

Guild Scene Analysis with Answers, *The English Patient*
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Scene Summary: Hana risks her life to retrieve a book to read to her patient and lose her present state of mind in a story.

Scene Location: From *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje, I. *The Villa*

***The English Patient* is a 1992 novel by the Sri Lankan author, Michael Ondaatje. The story is a mini-plot that follows four dissimilar characters brought together at an abandoned Italian villa during World War II. In this scene, a young nurse (Hana) cares for an amnesiac burn victim (Almásy).**

She would sit and read, the book under the waver of light. She would glance now and then down the hall of the villa that had been a war hospital, where she had lived with the **other nurses** before they had all transferred out gradually, the war moving north, the war almost over.

This was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world. She sat at the night table, hunched over, reading of the young boy in India who learned to memorize diverse jewels and objects on a tray, tossed from teacher to teacher—those who taught him dialect those who taught him memory those who taught him to escape the hypnotic.

The book lay on her lap. She realized that for more than five minutes she had been looking at the porousness of the paper, the crease at the corner of page 17 which someone had folded over as a mark. She brushed her hand over its skin. A scurry in her mind like a mouse in the ceiling, a moth on the night window.

She looked down the hall, though there was no one else living there now, no one except the **English patient** and herself in the **Villa San Girolamo**. She had enough vegetables planted in the bombed-out orchard above the house for them to survive, a

man coming now and then from the town with whom she would trade soap and sheets and whatever there was left in this war hospital for other essentials. Some beans, some meats. The man had left her two bottles of wine, and each night after she had lain with the Englishman and he was asleep, she would ceremoniously pour herself a small beaker and carry it back to the night table just outside the three-quarter-closed door and sip away further into whatever book she was reading.

So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night.

The villa that she and the Englishman inhabited now was much like that. Some rooms could not be entered because of rubble. One bomb crater allowed moon and rain into the library downstairs there was in one corner a permanently soaked armchair.

She was not concerned about the Englishman as far as the gaps in plot were concerned. She gave no summary of the missing chapters. She simply brought out the book and said “page ninety-six” or “page one hundred and eleven.” That was the only locator. She lifted both of his hands to her face and smelled them—the odour of sickness still in them!

Your hands are getting rough, he said.

The weeds and thistles and digging.

Be careful. I warned you about the dangers.

I know.

Then she began to read.

Her father had taught her about hands. About a dog’s paws. Whenever her

father was alone with a dog in a house he would lean over and smell the skin at the base of its paw. This, he would say, as if coming away from a brandy snifter, is the greatest smell in the world! A bouquet! Great rumours of travel! She would pretend disgust, but the dog's paw was a wonder: the smell of it never suggested dirt. It's a cathedral! her father had said, so-and-so's garden, that field of grasses, a walk through cyclamen—a concentration of hints of all the paths the animal had taken during the day.

A scurry in the ceiling like a mouse, and she looked up from the book again.

Between the kitchen and the destroyed chapel a door led into an oval-shaped library. The space inside seemed safe except for a large hole at portrait level in the far wall, caused by mortar-shell attack on the villa two months earlier. 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. The shelves nearest the torn wall bowed with the rain, which had doubled the weight of the books. Lightning came into the room too, again and again, falling across the covered piano and carpet.

At the far end were French doors that were boarded up. If they had been open she could have walked from the library to the loggia, then down thirty-six penitent steps past the chapel towards what had been an ancient meadow, scarred now by phosphorus bombs and explosions. **The German army** had mined many of the houses they retreated from, so most rooms not needed, like this one, had been sealed for safety, the doors hammered into their frames.

She knew these dangers when she slid into the room, walking into its afternoon darkness. She stood conscious suddenly of her weight on the wooden floor, thinking it was probably enough to trigger whatever mechanism was there. Her feet in dust. The only light poured through the jagged mortar circle that looked onto the sky.

With a crack of separation, as if it were being dismantled from one single unit, she pulled out *The Last of the Mohicans* and even in this half-light was cheered by the

aquamarine sky and lake on the cover illustration, the Indian in the foreground. And then, as if there were someone in the room who was not to be disturbed, she walked backwards, stepping on her own footprints, for safety, but also as part of a private game, so it would seem from the steps that she had entered the room and then the corporeal body had disappeared. She closed the door and replaced the seal of warning.

She sat in the window alcove in the English patient's room, the painted walls on one side of her, the valley on the other. She opened the book. The pages were joined together in a stiff wave. She felt like **Crusoe** finding a drowned book that had washed up and dried itself on the shore. A Narrative of 1757. Illustrated by **N. C. Wyeth**. As in all of the best books, there was the important page with the list of illustrations, a line of text for each of them.

She 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.

Scene Analysis:

A STORY EVENT is an active change of life value for one or more characters as a result of conflict (one character's desires clash with another's).

A WORKING SCENE contains at least one story event. To determine a scene's story event, answer these four questions:

- **Word count:** 1127
- **Literal Action:** Hana reads to her patient and risks her life to enter a dangerous area to obtain a book.
- **Essential Action:** Hana wants to care for her patient and, in doing so, heal herself. She believes obtaining a good book will help them both escape their grief.
- **Life Value Change:** suffering the realities of war to anesthetized by imagination
- **Value to Record:** suffering to anesthetized
- **Scene type:** beginning hook, progressive complication, conflict avoidance, gains a tool.
- **Additional notes:** The narrative device of this story breaks scenes and moves back and forth in time. This scene is compiled from three interspersed beats from the first story segment, I. The Villa. Ondaatje uses four points-of-view to introduce his four

protagonists and relies heavily on flashbacks to pull in backstory. The narrative drive is derived via missing information, sparking intrigue and curiosity in readers.

- The global genre of the novel is Worldview/Revelation with strong supporting Love and War Genres.
- When the novel was adapted for film, significant changes were made to the storyline.

Inciting Incident (causal): Hana realizes the book she is reading to Almásy is not holding her attention.

Progressive complications: Almásy warns Hana to be careful and avoid areas that may conceal bombs.

Turning point: Despite trying to refocus on the first book, Hana's mind wanders again and she remembers her deceased father for whom she greatly mourns.

Crisis: Should Hana heed Almásy's warning and stay clear of potentially booby trapped areas but suffer emotionally, or does she disregard his warning and enter the potentially dangerous library (risk her life) to retrieve a book that will distract her and Almasy from their misery?

Climax: She enters the library and retrieves a book.

Resolution: Their grief is temporarily relieved by reading a story.