

Platonic or Romantic? Critical examining the contrasting relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in Homer's *'Iliad'* vs Miller's *'The Song of Achilles'*

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Abstract

This paper discusses and analyses the depiction of two very on-demand characters, Achilles and Patroclus. The recently popular Greek myth retelling, 'The Song of Achilles' by Madeline Miller is compared to 'Iliad' by Homer in terms of these two characters' bonding. Miller incorporates aspects of their relationship, left untouched by Homer, who didn't make the relationship explicit. Miller's retelling transcends the idea of gender and time. While Homer explores 'what' a character does, Miller explores the reason 'why', and she does this by telling us the backstory of both Achilles' and Patroclus' life before they joined the Greek army. Upon reading 'The Song of Achilles', we get a cognitive understanding of their relationship. Miller believes that the 'Iliad' has to offer more than it seems, and it provides us with a comprehensive sense of ourselves and uses this as inspiration to write her debut novel.

Keywords: Relationship, war, glory, honour, love, grief, human nature, moral goodness

Is the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus platonic or romantic? Who can confirm? Their relationship is one of the most pondered questions, which has been discussed and debated for over 3 millennia. Some critics and scholars wave out such assumptions and believe it to be unnecessary at this point, unlike Madeline Miller, who, when asked in a Q and A published on Booktopia's and Madeline Miller's website, "What do you hope that readers will gain from reading your book?", to which Miller answered, "I certainly would love to hear that the novel inspired some interest in Greek mythology in general and the 'Iliad' in particular. I hope too that it might help to combat homophobia" (Miller, Q & A), which hasn't left the chat even after numerous centuries have passed by.

According to Miller, the 'Iliad' is a timeless classic that entails "human nature and its attendant folly, passion, pride, and generosity have not changed in the past three thousand years and are always relevant." A common misunderstanding concerning the author's text, 'The Song of Achilles', is that she derails from the original text, which she clarifies in her Q and A, where she mentions, "It was very important to me to stay faithful to the events of Homer's narrative". This is apparent because she based her book on Achilles' grief over Patroclus' death, as mentioned in Homer's 'Iliad'.

Though Miller took inspiration from the ‘Iliad’, that doesn’t mean there aren’t significant differences in both texts. Homer focused on war and poetry as a way of life and lifestyle, which also suited the audience then, whereas Miller seems to shift her focus from war to saving humanity from all kinds of violence. Greek myth retellings are becoming popular among followers and non-followers of ancient Greek literature alike. Miller aims at simplifying Greek myth for modern readers, unlike writers like Homer, who, according to Miller, “assume that their audience understands epic conventions, like listing all the generals and their ships, or using frequent repetition.” She mentions, “One of my explicit desires in writing this book was to make it so that readers didn’t have to know anything about ‘Iliad’ to enjoy it. I wanted to give everything they needed to follow the actions right then and there, so that they could experience Homer just as his first audiences would have: as entertainment, instead of an object of study”.

Miller’s debut novel, ‘The Song of Achilles’, surprisingly narrated by Patroclus himself, gives us a deeper understanding of the bond that Achilles and Patroclus share. We witness a point of view that wasn’t offered to us before, nor did we expect it. The book covers the details that were lacking in the ‘Iliad’ regarding certain events, especially Achilles’ actions, which were deemed to be violent and, to a certain extent, diabolical. The book also expands on the untouched romantic rumours between Achilles and Patroclus, which were left out of the ‘Iliad’; it also acts as a background story concerning the lives of Achilles and Patroclus before joining Agamemnon’s army of warriors. From Patroclus’ childhood to his exile from his father’s kingdom to Pthia, King Peleus’ Kingdom, where he meets the future’s greatest warrior, Achilles, who is half god and half human preparing to be a warrior, he is initially envied by Patroclus, but his dislike for Achilles’ blonde hair and blue eyes soon blossomed into friendship and eventually love as they grew up to be young men over the years.

Throughout the story, Achilles and Patroclus are on a quest to discover themselves while facing enormous trials and tribulations, one of which was Achilles’ mother Thetis, who, according to Hamutal Minkowich in her analysis of ‘The Song of Achilles’, portrays Thetis as “a cruel and distant mother”, and Trojan War complications. No matter what situation and circumstances they came upon, they did not lose sight of each other. Patroclus expresses his feelings and says, “I will never leave him. It will be this, always, for as long as he will let me.” Patroclus is unwilling to separate from Achilles and thus follows him to Troy, even though he is far from being a warrior of the same stature as Achilles. Patroclus might not have been a warrior on war grounds, but he was a warrior of hearts; he swayed Achilles and readers with his down-to-earth nature and immense knowledge and understanding of human nature and the consequences of pride and unthoughtful actions. It is prophesied that Achilles will die a brutal death if he fights in the Trojan War, and he is advised to stay clear of Hector. To stop this from happening both, Thetis and Patroclus try to prevent it, but fate prevails. Thetis tries to warn him not to join the army and believes Patroclus will become the cause of Achilles’ downfall and despised their relationship from the beginning, this is the sole reason why many readers dislike her in ‘The Song of Achilles’, but one cannot deny that in a way Patroclus contributed to Achilles death, other reasons being Achilles pride to die a death of honour. Patroclus, in his lover’s amour, ventures to kill Hector, believing that this act will help Achilles escape death once and for all, but gets killed himself in the process of saving his lover, which infuriated Achilles, and the death of Patroclus eventually led to a brawl between Achilles and Hector, at which Achilles kills him. This is where his rage takes a dark turn, anger caused by his companion’s death leads him to lose the sanity once provided by Patroclus. He mutilates Hector’s body by punishing it for causing extreme pain and grief. He

also disrespects Priam's constant request to return his son's corpse and drags Hector's body by tying it to a chariot. Soon Paris, the Trojan Prince, with the help of Apollo, strikes an arrow at Achilles' most vulnerable part, his heels, and kills him. Achilles, while grieving with Briseis (a captive woman saved by Patroclus and Achilles from Agamemnon's wrath but eventually killed by Achilles' son, the devil incarnate, Pyrrhus), requested his ashes be mixed with Patroclus', saying, "When I am dead, I charge you to mingle our ashes and bury us together." Even Thetis, by the end of the book, did not hinder his decisions, unlike Pyrrha, who lived with Thetis since the day he was born, and believes Patroclus is not an important figure to be buried with his father. Though Achilles was prideful and arrogant, he was still lovable, but his son Pyrrha stands in contrast to him, incapable of love and humanity. By the end of the book, though, we know very little about Pyrrha and end up detesting him. His character, though seemingly annoying to the nerve, helps us understand Achilles' good side, which was invisible amidst the war.

It's astounding how Miller's writing is similar to Homer's. She gives us what the classics didn't feel the need to. The details regarding the background of these characters bring us even closer to them than the 'Iliad' could. Choosing Patroclus as the narrator of the story became the driving force of this tale. Taking place over the 18 years of Achilles and Patroclus' lives, we feel more connected to their human nature.

Though Miller's book is a book of its own, it does touch on themes evident in Homer's 'Iliad', for instance, war, revenge, mortality, friendship, fate, free will, the quest for glory and honour, and worst of all, pride. Patroclus seems to notice the atrocities of the selfish, narcissistic troop of leaders and warriors alike. Barbarians are both gods and men equally and the only sane person in an insane, cunning environment was Patroclus, who did not let himself get swayed along in the pursuit of glory and honour. His ability to see moral goodness in everyone and everything and be aware of his weaknesses and strengths. One can differentiate Patroclus from Achilles, who, unlike Patroclus, falls victim to extreme pridefulness and arrogance. It is as if this relationship resembles that of Yin and Yan. Patroclus, playing the role of the better half of Achilles, reminds Achilles of his responsibility as a fellow human and tries to make sense of him. He is the only person Achilles appreciates and acknowledges, which gives us an understanding of the deep bonding between the two. To conclude, the 'Iliad' doesn't venture into the possibility of a romantic relationship, whereas 'The Song of Achilles' picks up from there and creates an amalgamation of an unconventional love story that wanted to be written. Miller's description of the love shared by them is passionate but equally heart-wrenching which catches the reader's attention and leaves them feeling euphoric.

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