

THE ENGLISH PATIENT

[1996]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

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In 1930s North Africa a wealthy man, Geoffrey Clifton (Colin Firth), and his wife, Katharine (Kristin Scott Thomas) join an aristocratic map-making and archeological expedition. Slowly, Katharine falls in love with Hungarian nobleman, Count Laszlo de Almásy (Ralph Finnes), the story's central character. Geoffrey discovers the lovers but bides his time. The party makes a phenomenal archeological find – the Cave of Swimmers. As the thirties move on, politics begin to impinge on this apolitical upper-class group. The Nazis want the maps they have been making for almost a decade to help in their conquest of North Africa. Geoffrey attempts to kill Almásy by crashing his plane into him. Instead, Geoffrey dies and Almásy survives, but Katharine is badly injured. Leaving her in the Cave of Swimmers, Almásy goes for help. He is arrested by the British because of his European-sounding name. He pleads with them to send help to Katharine, but they ignore him. He escapes and goes to the Germans, offering the maps in exchange for an airplane to rescue her. By the time he arrives, Katharine is dead. He puts her body in the airplane but is shot down. He is terribly burned; feigning amnesia, he winds up in an Italian hospital where he meets a sympathetic French-Canadian nurse, Hana (Juliette Binoche). Because he is slowly dying and cannot be moved, Hana moves him into a ruined monastery and stays with him in isolation. David Carravagio (Willem Dafoe) arrives looking for the German spy who sold him out to the Nazis who tortured him and cut off his thumbs, suspecting Almásy is his prey. Hana begins to fall in love with Kip (Naveen Andrews), a Sikh in the British Army whose specialty is disarming bombs and digging up land mines. David comes to terms with his hate; Almásy requests euthanasia from Hana and she agrees. The story ends when Hana follows Kip north to join him. (This plot summary is linear, the film is anything but.) (Rated R)

The English Patient is three stories rolled into one: a tragic love triangle, a spy story, and a more optimistic love story. Cleverly, they interconnect – more in the style of a long novel than a film. And this exercise in ambition is gift wrapped in a visually sumptuous package. Whether it is successful really depends more on your taste for stories and the way they are told than on the film itself.

The filmmakers are intelligent enough to turn the lush visuals on and off as the story requires. For instance, the film begins and ends with its most stunning image: an aerial view of sand dunes at dusk which resemble a mysterious, infinite expanse of the most sensuous feminine flesh imaginable. The beauty of the film continues but abates slowly as the story picks up and takes its place as our center of attention. Would that other visually gifted filmmakers knew when to turn off the beauty of their images before giving the audience an overdose of the saccharine and distracting from the story itself. Perhaps a film that is visually stunning (and eye-grabbing) throughout, shows that the makers either do not trust their own power of storytelling or they don't trust their

audience to be satisfied with anything but a large helping of eye candy. But not so *The English Patient*.

The three stories of *The English Patient* are not told linearly, but through a series of flashback memories and we, like the narrator, slowly put things together as the film progresses. What is perhaps most interesting (aside from the epic scope of its story) is how the three stories are integrated in time, space, emotions, and psychology.

The best example of the deep integration at a symbolic level is the use of principle locations wherein much of the emotional action takes place: the Cave of Swimmers in the North African desert and the ruined Monastery in the mountains of Italy.

The Cave is a Neolithic site of art and religion. It is deep underground, highly decorated and accessible only through a narrow opening. Definitely womb-like. And the “swimmers” – immersed in fluid – confirm this idea. The womb, of course, is a place of birth and it is here that the lovers first discover their mutual, fatal attraction. Being Neolithic, it represents the ancient and primitive, a time before our current rules of civilization came into effect. (And this is doubly true for the sophisticated, effete, upper-class, coming, as they do, from a culture that is almost totally rule-bound.) In this ancient cave, the emotions that are activated that are primitive, that descent into the cave is a descent on the ladder of civilization to its lowest depths – depths of pure feeling. (This, of course, makes for a great love story – love is love and to hell with the rest of the world.

While all this makes perfect sense at the symbolic level, symbology is never quite that simple. All powerful symbols contain their own opposite meaning – Jung called this enantiodromia. A symbol of birth also contains elements of death. A good example of this is the Hindu goddess Kali who is typically portrayed giving birth while dancing on the skulls of those she has killed. And this is true of the Cave of Swimmers, for it is here that Katharine dies. (The swimmers drown in a sea of emotion?) But not only Katharine dies here. Just as the birth of their love involved a descent into the primitive, so her death causes a descent in social relations.

In his attempt to save Katharine, the Almásy sells his maps (and his soul) to the Nazis – and sells out his country. Just as their love causes them to abandon contemporary sexual mores, her death instigates a desertion of a deeply held political affiliation in exchange for a hope for life. *The English Patient* opts for love over country (just the opposite of another magnificent love story, *Casablanca* [1942]).

The Monastery in Italy is a direct parallel of the Cave in North Africa. Both are abandoned and in ruins, both are refuges from the outside world, both have their intended functions radically changed by the wages of war, both are the repositories of awe-inspiring art. And most important, both are the locus of symbolic birth and death and its attendant consequences. When Kip takes Hana to view the frescoes in a church, their love is cemented – in direct parallel to what happens in the Cave of the Swimmers. And it is in the Monastery that the Count dies – in parallel again to what happens to Katharine in the Cave.

However, there are several important differences between the Monastery and the Cave. One is underground while the other is on top of a hill. One represents the descent into the primitive unconscious while the other is an ascent to the highest aspects of spirit. One is an artifact of a religion long past, the other a living force. Several things happen in the Monastery that don't happen in the Cave, which indicates a general progression in the growth of consciousness.

First, Almásy confesses his "sin." Of course, his actions in terms of the values developed in the cave are not sinful, but proper – anything for love. However, when transferred into the present day, into the light of consciousness, he realizes that one cannot live in the modern world by the rules of the primitive. It is the responsibility of consciousness not only to appreciate and harness the forces of the unconscious, but also to modify it, to alter it, and sometimes even resist it so that its power can be employed not only for a personal good, but a general betterment of the universal consciousness. And this is where the count has failed. In the Monastery, the symbol of universal consciousness, he realizes his errors and makes amends as well as he can. He heals another's hate – David Carravagio's – and then welcomes his inevitable death with peace and calm. Despite his mistakes in both the world of the social and psychological, he has accomplished what few others have.

Second, in the Monastery we witness, in addition to a death and resolution, a birth and resolution. Kip and Hana come to terms with their own doubts about themselves, about each other, and about the world. Then, with this resolution, they channel the energy into the construction of their own love. The film ends on a hopeful note: Hana heads North (away from the primitive unconscious of the North African desert), to join Kip. Again, few achieve such resolve and resolution of their emotions.

The English Patient is one of those rare Hollywood "intellectual" films that actually trusts its audience to be intelligent. Most contemporary "limited audience" films are either patently transparent or infantile (*Swingers* [1996], for instance, takes an hour-and-a-half to come to the conclusion that mature women don't like infantile men – wow!)

The English Patient keeps its treasures well hidden. Almost every scene is rich with symbolic meaning that, once inspected, fleshes out the film even more than what we see on the screen at first glance – Herodotus (which contains on its written pages the history of the world and interleaved, Almásy's personal history), the repairing of a staircase with unreadable books, a plum being very plum, even the offering of olive oil for a hair tonic, all these and dozens of other little, but symbolically heavy, incidents make this film a fascinating journey.

While the scope of *The English Patient* is vast, ironically its failure is that its scope isn't vast enough. Its grandeur invites comparison with *Lawrence of Arabia* [1952] or *Ghandi* [1982]. However, these and many other historical biographies open up their characters – and the film – into a gambit in which the experiences of the individual change not only the single person, but the whole course of world history. As attractive as

it is, *The English Patient* is only about six people and that's it. Yet this may be appropriate for films today. This aspect of *The English Patient* may be evidence that the lowered expectations of Generation-X are being projected backward into history in an unconscious effort to justify the present. The patient, it seems, is not just English, but a whole generation.

The English Patient. Directed by Anthony Minghella. Screenplay by Anthony Minghella from the novel by Michael Ondaatje. Cinematography by John Seale. Distributed by Miramax Films, 1996.