each character’s memory.
The third chapter continues the exploration of the Villa and turns to the kitchen. The kitchen is the meeting place of personal struggles in the novel. It is the place of ideas to be suggested which provide sustenance for the soul. Loneliness as darkness is discussed as well as loneliness as it relates to distance. Loneliness occurs both within an overabundance of space and within a lack of it. The relationship between loneliness and solitude is also investigated and it is evident that they are not one and the same. Solitude is comfortable isolation while loneliness is painful alienation. A discussion of the Villa’s garden ensues. Like the Villa, the garden has been damaged by bombs and is in disrepair. A comparison is drawn between the garden and the tromp l’oeil in the patient’s room. A further comparison is made between the garden and the biblical garden, the original paradise. Kip is readily associated with the garden and his status as the Other in the novel is discussed as is Ondaatje’s status as an Other in terms of his position as a post-colonial writer. Kip becomes a symbol for all that is foreign and his character voices concerns about the West’s political agenda; Kip’s strong reaction to the bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki indicate this. The third chapter also offers a brief discussion of nomad thought – a philosophical trope associated with the desert and its unceasing movement.

The hallway is the final space in the Villa to be discussed in the third chapter. The hallway is a transitional space. It represents movement in the space of identity and it is most readily associated with Hana and the patient. Both characters grapple with notions of home and family. This space suggests Ondaatje’s lament for the absent father figure.

The fourth chapter opens with a discussion of the body and embodiment. Two understandings of body are relevant here: a body of literature and the physical body. The body of literature makes reference to the theory of phenomenology proposed by Husserl and Heidegger and the existentialism of Sartre, Camus and Beckett. The biology and geography of the body pertains to the physical body. The physical body is discussed as it relates to Eastern thought and body concepts in which a discussion of the chakras and the aura is given particularly as it relates to the emotions. The significance of the heat auric layer for the novel is indicated as it has direct bearing on the recurring fire imagery present in The English Patient. Examples include, most
obviously, the patient who suffers devastating bodily burns, Kip who deals with explosives every day, the bombings in Hiroshima and the desert as a burning entity. The discussion of the human body returns to the empirical realm as body image, body schema and mirror neurons are investigated. The body in terms of signification is discussed next. Here, writing is described as a wound, a cut to the body. It is suggested that loneliness is also a cut, a pure cut. Social conceptions of the body are significant as well. Body language as a socially manipulative tool is discussed as is the taboo surrounding the representation of bodies in abjection and Durkheim’s ideas on totemism. The chapter also provides a more comprehensive discussion on emotion, and definitions of emotion are given. The suggestion of an emotional unconscious is made and the link between linguistic segments and (repressed) emotions is discussed. This refers to language used to describe emotion and the manner in which language can be manipulated to suit the ends of emotion memory. A discussion of metaphor ensues with particular reference to the master metaphor concerning emotion that Kövecses asserts, namely ‘EMOTION IS FORCE’. Ondaatje uses a fire metaphor throughout the novel which reflects the intense energised state experienced by the individual undergoing the emotion as well as the damage done by the individual’s inability to control her or his emotions, just as damage is done to the objects in a fire. The phrase discussed in the chapter is ‘the heart is an organ of fire’. This raw and wild state is akin to loneliness in that it is alienating since it is frightening to others. Thus, loneliness is written into The English Patient by way of Ondaatje’s metaphoric style which reflects the sense of disconnection associated with feelings of isolation and loss.

Several areas requiring further research have been presented in this dissertation. The representation of emotion in literature is one such area. Indeed, the importance of emotion in literature requires detailed discussion and analysis. Most pressing and intriguing is the (possible) link between reader response theory and the critics of the Geneva School of Literary Criticism. The Geneva School used the phenomenological method to analyse literary texts as representation of deep structures of consciousness, and, according to this method, the text is considered a subjective interpretation of reality. Reader response theory holds that the reader brings with her or him a set of beliefs and ideas which inform the interpretation of the text. Thus the reader is not a passive recipient of the text but constructs the text as it is read. Following on from
these two schools of thought, I argue that there is a relationship between the reader’s consciousness and the writer’s consciousness and that together the consciousnesses construct a text in particular ways. Thus, the writer brings to the text a subjective interpretation of reality and the reader brings an equally subjective interpretation of reality to the written text. The reader then taps into that creativity when reading, and, constructs meaning from the text, creating her own meaning around the text as well. The role of emotion in this relationship between writing and reading is interesting. It may be the case that, just as the writer and reader bring sets of beliefs and ideas to a text, so too do they bring emotion states and triggers. Thus, the emotional elements and valence of a text may be a subjective interpretation as well. This renders Ondaatje’s style all the more powerful in that he uses grammar, diction and metaphor to open the text so that it encompasses subjective emotion coding, thereby creating the isolation, fragmentation and alienation required to imbue the text with a sense of loneliness.

Loneliness pervades Ondaatje’s novel, and exists at every level within the text: in the narrative, in the characters, and in their emotions. The novel is a chronicle of loneliness and loss – a tale of four people who are and always will be alone together.


