

Zach Strong

Professor Michelle Damour

English 1406

13 April 2021

The Connection Between Setting and Power in *The English Patient*

Power can mean many things, from a person's "ability . . . to act or do something effectively", a "specific capacity" one may possess, the ability for someone to "exercise control", or even the "effectiveness [of] moving one's emotions" ("Power", *American Heritage*® *Dictionary*). What exactly power means in a given instance depends on what someone wishes to accomplish in a given setting. *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje provides an ideal playground in which to explore power's relation to setting. Hana, as a nurse, is given an overwhelming amount of control over the wounded soldiers assigned to her care. Kip, as a sapper, possesses the knowledge to disarm a plethora of German bombs as well as the skill to decipher bombs he has not yet encountered. By the above definitions, both Hana and Kip are powerful characters. However, Hana's role as a nurse and Kip's role as a sapper place both characters in situations where they are forced to relocate, to change the setting in which they inhabit. Without a permanent setting, Kip and Hana's power over their surroundings is largely nullified. The Villa San Girolamo, which Hana and Kip both join, acts as a way to restore power to them by means of asserting themselves on their environments, thereby gaining control over their surroundings. Due to the ever-changing nature of the war, however, the novel reveals that this power is temporary, much like the shift of power between nations during the war. In this way, Hana and Kip's means of control over their environments is largely circumstantial, dependent on their current settings.

Hana's slow, drawn-out time in the war helps establish her as a knowledgeable individual, one who uses that knowledge to exercise a great amount of control (and therefore power) over the people surrounding her. Hana spends an extensive amount of time working as a nurse during the war. She recalls all "the towns they crept towards and through, Urbino, Anghiari, Monterchi" (Ondaatje 48). By describing this movement through towns as a creep, a movement associated with slowness and sluggishness, Hana is making clear the sheer amount of time she spent among wounded soldiers. Adding on to this, Hana also recounts how "she would leave [her hospital] and walk outside into spring or winter or summer, seasons which seemed archaic" (51), indirectly expressing the number of seasons she endured. Seasons are not even adequate to describe the passage of time for her; they are "archaic", an old measurement of time now useless amidst the lengths of time she experienced as a nurse. The significance of all this time spent in the war becomes apparent when Hana tells Caravaggio that she "know[s] death now . . . how to divert [soldiers] from agony. When to give the quick jolt of morphine in a major vein" (83-84). By spending so much time surrounded by the deaths of soldiers, Hana learns to control death, almost taming it. She knows how to calm its worst side effect: the agony which she diverts with a "quick jolt of morphine" (84). She also learns to control the patients themselves. To treat patients on the brink of death requires that she "make them empty their bowels before they die" (84). Hana literally possesses the knowledge to control the basic bodily functions of her patients! Despite being only twenty years old (84), Hana's relatively long experience working with death has allowed her to demonstrate the immense amount of control she can have over the people around her. Compared with the generals which preside over the war, Hana also enjoys a certain form of power which the generals never could: the power to ignore rules. Because she can control so much about her patients, Hana is able to gain control

over their possessions as well. Hence, “when one of the patients died [Hana] ignored all rules and took the pair of tennis shoes he had with him” (50). Hana’s power to break the rules placed upon her is a power the generals could never have as, in Caravaggio’s words, “they have to follow the rules of their shitty civilised world” (123). Thus, Hana enjoys a fair amount of power as a nurse, and in some cases enjoys more power than the war generals. This demonstration of Hana’s power emphasizes the importance her setting has on this power. Without the constant stream of injured soldiers that the war provides, Hana would be unable to exercise this same amount of control over her surroundings.

Despite being placed in an environment which allows Hana to exercise control over her environment, this control is weakened by the ever-changing setting which surrounds her. As a World War II nurse, Hana is constantly given new patients, treating individuals for only short periods of time. In her own words, “[c]aring was brief. There was a contract only until death” (51). This contract Hana has between herself and her patient, the control she has over them, lasts only until their deaths; it is temporary. Because the people surrounding Hana are constantly changing (and constantly dying), Hana is unable to establish any long-term control over them. In other words, the power Hana exercises over her setting is limited based on its ever-changing nature. Hana also travels between many different towns during her time as a nurse, causing her setting to be even more variable (48). In an attempt to gain some long-term control at the Santa Chiara Hospital, Hana designates a sculpture of a white lion as her sentinel, an entity that “keeps guard [as] a sentry” (“Sentinel”, *American Heritage® Dictionary*). Lions are commonly depicted as “the fiercest creature in the environment” (Sooke), so it is natural that Hana wants a creature of this type as a guardian, even if it is just a depiction of one. During her late-night shifts, Hana believes that the lion “would emerge like her into the dawn shift” (Ondaatje 40), signifying not

only that the lion would remain there, acting as something permanent in her ever-changing setting, but also that the lion would emerge “like her” (40). Hana envisions herself emerging into the new day as powerful as a lion to treat her patients. The white lion serves as a way for Hana to draw strength from her new environment, creating a seemingly permanent form of power for herself. However, not only does Hana eventually relocate to another hospital (51), forcing her away from this power, but the emotional context surrounding her changes as well. Hana is informed of the death of her father in the war, an event described as “[a] white lion”, just like her sentinel (41). This white lion breaks Hana (41). Even when Hana is able to temporarily find a white lion in her physical setting to draw power from, the ever-changing emotional setting brought about by the war is able to produce white lions of its own, strong enough to lessen her power (in this case completely breaking her) (41). Both Hana’s physical and emotional settings are subject to change during the war; finding solace in her physical setting alone is not enough to secure power over the world around her. Because Hana’s setting refuses to remain constant, her control—and therefor her power—over it is weakened. This calls into question the relationship between Hana’s setting and her power. Her setting is responsible for providing her with an opportunity to gain control over wounded soldiers, but it is also responsible for facilitating an environment which limits that control. Is it the case, then, that settings which facilitate power necessarily limit that power?

Much like Hana, Kip is another knowledgeable character whose position in the war helps bring him power. Even before Kip travels from India to Europe for the war, he possesses a vast amount of mechanical knowledge. Kip is described as coming “from a country where mathematics and mechanics were natural traits . . . [m]ost people in his village were more likely to carry a spanner or screwdriver than a pencil” (188). Despite this, Kip’s knowledge does not

immediately translate into power. As the above quotation points out, “[m]ost people in his village” have the capacity to work with math and mechanics, making Kip perfectly average in this setting (188). It is only when Kip enters the war in Europe that his competency in mechanics translates into power. This power manifests itself in Kip’s ability to disarm bombs. Throughout the novel, the bombs Kip works with are described in terms of their sheer power. As an example, when Kip is working with a bomb that Lord Suffolk fails to disarm (inevitably killing him), another bomb explodes a quarter mile away (193). The explosion is described as “making even the arc lights seem subtle and human” (193). Not only is this bomb capable of being seen from such a long distance—a quarter mile—but it possesses the ability to make large glaring arc lights seem “subtle and human” in comparison (193). Characterizing the arc lights as human implies that the bombs Kip is surrounded by are not human, reaching power levels humans could only dream of. Notwithstanding this, Kip is able to defuse these bombs almost nonchalantly! After finishing with the bomb mentioned above, Kip simply states that “[t]here was a second gaine” and that he “was very lucky, being able to pull out those wires” (195). Kip makes no mention of any fear or anxiety felt during the job, no mention of the difficulty of the defusing. In fact, Kip downplays his defusing by claiming that he simply got lucky. In successfully disarming such complicated bombs, as well as showing no fear in the process, Kip gains total control over these bombs which are established as containing great power. Kip therefore possesses more power than these bombs which are supposedly above humans. This power is a direct result of enlisting in the war to defuse bombs. The setting is crucial for Kip’s power.

Nonetheless, much like Hana, the very setting which gives Kip his power is also responsible for severely limiting that power. Kip is a long way from India, both physically and culturally. As Damour notes, “[b]eing visibly different than the white English soldiers [in

Europe] meant he became invisible”, and therefore loses assertiveness over the people around him (Damour 2). Though, race is not the only important factor to consider when assessing Kip’s power in the war. Take Kip’s name, for instance, which is given to him by the sappers he works with under Lord Suffolk. His actual name, Kirpal Singh, is quickly forgotten (Ondaatje 87). Kip goes along with his new name due to him preferring it “to the English habit of calling people by their surname” (88). It is understandable that Kip would be hesitant to accept the standards of such a new environment since, at the time, this was Kip’s first bomb disposal report in England (87). The entire culture is still new to him. However, by letting the other sappers take away his real name and replace it with the equivalent of “a salty English fish”, a small creature of little significance, Kip is allowing his setting to take control of him due to not being comfortable with its customs (87). In this way, Kip’s power over his surroundings is limited by this new cultural setting he finds himself in. Even when Kip is given an opportunity to gain near full control over the sapper squad after Suffolk’s death, he refuses (195). Kip lists a few reasons contributing to this decision, one of which relating to his connection with the sappers around him: “those men who would not cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him when they were off duty would do what he desired. It was strange” (196). Kip feels completely separated from the people around him. To “cross an uncrowded bar to speak with him”, requiring only to walk a few meters across a presumably clear floor, is too far for Kip’s fellow sappers (196). Though not physically distant from the other sappers, the cultural setting surrounding Kip separates him from others as he is not socialized enough into European culture to form personal connections. Notwithstanding this, the sappers would still follow Kip’s orders. Kip realizes that the power he would have gained from Lord Suffolk’s death would be largely ceremonial. He does not have any actual control over the sappers. The sappers cannot even be bothered to talk with Kip or call him by his actual

name. If they follow Kip's orders, it is due solely to their obligation to the war effort, not out of any power Kip has over them. Kip's role as a sapper gives him immense power in the form of bomb defusing, but this same role also limits the amount of power he can exercise over his surroundings since it forces him into a setting to which he is unaccustomed. Even with a direct opportunity for power over the group of sappers, the new cultural setting in which Kip is placed can inhibit him from obtaining that power. If both Hana and Kip could transfer their knowledge and/or their competencies to a different setting, it seems it would be possible for them to gain the power that their settings are restricting them from accessing.

Hana's choice to stay at the Villa San Girolamo considerably increases her power in terms of the control she can assert over her environment. The very act of Hana stepping away from the war and deciding to stay in the villa with the English patient demonstrates a reclaiming of her control over her surroundings. The villa provides a fixed environment for Hana, a place where she can both assert herself and draw strength from the English patient (14). No longer is Hana's control dependent on soldiers who arrive only to die shortly after. The villa has no higher power commanding Hana to leave for a new hospital or telling her that her father has passed. It is solely her domain. In fact, the villa provides so much control for Hana that "she could burn down [the villa] if she wished" (14). Normally, it takes the efforts of many people to burn down an entire area. For instance, it takes an entire German division mining Naples to even have a chance at having the city "dissolve in flames" if ignited (276). Hana, however, possesses that same power in the Villa San Girolamo, able to burn the place down if the urge ever strikes her. Furthermore, Hana's control over her surroundings is no longer restrained to only matters involving wounded patients; she gains autonomy from the villa. Hana's increased autonomy can be seen even when she is sleeping. As a nurse, Hana sometimes laid "on the floor beside a

mattress where someone lay dead” in order to sleep (49). By sleeping on the floor, Hana is literally putting herself beneath a dead soldier, submitting to her surroundings by allowing inanimate people better treatment than herself. By contrast, Hana can “bang spikes [for her hammock] into whatever walls she desired, whichever room she wanted to wake in, floating above all the filth and cordite and water on the floors” in the villa (47). On top of the increased autonomy Hana is given in choosing her sleeping arrangements, the villa also gives her the ability to sleep “above all the filth” on the floors. This elevates her to a higher level than what was possible in war, a place where Hana was forced directly to the floor to sleep, the lowest possible position she could occupy. This ability alone is a sign that her power is no longer as restricted by her setting; she can assert herself wherever she wishes. Lastly, the villa provides a source of strength for Hana, similar to the white lion from the Santa Chiara Hospital: the English patient. When the reader is first introduced to the English patient, Hana describes him as having “[h]ipbones of Christ”, and that he is “her despairing saint” (3). Hana is painting the English patient in possibly the best possible light. Christ is the one man Christians paint as representing “an ideal type of humanity” (*Merriam-Webster*), while a saint is another person who embodies holy actions. From these descriptions, it seems that Hana looks to the English patient as a well of knowledge and strength whenever she listens to one of his stories, much like the way Christians turn to Jesus for strength. Thus, the villa provides for Hana a stationary setting from which she can draw strength, unlike the ever-changing setting Hana’s role as a nurse provided.

Kip’s decision to stay at the villa also grants him a wealth of power unavailable to him beforehand. While Kip does not necessarily turn his back on the war as Hana does (Ondaatje 72), simply being present in the villa elevates him to a higher status, one where he is able to build real connections with people and gain real autonomy with the environment around him. As a sapper,

Kip is required to be “permanently suspicious of any object placed casually” in his surroundings in case a bomb has been planted there (275). This habit is very much the result of the constantly changing physical setting Kip is placed in as a sapper. Being regularly shipped around to various locations to defuse bombs teaches Kip, to an extent, to let his surroundings control him. He is never given enough time to become comfortable in his setting; he is at the mercy of whatever bombs he is placed near. While defusing, Kip describes himself as an “animal reacting just to protect [it]self” (216), furthering the idea that he is near powerless compared to his setting, a mere animal in a world of bombs previously described as being beyond human. The villa eliminates this problem. It is a set location for Kip to repeatedly return to, allowing him the opportunity to become comfortable in a space without the fear of a hidden bomb. Kip’s game with Hana demonstrates this perfectly. Because the villa provides a stable, unchanging environment, Kip is able to clear it of bombs, allowing him to race “suddenly across [a] room [with] the bounce of his sapper light all over the place” (224). No longer is Kip an animal protecting itself. He is fully comfortable in the villa, able to bolt across rooms and carelessly bounce his light wherever he pleases. The villa provides a place for Kip to exercise much more control over his environment (in the form of racing over it) than his place in the war provides. As well, the villa also provides a place for Kip to become less anonymous, granting him even more power. As mentioned before, travelling from India to Europe puts Kip in a completely unfamiliar setting, a setting whose customs he is not familiar and/or comfortable with. Before Kip takes Lord Suffolk’s test, he spends his time staring “at a barometer . . . mutter[ing] the words to himself in his new English pronunciation” as he does not know anyone there and feels uncomfortable under the stare of Miss Morden (187). Being from a very different part of the world relegates him to the corner of the room with a barometer, lowering his already small

influence over the people around him. He becomes anonymous, just another unimportant person in the room. The villa, once again, fixes this. Kip becomes the center of Hana's attention, "able to surround her, be everywhere" (88). Being given the ability to surround someone suggests all encompassing power, which is accurate for how Kip asserts himself into Hana's life. Kip is such a crucial part of Hana's life in the villa that she defends him against Caravaggio's morphine driven ramblings (122). The villa enables Hana and Kip to break free of the restrictions their past settings imposed on them and assert themselves on their surroundings, gaining power. It is interesting to note how the single action of choosing to stay at the villa causes a near instant power shift in Hana and Kip's favour. Not only is their power circumstantial, but it is also based solely on a few choices they make regarding the settings they place themselves in.

With the shift of their social setting caused by the bombing of Japan in the war, Kip's power in the villa is loosened, showing how his power is temporary much like the power nations enjoy during wars. Much of Kip's power in the villa is based on the connections he makes with the others staying there. As mentioned before, he is no longer "the anonymous member of another race", unable to have any real influence over his fellow sappers (196). Instead, he feels "he is now within something", within a community of people (the villa) in which he feels recognized (104). After all, Hana is literally willing to die with Kip while he is disarming a bomb (103). This undying devotion from Hana, even at the possibility of death, shows at the very least that Hana acknowledges his existence. The villa provides a physical setting where Kip can be "within something" as opposed to being cast to the wayside (104). As a result, Kip gains a considerable amount of power over the people surrounding him, building intimate connections with them and having an influence on their actions. Then two bombs are dropped onto Japan. This action changes not only the power relations of the war, elevating the US above Japan, but it

also changes the power relations within the villa. Kip is no longer an equal member of their community. In response to these bombings, Kip says that it does not matter whether you are American or French or any other white nation, “[w]hen you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman” (286). Kip is doing more here than dividing nations between racial bounds. He is pitting himself against Hana, Caravaggio, and Almásy, three people of European descent. The specifics of their nationalities are not important. The very fact that they are even associated with the nation that is “bombing the brown races” is enough to lump them together into one group (286). The bombing of Japan has proven to Kip that being of a distant nationality truly does separate him from the others. He strengthens this idea by leaving “the three of them to their world” (286). Not only are Hana, Caravaggio, and Almásy members of a different race, they are of a different world altogether. He has no further business cohabitating with members of a world who commit such devastating acts of violence. Because of this, Kip no longer sees himself as a member of the villa, losing the connections he formed. It is true Hana still feels a great deal of emotions for Kip during this time, as she still “leans forward into him” when in the chapel with him (288). However, Kip recognizes that this influence he still has over her is not “true” power. Much like when Kip realizes he does not have a true connection with the other sappers, he understands that he does not have a true connection with Hana anymore; Hana would be influenced by Kip only as far as she wanted. The bombing of Japan in the war completely severs Kip’s ties to the others in the villa by changing the social context which surrounds them. Kip no longer sees himself as a part of the villa, which in turn lessens any power he previously had over it.

Hana experiences a similar loss of power to Kip in the villa. One of Hana’s greatest sources of power in the villa is her autonomy. The villa, as mentioned prior, gives Hana a great

deal of control over where she goes and what she does, luxuries not afforded to her as a nurse. However, at the bombing of Japan, Hana becomes grouped in with the Englishmen by Kip. She becomes a vague enemy in Kip's eyes instead of the Canadian women with "the voice of a cello" she was seen as earlier (104). Kip no longer listens to Hana or even allows her a voice. Hana tries to assure Kip that she is not a part of the "Englishmen" he is referring to: "Kip, it's *me*. What did we have to do with it?" (288). Hana is being as clear as she can be, urging Kip to remember the person he has been with by saying "it's *me*" (288). She is not one of the Englishmen responsible for Hiroshima or Nagasaki, she is Hana. Despite this, Kip refuses to acknowledge this. As far as he is concerned, Hana is dead (286). Kip willingly lets the actions of the war define Hana as a person, disregarding everything he learns of her. This action takes a great deal of Hana's autonomy away. The villa was largely a place for Hana to escape the chaotic, ever-changing setting the war gave her as a nurse, but the shift of power in the war has brought its influence right back. She is no longer given the control to assert herself on her surroundings; Kip lets his radio do that for her. As a further example, Kip "leans to his side away from [Hana]" when she attempts to reason with him (288). Kip's action signifies that his opinion of Hana has dropped. He went from viewing her as a woman with a voice not unlike a cello, a well-loved string instrument, to simply "a girl", erasing all his previous affection towards her (288). To lower his view of Hana so extremely for a reason outside her control demonstrates Hana's loss of autonomy, and therefore power, within the villa. Therefore, just as how power among nations changes so drastically after the bombing of Japan in the war, Hana and Kip's power over their surroundings changes as well. The power they possess at any given time is temporary, dependent largely on the physical, cultural, and emotional settings they find

themselves in. Put more succinctly, Hana and Kip do not have power over the power they possess at any given moment; their power is circumstantial.

Within *The English Patient*, the power Hana and Kip exert over their surroundings is subject to change based on their current setting. Hana as a nurse and Kip as a sapper are both placed in environments where they can exercise control over the people and landscapes around them. Though, these settings fundamentally limit how much power they can obtain based on their tendency to change and be unfamiliar. The villa provides a more stable setting in which Hana and Kip can assert themselves, gaining considerably more power over their surroundings than before. Ultimately, this power is proven to be temporary due to the influence of the war following them into the villa, altering the villa's power relations as power relations change among nations. It is interesting that Ondaatje draws parallels between Hana and Kip's power with the power of nations near the end of the story. It is possible that, through Hana and Kip's power being revealed as circumstantial, Ondaatje is attempting to claim that nations should not be viewed as absolute units of power that dictate the world's happenings. Instead, nations are highly flexible and influenceable entities whose power is as alterable as that of Hana and Kip. Seeing Hana express disapproval of the generals which ruled over the war and Kip blatantly attack nationalities during his outburst, it would not be a stretch to say that Ondaatje wanted to paint nations in a less powerful light through *The English Patient*, showing their flaws by examining them in a war caused by national dysfunctions (WWII). Regardless, Hana and Kip's power in *The English Patient* is in constant flux, a result of the changing settings they are placed in.

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