

The story returns to the present, and both Priam and Somax anticipate their homecoming. Priam observes Hecuba, 'a figure standing small and emphatic' (p.215) on the wall of his city; meanwhile, Somax ponders the gifts he will buy for his family 'to celebrate his homecoming, and to mark this day and night he has just passed that has been so extraordinary' (p.215). The story of Priam's journey to ransom Hector's body from the great Achilles eventually becomes legend, and Somax's role in the tale is largely forgotten or dismissed as 'an old man's empty bragging' (p.216).

- Q** What do you think Priam has achieved by the end of *Ransom*?
- Q** In both *Ransom* and *The Queen* there is a marked difference between the public version of events and the way those involved would describe them. How do the two narratives convey this distinction?

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Priam

Key quotes

'I have always, to the public view, been just what I appear to be. That is the discipline of kings ... A little too punctilious, I know, in all that is due to ceremony. A stickler, as they say. For form, for the rules.' (p.77)

'One of the chief concerns of a good king is the image he presents, and most of all, as he grows older, the image that other men will keep of him when he is gone.' (p.89)

Priam, King of Troy, is constantly aware of his role. He is 'the sacred spirit' (p.83) of Troy, and his people expect him to have no part in 'ordinary desires and needs and feelings' (p.84). Priam has always accepted this responsibility. Until Hector's death Priam was willing to hold himself 'apart in ceremonial stillness and let others be' his 'arm', his 'fist' and his 'breath too when talk

was needed' (p.53). However, after his eldest son is slain by Achilles, Priam is no longer content with 'the splendour and limitations' (p.85) of his role as king, and wants instead to do 'something for which he will be remembered' (p.208). It is his desire to achieve something lasting, something unusual, and to do so through his own agency, that drives Priam to act as if his world is 'subject to chance' (p.46).

Priam was born 'Podarces, son of Laomedon, King of Troy' (p.68). When he was six years old Troy was sacked (invaded and looted) by Heracles. He escaped by hiding among slaves, 'a rabble of filthy, lice-ridden brats' (p.64). Podarces was subsequently ransomed and renamed Priam, meaning 'the price paid' (p.74). As Priam, he was placed on his 'father's throne' (p.75) to become King of Troy; however, his brief time as a slave has left an indelible effect on him. He explains to Hecuba, 'I had experienced something I could not un-experience' (p.75), and he feels that as a consequence he inhabits his life 'in a ghostly way ... As a substitute' (p.76). Priam's early involvement in war is repeated 'seventy years' later (p.45), although this time he will be the slain King, and his wives and children will be murdered or enslaved. While he accepts the inevitability of his death and the fall of Troy, he still embraces the possibility of living in 'a world that is also subject to chance' (p.46) and he revels 'in the light of ... otherwise' (p.197).

Priam's ability to 'try something that might force events into a different course' (p.61) allows him to step beyond his role and 'take on the lighter bond of being simply a man' (p.60). His decision to approach Achilles is powerfully symbolic, affirming their common humanity. Priam acknowledges that 'it is only a provisional triumph' (p.208), and readers know that Troy will soon fall. However, for Priam 'it is enough' (p.209).

Achilles

Key quotes

'Achilles ... staggered a moment. He felt his soul change colour.' (p.24)

'Something in him has freed itself and fallen away. A need, an obligation. Everything around him is subtly changed.' (p.189)

Achilles struggles with the duality and fluidity of his nature. 'He is a child of the earth' who is also 'drawn ... to his mother's element', water (p.4).

Malouf explores this internal conflict by describing the contradictory elements of Achilles – his ‘warrior spirit’ (p.7) and ‘buried rage’ (p.10) in contrast with his ‘pious resignation’ (p.9) and occasional ‘unheroic thoughts’ (p.193). He is also alert to his destiny, knowing that his life will end ‘on the beach in the treacherous shingle, or out there on the plain’ (p.9). After releasing Hector’s body, Achilles savours the brief feeling that ‘the end, which is so close now, seems to have been miraculously suspended’ (p.211). However, ‘the foreknowledge of what they have already seen’ (p.201) remains with him. Like Priam, Achilles is restricted and confined by expectations; however, unlike Priam, Achilles accepts his destiny.

Achilles is constantly aware of his duty to lead and inspire the men under him, making decisions for himself and ‘all his followers’ (p.17). At times this responsibility weighs heavily on him. He is aware that his men are confounded by him and fear ‘that some rough-haired god has darkened his mind’ (p.29), but he helplessly ‘rages, shames himself, calls silently on a spirit that does not answer, and sleeps’ (p.36). This is perhaps why he accepts Priam’s ransom, because it gives him an opportunity to ‘leap clear of the clogging grey web that enfolds him’ (p.36) and recognise that they are both ‘men ... not ravening beasts’ (p.183). This acknowledgement of their shared humanity is ‘perhaps ... the real gift ... Perhaps that is the ransom’ (p.60). Once Achilles accepts Priam’s offer and relinquishes Hector’s body he ‘is visited by a lightness that is both new and a return’ (p.211), demonstrating the power of Priam’s actions. After the ransom is paid, Priam is ‘a man remade’ (p.209) and Achilles is finally restored as ‘the true Achilles, the one he has come all this way to find’ (p.190).

Key point

The novel opens with Achilles sitting on the beach waiting to hear the voice of his mother. He receives no response from any of the gods, even though he is part god himself. In contrast, Priam’s prayers and fasting draw a response from Iris. Priam and Somax also receive assistance from Hermes, who protects the men and helps them gain access to the Greek camp and, more specifically, to Achilles. This suggests that the gods endorse Priam’s actions as honourable while condemning Achilles for his disrespectful treatment of Hector’s body.

Somax

Key quotes

‘His name is Somax. It fits him, he has always thought, rather well.’ (p.98).

‘I know you’ve got a temper ... and are on the sly side, that you’re a rogue in fact ... A bit of a tippler, and a storyteller and spinner of tales.’ (Hermes, pp.156–7)

Somax is ‘a plain workman’ with ‘no experience ... of princes’ (p.93). He lives a modest and simple life as ‘a poor day labourer’ (p.218), with a ‘feigned indisposition to be astonished by anything the world might throw at him’ (p.159). Somax is stoic and practical. He is aware of the importance of balance between the spirit and the body: ‘if the one is to be considered so must the other. We’re children of nature ... Of the earth, as well as of the gods’ (p.121). He has been ‘blessed and then unblessed’ (p.130) as he has lost most of his family, but he explains to Priam that ‘we go on’ (p.131). His dignified acceptance of his lot is in contrast to the protests of Priam and Achilles, both of whom rage against their circumstances and are overwhelmed by grief.

Key point

Somax provides a foil for Achilles and Priam. He does not appear in *The Iliad* – Priam is accompanied in Homer’s text by Idaeus from the court instead – and is Malouf’s own creation. His function in the narrative is to provide a model of humanity and humility. Somax is free of the burden of being a king or a hero, and instead embodies ‘the lighter bond of being simply a man’ (p.60).

Like Achilles and Priam, Somax has a dual identity. He has been ‘comfortable’ with the name Somax ‘for a good fifty years’ (p.98), so when Priam renames him Idaeus Somax feels ‘increasingly uneasy’ (p.99). However, it is as Idaeus that he travels with Priam and enters Achilles’ camp. This suggests that sometimes in order to achieve great things an individual must step beyond their own identity and take on a different role. Somax’s assumed role is a symbolic one, whereas the challenge for Achilles and Priam is to put aside their symbolic roles and communicate ‘man to man’ (p.175).

Hecuba

Key quote

'They are two old people consulting together, seeking comfort in one another's presence. Two children holding hands in the dark.' (p.60)

Hecuba is Priam's first and favourite wife, and the mother of nine of his sons. Their relationship is one of genuine affection, a 'tenderness they have so long shared' (p.50). Hecuba is the first person Priam turns to when the 'dangerous suggestion' (p.46) of going to Achilles comes to him. She plays the role of devil's advocate in *Ransom*, challenging Priam's decision while also providing a pretext for Malouf to explore Priam's backstory as Podarces. Hecuba's resistance to Priam's plan has the effect of strengthening his resolve, and in working to persuade her he becomes more committed to and focused on his goal. Hecuba ultimately decides 'she needs the help of her sons' (p.61); however, once she realises he is firm in his resolve, her 'hand is there to steady him' as 'there is no point in further argument' (p.90).

Hector

Key quote

'The armour Hector wore was the armour he had stripped from the body of Patroclus, Achilles' own, which Hector wore now to mock him ...' (pp.21–2)

Hector is a prince of Troy, eldest son of Priam and Hecuba. He has a wife, Andromache, and son Astyanax. Hector is a fierce warrior, capable of turning the tide of battle and 'slaughtering on all sides' (p.15). It is his effort that has made 'the Greek cause ... become desperate' (p.15), and it is he who kills Patroclus on the battlefield. He then challenges Achilles and is killed. As Hector dies, while the two men are joined 'by three hand-spans of tempered bronze' (p.23), he tells Achilles that he will not outlive him for long. This connection, formed at the moment of Hector's death, haunts Achilles.

Patroclus

Key quote

'So it was settled. Patroclus was to be his adoptive brother, and the world, for Achilles, reassembled itself around a new centre.' (pp.13–14)

Patroclus' father Menoetius is King of Opus, meaning Patroclus was born a prince. When he 'struck and killed one of his companions' he was exiled from Opus and brought 'to Phthia as an outcast seeking asylum' (p.11). Peleus, Achilles' father, agrees to adopt Patroclus, who becomes Achilles' 'soulmate and companion' (p.10).

Their relationship is not without conflict. Patroclus remains conscious of his status as 'a courtier, a dependant' (p.14), and he struggles to express his distress at Achilles' withdrawal from the battle. His 'brooding presence' (p.17) as he sits 'grim-faced and silently distraught' (p.16) leaves Achilles 'drained of all will' (p.18), and he agrees to let Patroclus fight in his place. This is part of the reason for Achilles' overwhelming grief when Patroclus is killed by Hector – he feels responsible for the death of his closest companion.

Key point

The central male characters in *Ransom* are almost universally faced with conflicting and shifting identities. Achilles constantly battles to balance his 'hard boyish nature' (p.5) with the more fluid temperament of 'his other nature ... his mother's element' (p.4). Somax is forced to accept the title of Idaeus while he is travelling with Priam; Priam remains constantly aware of his previous incarnation as Podarces; and Patroclus has gone from being a prince of Opus to 'an outcast seeking asylum' (p.11). These changing identities illustrate the internal conflict that is an inevitable part of being human, highlighting the fluid nature of the self.

The gods (Iris, Hermes and Thetis)

Key quotes

- '... the goddess Iris ... is smiling. Indulgently, he thinks. The soft light she appears in has a calming effect ...' (p.46)
- 'Hermes ... really was the celestial joker – messenger, thief, trickster, escort of souls to the underworld ...' (pp.158–9)
- 'He has moved into his mother's element and is open again to her shimmering influence.' (p.172)

Several gods make an appearance in *Ransom*, highlighting the importance of fate and destiny while also revealing the lack of agency humans have in a world dominated by deities.

Iris is a goddess of the rainbow and a messenger of the gods. She appears to Priam after 'eleven days of watching and silent prayer, in which no food and not a drop of wine has passed his lips' (p.44) and offers him the possibility of 'a world that is also subject to chance' (p.46). Her support is instrumental in helping Priam decide to undertake the journey to Achilles' camp.

Hermes does not immediately identify himself as a god, instead pretending to be a guide sent by Achilles to help Priam and Somax reach the Greek camp in safety. Once Priam recognises Hermes he wonders 'how he had not seen it before' (p.158). Hermes' presence is 'an endorsement and blessing' (p.161), ensuring the ransom reaches Achilles and also providing strength and 'a slow energy' (p.161) to Priam. Achilles understands that 'more than ordinary forces' (p.176) have led Priam into his tent, and this makes him more open to Priam's offer.

Thetis, a sea nymph, is the mother of Achilles. The 'hard condition' of her relationship with the mortal Peleus (p.5) was that she would have to relinquish Achilles to be 'his father's son and mortal' (p.6). She remains connected to him although she is unable to be more than 'a faint far-off echo to his senses' (p.5), and Achilles is comforted by 'her shimmering influence' (p.172) when he is confronted by Priam.

Section 3: Comparison

IDEAS, ISSUES & THEMES

Narrative and storytelling

Key quotes

- '... a man's acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story.'
(*Ransom*, p.6)
- 'Words are powerful. They too can be the agents of what is new, of what is conceivable and can be thought and let loose upon the world.'
(*Ransom*, p.61)
- '... when people come to assess your legacy they won't remember those few days.' (Tony Blair, *The Queen*, 1:30:00)
- 'She was the people's princess, and that's how she will stay, how she will remain, in our hearts and in our memories.' (Tony Blair, *The Queen*, 24:50)

Taking control of the narrative of one's life is a central concern of both *Ransom* and *The Queen*. In both texts the central characters find themselves caught up in dramatic, large-scale events that will have long-lasting repercussions for their own lives and legacies. They struggle to find ways to negotiate the situation, and in both cases they are extremely aware of how they will be remembered.

As well as portraying particular events and individuals, both *Ransom* and *The Queen* are part of a wider story. An understanding of Priam's past as Podarces, Achilles and Patroclus' relationship and Somax's experiences are all essential to the audience's understanding of these characters; similarly, the stories of Charles and Diana's relationship and the Queen's path to the crown give important background that explains the various responses to Diana's death.