Ransom

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DAVID MALOUF

David Malouf is of mixed Lebanese and Jewish ancestry, and grew up in Queensland, Australia, where he also attended university. After graduating, he divided his time between Australia and Europe, teaching English in a number of secondary and post-secondary institutions. His first breakthrough as a writer came midway through his teaching career, with the 1962 publication of *Four Poets*—a volume of poetry. Although he largely shifted his focus to novel-writing in the mid-1970s, many critics (as well as Malouf himself) consider his early experiences as a poet key to his compact and lyrical style as a writer of prose. In 1978, Malouf published his second novel—the widely acclaimed *An Imaginary Life*—and subsequently resigned from his position at the University of Sydney to pursue writing full-time. In all, Malouf has written nine novels, ten volumes of poetry, and multiple other works, including short story collections, essays, and even the librettos for several operas.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

There is considerable debate over whether a real historical conflict resembling the Trojan War ever took place. Ruins of an ancient city founded in the 3rd millennium BCE and rebuilt several times *do* exist in modern-day Turkey, but it is difficult to know how much this historical Troy resembled its fictional counterpart; the *Iliad* was not set down in written form until the 8th century BCE, which was likely four or five centuries after the events it described. That said, Malouf traces his own affinity for the story of Troy to his childhood memories of World War II, since he first heard about the Trojan War in 1930s Brisbane—a staging ground for the war in the Pacific.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The plot of *Ransom* derives from a single episode in *The Iliad*—an epic poem by Homer that covers a few weeks of the ten-year Trojan War. Where the *Iliad* traces a path from Achilles' argument with Agamemnon through Hector's slaying of Patroclus to Hector's death, *Ransom* refers to these events only briefly and in flashback, focusing instead on King Priam's efforts to win back the body of his son from Achilles. This links Malouf's novel to other contemporary works that expand on scenes or characters from classic literature—particularly novels like John Gardner's *Grendel*, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which are all reworkings of epic poems (*Beowulf*, the *The Aeneid*, and *The Odyssey*, respectively).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Ransom*
- **Where Written:** Sydney, Australia
- **When Published:** 2009
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Novel, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Troy (legendary and quasi-historical city on the coast of modern-day Turkey), the Bronze Age
- **Climax:** Priam pleads with Achilles for Hector's body, and Achilles agrees to return it.
- **Antagonist:** Fate
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Recommended Reading. Malouf considers the *Iliad* the greatest literary work in existence, but he also reserves special praise for writers like Charles Dickens and William Shakespeare. As far as his fellow Australians go, he cites Patrick White as a particular source of inspiration.

An Eye for an Eye…or a Heel. As *Ransom* hints, Achilles would not survive the Trojan War either. While Achilles' death is not part of the *Iliad*, but the most popular version of the story of the war names Paris—Hector's brother—as his killer. According to legend, Paris shot Achilles in his only weak spot: the heel his mother Thetis held onto while dipping him in the River Styx to make him otherwise invulnerable.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the tenth year of the Trojan War, Achilles—a demigod and the greatest of all the Greek warriors—stands brooding on the shores of the **sea**. He thinks about his mother, a sea goddess, and his son Neoptolemus, whom he has not seen since leaving for war. Most of all, however, he thinks about his friend and adoptive brother Patroclus, who grew up with Achilles after being exiled for inadvertently killing a playmate. Patroclus has recently died, in part as a result of Achilles's own actions. Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, had taken a slave-girl from Achilles, and Achilles in turn refused to fight, angered by both the loss of the girl and the insult of Agamemnon taking her. Eventually, however, he agreed to let Patroclus wear his armor and lead his men in his place, resulting in Patroclus's death at the hands of the Trojan prince Hector. Enraged,

Achilles sought out and killed Hector, who prophesied with his dying breath that Achilles would soon die as well. Achilles then tied Hector's body to his chariot and dragged it back to the Greek camp. His revenge, however, has not been satisfying, in part because the gods have protected Hector's corpse from Achilles's attempts at mutilation.

As Part 1 draws to a close, Achilles returns from the beach and has his grooms prepare his horses. He lashes Hector's body—once again miraculously healed—to his chariot and drives around Patroclus's burial mound, hoping to finally satisfy his grief. His actions only leave him feeling empty, however, and he falls asleep wishing vaguely for an event that might rouse him from his current state of living death.

Within the walls of Troy, King Priam is thinking much the same thing. Eleven days of mourning for his son Hector have done nothing to dampen his grief, in part because it encompasses so much: the loss of his son has brought home to Priam the terrible fate that all of Troy is facing. Even as Priam thinks about the futility of his life and reign, however, he senses a presence in the room. He turns and sees the goddess Iris, who tells him that the deaths of Priam's children and the likely fall of Troy itself are not the "mockery" of the gods or fate, but in part the result of "chance"" Iris then disappears, but Priam experiences a vision in her wake: himself and a driver seated on a mule-drawn cart that is carrying a covered load.

Priam, excited, goes to find his wife Hecuba, who remains distraught over Hector's death. Priam consoles her and reveals his vision, along with his intention to make it a reality by taking a cartload of treasure to Achilles as **ransom** for Hector's body. Hecuba is appalled by her husband's suggestion and offers various objections: that Achilles won't accept the offer, that Priam will be killed, and—above all—that Priam's royal status prohibits him from lowering himself by appealing to his son's killer as an ordinary man might. Priam, however, feels that this is the main advantage of his plan, and argues that speaking to Achilles on a human level will allow both of them to sidestep the normal rules of fate and status. He further explains that he has never felt entirely at home in his role as king, in part because he was nearly sold into slavery as a child; when Heracles sacked Troy during the reign of Priam's father, Laomedon, Priam escaped only because his sister asked for him as her "gift." As Priam describes it, the brush with slavery was a brutal reminder that everything about his life as king is conditional rather than guaranteed. Hecuba, still worried, asks Priam to postpone making any decisions until after he has spoken to his children and advisors.

Priam duly explains his plan to his sons and counselors, who echo Hecuba's concerns, arguing that Priam has an obligation to remain aloof and awe-inspiring as a king. Priam, however, again reiterates that he is a man as well as a king, and subject to pain and death like everyone else. That being the case, he wants to do something "new and unheard of" before meeting his fate.

Seeing that it is useless to argue, Priam's sons begin to assemble the ransom and prepare a cart. Initially, however, they bring him his usual horse-pulled chariot, along with his herald Idaeus. Priam angrily scolds them for remaining enmeshed in ceremony and convention, and sends them to find an ordinary carter. They return with Somax, whose pretty mule (**Beauty**) has caught their eye. Despite feeling somewhat overwhelmed, Somax agrees to take Priam to the Greek camp, and later that afternoon, the citizens of Troy watch in confusion as the two men drive out of the city.

As Part 3 opens, evening is falling and Somax and Priam have stopped to rest. Somax pities Priam and encourages him to join him on the banks of the River Scamander, where they dip their feet in the water and eat **griddlecakes**. As Somax chatters about the way his daughter-in-law makes the cakes, Priam finds himself intrigued and charmed by the "unnecessary" details of the world around him. He asks Somax to talk more about his family, and Somax explains that he only has one grandchild left—a daughter who currently has a fever. He once had two grown sons, but both died in accidents. Priam, once again, is struck by the personal nature of the man's stories.

As the pair get underway again, they come across a young man who appears to be a Greek soldier, but who will in fact turn out to be the god Hermes. He tells Priam that Achilles has sent him as an escort, and though both Priam and Somax are somewhat wary of his claims and cocky demeanor, they accept his help. After the trio ford the river, Priam realizes who Hermes is, and the god confirms he has come to guide them to Achilles's hut. Priam takes courage from the idea that the gods have blessed his mission, and as Part 3 closes, the group reaches the Greek camp.

Meanwhile, Achilles is sitting in his hut watching his men eat and feeling resentful of the new squire, Automedon, who has taken Patroclus's place. Sensing the presence of a god, Achilles turns in the hopes of seeing Patroclus's ghost. Instead, however, he sees an old man whom he initially mistakes for his father Peleus, and falls on his knees before the visitor. Priam is disconcerted by this but explains who he is and why he has come—a story Achilles confirms with Somax. After sending Somax away to have a meal, Achilles listens as Priam pleads with him as a father, appealing to Achilles's relationships with both Peleus and Neoptolemus. Achilles is touched—all the more so when he has a vision of Neoptolemus killing Priam some time after his own death—and agrees to Priam's request.

As Priam rests, Achilles goes to retrieve Hector's body, which is again unblemished. Achilles, however, is no longer angry, and in fact feels a kind of solidarity with Hector. He watches as women wash and prepare the body, and he calmly anticipates his own impending death, before waking Priam. Over a meal, the two men agree to an eleven-day truce for Hector's funeral. Finally, Priam prepares to leave, and Achilles tells him to call on him for help when Troy falls. Priam wonders aloud whether

Achilles will himself be alive by then, and the two share a kind of grim joke about their ultimate fates.

As Priam and Somax return to Troy, they pass burial mounds and a burned village, stopping only once so that Priam can weep in private over his son's body. Despite his grief, however, Priam feels rejuvenated by the journey and what he has accomplished. Back in the Greek camp, Achilles likewise feels that a burden has been lifted from him.

As Achilles trains, the narrative briefly flashes forward to the fall of Troy. Neoptolemus, highly conscious of his father's fame, seeks out Priam in order to avenge Achilles's death. He finds and kills him, but the moment does not go as he had planned it, and for the rest of his life, he is haunted by the "shame" of it.

Back in the present moment, however, Priam and Somax continue to make their way toward the city. Somax thinks about returning to his family, anticipating the stories he will be able to tell. The narrative once more skips forward, this time long past the fall of Troy to an era when those still living in the region will find it hard to believe that such a wealthy civilization ever existed there. Somax, moreover, has a reputation as a teller of tall-tales, so his grandchildren and great-grandchildren do not lend much credence to his story about conveying Priam to Achilles's hut. Instead, they talk about how he once had an extraordinarily beautiful mule named Beauty.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Priam – Priam is the aging King of Troy and the father of Hector, who at the outset of the novel lies dead in the Greek camp after having been defeated in battle by Achilles. At the novel's outset, Priam is a broken man, mourning not only the loss of his son, but also the loss of his heir and the city's chief defender: Priam anticipates (correctly) that Troy will not survive long without Hector. In fact, Priam's malaise runs even deeper than this, because he sees the inevitable fall of his city as a mockery of all that he has tried to achieve in life since nearly being sold into slavery as a child when Heracles sacked Troy. An encounter with the goddess Iris, however, persuades him that there is another way of thinking about his misfortune, and that he might still be able to seize some control of his fate—that there is, in fact, room for chance and human agency even when fate ultimately holds sway. Priam therefore decides to go to Achilles and beg him for Hector's body in exchange for a **ransom**. The idea scandalizes Priam's wife and family, who view it as degrading and unworthy of a king. This, however, is precisely why it appeals to Priam, who relishes the idea of simply being a father after a lifetime spent obeying royal customs and conventions. Over the course of his journey (and thanks in part to his driver, Somax's, efforts), Priam becomes ever more enamored of the ordinary but personal world he has had so little chance to engage with as a king. His meeting with Achilles completes his transformation from king to man, and he is able to return to Troy at peace with himself and his life.

Achilles – Conventionally described as the greatest warrior to take part in the siege of Troy, Achilles is half-human and half-divine: his father Peleus is a human king, but his mother Thetis is a sea nymph. *Ransom* refers only indirectly to Achilles's status as a demigod, but it is clear from the start that Achilles—renowned as he is as a warrior—is not entirely at ease with the world of men. In particular, his affinity with **water** suggests a longing for the more spiritual and fluid domain of his mother. By the time the novel opens, Achilles's split identity has been further complicated by the death of his friend Patroclus at the Trojan prince Hector's hands. Enraged, Achilles in turn killed Hector and attempted to mutilate Hector's corpse as a way to display his wrath, but was thwarted by the gods, who intervened to protect Hector's body from injury or decay. With no outlet for his grief or rage, Achilles remains frozen in a state of helpless mourning until the arrival of King Priam in his hut. Priam, who has brought a **ransom** to exchange for Hector's body, appeals to Achilles as a fellow human, subject to injury and death. The conversation moves Achilles, releasing him from the burdens of his life as a warrior, and he agrees to Priam's request. As the novel ends, Achilles has regained his ability to straddle his dual identities and feels that he has become more fully himself, even though he knows that he himself will soon die in battle.

Somax – Somax—a middle-aged common man with a flair for storytelling and a special fondness for his mule **Beauty**—is the carter hired to convey Priam to the Greek encampment. As *Ransom*'s only original (and only lower-class) character, Somax occupies a unique role in the novel. In fact, he in some sense embodies the changes that Malouf has made to the story found in the *Iliad*, since his down-to-earth demeanor and ordinary troubles stand in stark contrast to the quite literally epic world that Priam and Achilles inhabit. Over the course of the novel, however, both Priam and Achilles come to appreciate the pleasures of being simply human (rather than a king, god, symbol, etc.), and Somax plays a key role in this transformation. Somax's children have all died, and as he travels with Priam, the two men bond over their shared losses, even as Somax encourages Priam to experience both grief and life in general in a more personal and particular way. Tellingly, it is Somax who has the final word in the novel, which closes with the carter telling his grandchildren and great-grandchildren about the part he played in the Trojan War. His listeners do not believe him, but do enjoy talking about Somax's now legendary mule Beauty—a detail that hints at Malouf's defense of ordinary and unheroic life.

Hecuba – Hecuba is the wife of Priam, and thus the Queen of Troy and the mother of Hector. Although her relationship with her children is in many ways more intimate and personal than

her husband's—she recalls, for instance, key milestones in one of her sons' childhood—she strongly objects to Priam's proposed plan to **ransom** Hector's body. In addition to worrying for Priam's safety, Hecuba believes that the assumptions underlying Priam's plan could disrupt the entire social order by calling into question the inevitability of fate (i.e. the power of the gods) and the distinctions between different social classes. Nevertheless, she is a loving and devoted wife, and supports Priam when it becomes clear that his mind is made up.

Hermes – Initially appearing in *Ransom* as a young and rather vain Greek soldier, Hermes is in fact the Greek messenger god. He is also the god of travelers, and the escort of souls to the afterlife, so it is symbolically fitting that he acts as a guide and protector to Priam and Somax as they make their way to Achilles's hut. The men encounter him shortly before crossing the River Scamander, and he introduces himself as an escort sent by Achilles to protect them. Although both Priam and Somax are initially mistrustful, they have no choice but to accept his presence, and after helping them ford the river, Hermes reveals his true identity. Priam takes heart from the knowledge that the gods approve of his plan, and Hermes accompanies them for the rest of their journey.

Patroclus – As Achilles's closest friend, Patroclus looms large in *Ransom* even though the novel opens after his death. Patroclus and Achilles met when they were boys and grew up as adoptive brothers, so Achilles's sense of himself is deeply intertwined with Patroclus. In fact, he views Patroclus as his "soulmate," implying a possible sexual or romantic relationship. Nevertheless, the two do not always see eye to eye, with Patroclus seemingly feeling a deeper debt of loyalty to the Greek army. This difference of opinion is also what ultimately leads to Patroclus's death, since after Achilles refuses to fight because of an insult he receives from the Greek general Agamemnon, Patroclus borrows Achilles's armor only to die in a duel with Hector. His death sends Achilles into a destructive spiral of grief and rage, leading him to kill Hector and drag Hector's body around the walls of Troy.

Hector – Hector is Priam's eldest son, and thus the Crown Prince of Troy. He is also the city's greatest warrior, so his death at Achilles's hands essentially seals Troy's downfall. By the time *Ransom* begins, Hector is already dead, and Achilles has dragged his body back to the Greek camp in revenge for Hector's killing of Patroclus. Hector's surviving relatives describe him as a proud and loyal defender of his father and country, but he himself appears only in a flashback to his duel with Achilles, during which he uses his final breath to predict Achilles's own impending death. Interestingly, however, Hector appears to say this out of a sense of camaraderie rather than anger, foreshadowing Achilles's own change of heart: after Priam's visit, Achilles comes to see Hector as a worthy opponent and (perhaps more importantly) fellow human being.

Peleus – Peleus, Achilles's aging father, appears throughout the novel in his son's thoughts. In fact, when Priam visits Achilles, Achilles at first mistakes Priam for his own father and falls at his feet in tears. Priam later invokes this parallel explicitly, asking if Peleus wouldn't do for Achilles what he himself is attempting to do for Hector. Priam's words, combined with Achilles's memories of his father's grief at their parting, help persuade Achilles to return Hector's body.

Neoptolemus – Neoptolemus is Achilles's son, whom he has not seen in nine years by the time *Ransom* begins. Although Achilles himself will die before he has the chance to see his son again, he has a vision of Neoptolemus in the future: he sees his son, now a teenager, killing Priam during the final sack of Troy to avenge Achilles's death. Malouf expands on this in the final pages of the novel, depicting the killing as an unsatisfying attempt on Neoptolemus's part to live up to his father's legacy, and an act that will haunt Neoptolemus with shame for the rest of his life.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Deiphobus –Deiphobus is one of Priam's sons. He claims to have been particularly close to Hector, and he urges his father not to disrespect his brother's memory by following through on his plan to visit Achilles.

Polydamas – Polydamas is an advisor to Priam and a friend of Hector. As a result of this friendship, he views the Trojan king as a father figure, and Priam returns the affection, carefully weighing Polydamas's advice.

Automedon – Automedon is one of Achilles's men and, in the aftermath of Patroclus's death, his chariot driver and attendant. Achilles recognizes that Automedon's loyalty and cautious nature make him a valuable assistant, but nevertheless resents him for being present at Patroclus's death as he himself wasn't.

Alcimus – Alcimus is Automedon's squire. He is relatively young and occasionally forgets to follow customs and conventions—a trait Achilles finds charming.

Helenus – Helenus is a son of Priam, who shares his ability to communicate with the gods. Helenus, however, has made a profession out of this skill as a priest.

Cassandra – Cassandra is one of Priam's daughters, and a seer like her father. In the wake of her brother Hector's death, however, she appears to lose interest in her visions, which had previously taken an ecstatic and crazed form.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have

a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FATE, CHANCE, AND CHANGE

In much of Greek mythology and literature, fate appears as an ultimate and inescapable force. This is certainly true of the stories surrounding the Trojan War, including the *Iliad*: in Homer's version of events, the deaths of Hector and Achilles, and even the fall of Troy itself, are all preordained. As a retelling of a single episode from the *Iliad*, *Ransom* largely works within this same tradition, depicting the final destinies of its characters as fixed and unalterable, at least by the time the story opens. At the same time, however, the novel attempts to reconcile this concept of fate with more modern ideas about chance and free will in order to envision a world in which internal change is possible, even when external change is not.

Fate itself appears in various guises in *Ransom*, some more traditional than others. Priam, for instance, at one point associates destiny with the will of the gods. But other, more earthly forces exercise in the book a similarly binding power over human lives. Priam, for instance, describes the royal sphere he occupies as king as one in which speech, actions, and events are never "accidental" but are instead carefully plotted out ahead of time in order to adhere to set symbolic meanings. Regardless of the particular form it takes, however, fate often overrides individual desire and action in the novel. This is particularly clear in Malouf's treatment of death, which—because it is universal and inevitable—is perhaps the most basic kind of destiny at play in the novel. Far from being avoidable, for instance, Hector's death at Achilles's hands is presented as the only possible outcome of both men's lives: "a meeting that from the beginning had been the clear goal of their lives and the final achievement of what they were." What's more, *Ransom* structurally emphasizes this connection between fate and mortality by repeatedly flashing forward to deaths that take place beyond the timeframe of the novel, but which nevertheless seem settled—most notably, Neoptolemus's grisly murder of Priam during the fall of Troy.

Of course, it's possible that the *details* of Hector's and Priam's deaths have not always been set in stone. The goddess Iris, for instance, describes the siege and fall of Troy as "the way things *are*" rather than "the way they must be," implying that things might at one point have gone differently. By the time the novel begins, however, there is very little sense that major changes to Troy's future are possible: events have taken on a momentum of their own. Interestingly, however, the climax of the novel—Priam's visit to Achilles with treasure in order to **ransom** his son's body—seems to exist outside the bounds of fate, however that fate is defined. Although the meeting is possibly preordained in a certain sense (Priam, after all, foresees it in a vision), the novel also describes it as an event that flies in the face of every major form of "destiny," including social convention, individual character, and even physical probability (no one, for instance, thinks it is even possible for Priam to reach the Greek camp alive). In fact, Priam's plan is a direct response to Iris's words: as he explains to Hecuba, the simple act of relabeling fate as "chance" might provide an "opening" where humans can exercise free will, presumably because it expands the range of actions they can imagine. This in turn can have a snowball effect. For instance, Priam's actual meeting with Achilles does *not* entirely conform to his vision of it, because Achilles kneels to Priam before Priam has the chance to do the same. In other words, by acting in such an unexpected way himself, Priam creates a moment in which others can behave in similarly surprising and unscripted ways.

In the end, of course, Priam's actions do not alter the material facts of either his own destiny or Achilles's. Since both men are (still) fated to die in the war, it is tempting to conclude that Priam's newfound hope in the idea of chance is misplaced. In reality, however, something *has* changed over the course of the novel: Priam and Achilles themselves, who shed some of the norms and burdens associated with their usual roles as king and warrior, and become more fully human as a result. This is why Priam's insistence on "naming" fate as chance is so important. However fixed external events may be, *Ransom* suggests that humans can rise above their fates by creating moments where internal change is possible.

IDENTITY, HUMANITY, AND MORTALITY

Ransom focuses tightly on the inner worlds of two characters: Priam and Achilles. As the novel opens, however, neither of these characters has a particularly stable or unified sense of identity. Each is instead pulled in different directions on account of factors like their social roles as a king and a warrior and their interpersonal relationships. This is a distressing experience for both men, who feel variously uncomfortable with or alienated from different aspects of themselves. In the end, Priam's visit to Achilles will provide the framework necessary for each man to rebuild his sense of self, but it does this—unexpectedly—by stripping away much of what makes the characters distinct to reveal a common underlying humanity.

To a certain extent, *Ransom* suggests that human identity is naturally dual and composite. The carter Somax, for instance, very calmly notes that humans have both a physical nature and a spiritual one, saying, "We're children…of the earth, as well as of the gods." For both Priam and Achilles, however, this ordinary duality is exaggerated—literally, in the case of Achilles, who is the son of a sea goddess and therefore half divine. By and large, Achilles seems to accept the split in his identity as natural, though he misses the easy way in which, as a boy, he was able to slip between the spiritual world of his mother and the earthly world of his father. As the novel opens, however,

Achilles has become more seriously estranged from his divine nature, existing in a state of living death the novel describes as "earth-heaviness." Priam, meanwhile, is trapped between physicality and spirituality in a different sense. Although he is an elderly man, subject to the same pains and losses that affect any other human, Priam is also a king and, in that respect, a symbol of a "fixed and permanent" social order. The burden of being this symbol weighs on Priam, however, to the point that he seems in danger of losing himself inside his role as king; he talks, for instance, about "rattl[ing] about like a pea in the golden husk of [his]…dazzling eminence." Further complicating all of this is the fact that identity in *Ransom* hinges on interpersonal relationships. Achilles, for instance, only becomes "fully himself" in relation to his friend and "soulmate" Patroclus, but his dependence on another for his sense of self means that he experiences Patroclus's death as a loss of his own identity.

For both Priam and Achilles, then, the challenge is to resolve these feelings of inner turmoil and estrangement. In part, that simply means coming to terms with the complex and even conflicting nature of identity. While talking to Somax, for instance, Priam is surprised to discover that the carter is quite at ease with both sides of his nature—the physical and the spiritual. In order to make this kind of peace with themselves, however, both Achilles and Priam first have to rediscover a core humanity distinct from any of the specific identities they hold (as kings, warriors, demigods, etc.). *Ransom* repeatedly refers to Priam's visit to Achilles as a "merely" human action, or an action that "any" man might undertake—that is, it's not rooted in anything particular to Priam, but instead is an experience common to all fathers. Even more broadly, it's rooted in an awareness of mortality that all humans share: in making his case to Achilles, Priam points out that they both know, as only humans can, what it means to be mortal, and that they should therefore have compassion for one another. Priam's appeal resonates with Achilles, who (as Priam earlier predicted) is then similarly able to cast off the obligation of being a "hero" in favor of simply being a man.

Counterintuitively, then, *Ransom* suggests that people need to shed (at least temporarily) what seems to make them most distinct in order to fully grow into their identities. People need to recognize their common humanity in order to find their own individual human selves. As the novel draws to a close, both Priam and Achilles are newly comfortable with all aspects of themselves; Achilles, for instance, rediscovers the "lightness" of his half-divine nature in the wake of Priam's visit. What's more, this treatment of identity reflects the novel's broader ideas about the link between mortality and humanity. Ultimately, *Ransom* suggests that it is the knowledge that life will end—that is, that every individual will lose his particular identity—that makes human nature distinct.

LANGUAGE, STORYTELLING, AND EMPATHY

In the Afterword to *Ransom*, Malouf says that he considers the novel to be, at heart, about storytelling. Given that the novel is a reworking of a preexisting story—told most famously in *The Iliad*—this is not surprising. Still, it is striking just how often Malouf interrupts the main narrative to tell a story-within-a-story. These interludes serve different purposes over the course of the novel, from offering necessary backstory to providing entertainment. Most importantly, however, they provide a contrast to the rigid and formal language of the Trojan royal court. Whereas the stylized speech of the court tends to bind people more tightly to a set role in life, storytelling encourages them to look beyond the boundaries of self, space, and time.

Broadly speaking, *Ransom* deals with two types of language: ceremonial and narrative. As King of Troy, Priam is used to the former—highly stylized arguments, speeches, and exchanges that follow rigid formulas. This kind of language typically serves a set purpose, which is one reason why Hecuba reacts with such alarm when Priam begins to question the limits of fate: she is used to thinking of words as "agents" that act in specific and powerful ways, so she fears that Priam will unleash chaos simply by *talking* about chance. In fact, the language used in the Trojan court is actually designed to *limit* chance by maintain a particular social order. Within this world of the court, words and even people have established symbolic meanings, so the act of speaking tends to reinforce a person's status, his formal relationship to others, etc. For Priam, even remaining silent is a way of shoring up his position as a king: "Silence…was expressive. Power lay in containment."

When Priam ventures out beyond his palace, however, he begins to notice a different kind of language—one associated with narrative. The stories his carter Somax tells about his daughter-in-law, granddaughter, and sons are not "important" in the sense of serving a particular function or conveying a particular meaning (in fact, Priam associates Somax's speech with the meaningless "prattle" of water, wind, and animals). With that said, Priam quickly discovers that he enjoys Somax's stories, and draws a distinction between importance and "interest," implying that storytelling can be a pleasurable way of passing the time if nothing else.

Ultimately, however, *Ransom* suggests that storytelling *does* serve a purpose besides enjoyment. More specifically, narrative offers *Ransom*'s characters what Priam calls a "crack in the door" through which they can access other people's worlds. Narrative language, whether in a spoken story or a novel, thrives on the specific, sensory details that symbolic language considers "unnecessary." As a result, listening to stories is a very physical experience in *Ransom*. When Priam eats the **griddlecakes**, for instance, he feels that he can taste the deft

motions Somax has described his daughter-in-law using to flip them. Even more strikingly, Achilles seems to experience in real time events he never witnessed simply by hearing the story of how Patroclus came to be in exile: "Achilles too stands spellbound. Like a sleeper who has stumbled in on another's dream, he sees what is about to happen but can neither move nor cry out to prevent it…The blow is about to come."

On a basic level, then, *Ransom* depicts storytelling as a way of fostering empathy. It does this, however, not simply by pointing out that stories provide insight into other people's thoughts and feelings, but by suggesting that stories literally allow people to transcend their own identities and lives, which are otherwise limited by everything from social position to mortality. When Priam presents his "story" to Achilles, for instance, Achilles imagines himself as an old man, and thus experiences a version of himself that will never exist in reality (as he his fated to die young, and knows that this is his fate). Achilles, the, can only ever know himself as an old man through the empathy and imaginative connection created by storytelling. In this way, storytelling also intersects with the theme of chance—through narrative, Malouf suggests, humans can experience what could be but isn't, including *who* they could be if they were not themselves.

THE EPIC AND THE EVERYDAY

Epic literature varies from culture to culture, but one core feature of the genre is its concern with people and situations that exist outside the bounds of normal human experience. The *Iliad*, for instance, deals with an epic event (the Trojan War) and is populated by characters who are either gods, demigods (e.g. Achilles), or royalty with abilities that verge on superhuman (e.g. Hector, Odysseus). *Ransom*, of course, takes its plot from the final book of the *The Iliad* and generally adheres closely to Homer's version of the story. In terms of tone, however, the two works are strikingly different, in part because Malouf introduces elements (e.g. the carter Somax) that belong to the realm of ordinary, unheroic life. In the end, these differences not only mark a shift in genre (from epic poetry to novel), but also constitute a claim about what makes human life worthwhile.

As the novel opens, both Achilles and Priam clearly belong to the world of epic literature: Priam is a king, while Achilles is a demigod conventionally held to be the greatest warrior to take part in the Trojan War. Both men, moreover, possess the ability to communicate with the gods and see into the future. Interestingly, however, *Ransom* downplays the grandeur of its protagonists' capabilities. Priam, for instance, sees his visions as simply one more "aspect of daily being," and Achilles (as a boy) viewed his ability to straddle humanity and divinity as "natural." This normalization of unusual traits and experiences points to *Ransom*'s skepticism of the lofty world of epic literature. The royal sphere that Priam inhabits, for example, is in many ways a stifling one, because it limits his ability to express or even experience ordinary emotions. In some ways, this process is even dehumanizing: Priam must always exist as a "ceremonial figurehead" rather than as a living and breathing person.

Not surprisingly, then, part of what appeals to Priam about approaching Achilles with **ransom** is the opportunity to stop acting like a king and begin acting like an ordinary man and father. Over the course of his journey with Somax, however, Priam discovers that everyday life holds many pleasures over and apart from the pleasure of being "merely" human: the sensation of wading in cool water, the sounds of birds flying overhead, and all the other details of his surroundings that are "just themselves" rather than symbols of a grander world. In fact, the entire midsection of the novel functions as a defense of the ordinary, since it disrupts the main storyline involving Priam and Achilles to focus on the thoughts and feelings of a lower-class carter who is not particularly strong, brave, wise, etc.

Perhaps the most telling indication of the novel's stance on the epic vs. the everyday comes in its final pages. Instead of ending with Priam or Achilles, *Ransom* closes with a lengthy description of Somax's life as an old man, by which point no one believes his stories about the role he played in the Trojan War. On the face of it, this might seem to undercut the seriousness of the novel's central episode: Priam's meeting with Achilles. In terms of personal development, however, the function of this meeting was to free both men from the constraints of being archetypical characters in an epic story, and to allow them to be ordinary humans who are complex and imperfect. By ending with Somax and **Beauty**—a common, albeit pretty, mule—Malouf prioritizes everyday life in all its confusion and pleasure.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

RANSOM

Ransom payment is without question the most important symbol in Malouf's novel, but its meaning is complex and multilayered. In fact, the treasure that Priam provides to Achilles in exchange for his son Hector's body is just one of a series of "payments" in *Ransom*, each of which adds nuance to the basic idea of buying back something valuable. Priam's name, for instance, means the "price paid"—a reference to the fact that as a boy he was nearly sold into slavery after Heracles sacked Troy, and his freedom was only secured (or "purchased") when his sister begged it as a "gift" from Heracles. His second lease on life, however, also comes at

a price: his first name and identity, Podarces, was changed to Priam after he was granted his freedom. And so the gift of freedom also requires a kind of "death." This episode, then, begins to link the literal payment of ransom to the figurative price humans pay for being alive: death. Priam eventually makes this symbolism explicit in a speech he delivers as he pleads with Achilles; arguing that the two of them are united in their mortality, Priam describes death as a "fee paid in advance."

However, while death itself is a form of ransom in the novel, Malouf also suggests that the payment of ransom can be a way of *cheating* death. When Priam imagines bringing Hector's body back, for example, he describes his son as "newly restored and shining, restored and *ransomed*," as if his own actions have preserved Hector's body from the physical effects of death. In reality, it is the gods who have protected Hector's body from decay, but Priam's remarks raise the possibility of metaphorically overcoming death through payment or sacrifice. As the novel ends, for instance, Achilles feels newly alive despite the fact that he knows his own death is rapidly approaching, simply because his interaction with Priam has given him a new identity as a human rather than as a warrior.

BEAUTY

Beauty, one of a pair of mules that pull Somax's cart, is a symbol of the pleasures of the incidental and ordinary. Unlike Achilles's immortal horses Balius and Xanthus, or even the thoroughbreds who pull Priam's usual royal chariot, Beauty is not particularly strong or majestic; in fact, she might at first seem out of place in a story about kings and demigods. *Ransom*, however, depicts Beauty as extraordinarily pretty and charming—so much so that the people living amongst Troy's ruins remember Somax's connection to Beauty long after they have dismissed his stories about escorting Priam and meeting Achilles as tall tales. This is fitting, given that part of the transformation Priam experiences over the course of the novel involves learning to appreciate the surprises and delights of everyday life. By giving Beauty (and everything she represents) the last word, Malouf implies that it is the commonplace rather than the epic that makes human life important and valuable.

EARTH AND WATER

The supernatural is not nearly so strong a force in *Ransom* as it is in the *Iliad*, where gods are continuously intervening in human affairs, often in extreme or fantastical ways. With that said, the novel *does* draw a clear distinction between the spiritual and the physical, and it uses the elements of water and earth to illuminate that distinction. This is particularly clear in Malouf's depiction of Achilles, whose spiritual and immortal side has a quite literal connection to water; in Greek mythology, Achilles's mother was the sea goddess Thetis. The fluidity of water, however, also makes it an appropriate symbol for the spiritual world, which is not bound to fixed physical forms (e.g. bodies). By contrast, earth represents human physicality and mortality. This is true not only in a literal sense—Achilles, for instance, knows that his body will eventually "go back" to the soil—but also in a metaphorical one. In the aftermath of losing Patroclus, Achilles succumbs to a kind of living death, unable to move on or even feel anything other than emptiness and grief—a state the novel describes as "earth-heaviness."

THE GRIDDLECAKE

In addition to being another source of humble, everyday enjoyment, the griddlecake that Somax gives to Priam is a symbol of the nature and power of storytelling. As King of Troy, Priam is used to language that operates in specific and set ways (often by symbolizing something abstract and idealized). The idea of telling a story that does not hold any "higher" meaning is novel to him, and Somax's description of his daughter-in-law making the griddlecakes is his first experience of this kind of language. What's more, when Priam actually *eats* the griddlecake, he is impressed by its "lightness"—a quality Somax attributes to the way his daughter-in-law flips the cakes as she cooks them. This idea that Priam can "taste…the lightness of the girl's wrist" in the griddlecake itself speaks to the ability of narrative to collapse boundaries of time and space through its focus on immediate, sensory details. Ultimately, this makes storytelling a way of promoting empathy, because it allows *Ransom*'s characters to experience, in a visceral way, events that they do not or cannot have direct access to.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Ransom* published in 2009.

Part 1 Quotes

"The man is a fighter, but when he is not fighting, earth is his element. One day, he knows, he will go back to it…But for the whole of his life he has been drawn, in his other nature, to his mother's element. To what, in all its many forms…is shifting and insubstantial.

Related Characters: Achilles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

The above passage is *Ransom*'s first nod to Achilles's status as a demigod: water is "his mother's element" because she is a sea goddess. Not coincidentally, the passage also introduces water and earth as symbols of the spiritual and physical, respectively. Perhaps most importantly, however, this is the first hint Malouf provides as to the tension at the heart of Achilles's nature. Although he is a mortal, he to some extent resents the physical limitations associated with his humanity. Learning to reconcile himself to his physicality without sacrificing his spiritual nature will be a central task for Achilles in the novel. It is also, to a lesser extent, a struggle that characters like Priam share, since Malouf depicts *all* humans as having a dual, half-spiritual and half-physical nature.

He had entered the rough world of men, where a man's acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of a story. A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation...at last of death.

Related Characters: Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

As Malouf continues to develop Achilles's character, he explains that Achilles's childhood ability to move easily between his mortal and immortal sides eventually disappeared, and Achilles became fully human. This passage further underscores the link between mortality and humanity. As Malouf describes it, the "world of men" is inseparable from death, whether the individual's own or that of the people he cares about. This basic idea appears again and again throughout *Ransom*, though not always in such bleak ways; "humanity," for instance, will eventually come to imply not just the state of being human, but also *humaneness*.

Finally, it is worth noting that the above passage also associates human nature with narrative. This perhaps reflects the fact that *Ransom* associates more symbolic forms of language (i.e. poetry) with the abstract and idealized world of the gods. By contrast, storytelling is a more appropriate vehicle for the human world, where things are in a constant state of flux that can be traced through narrative.

For a long moment the taws hang there at the top of their flight; as if, in the father's grave retelling of these events, he were allowing for a gap to be opened where this time round some higher agency might step in and, with the high-handed indifference of those who have infinite power over the world of conjunction and accident, reverse what is about to occur.

Related Characters: Patroclus, Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

While Achilles stands on the beach, haunted by thoughts of Hector and Patroclus, the narrative jumps back in time to explain how Achilles and Patroclus first met. Patroclus (then thirteen) was seeking asylum from Achilles's father Peleus, and Achilles (age ten) was present as Patroclus's own father explained how his son had accidentally killed a playmate in an argument. This passage, which occurs at the climax of the story, is therefore the first major example of narrative's power in *Ransom*. In addition to capturing Achilles's attention so completely that he feels as if he took part in the incident, the story creates a moment (or "gap") where it seems as if events might play out differently. In one sense, this is clearly an illusion, since everything Patroclus's father describes has already taken place and can't be changed. Over the course of the novel, however, Malouf will also suggest that storytelling *can* weaken fate's power by opening up alternate versions of reality (i.e. demonstrating that things could be different).

[B1] He was waiting for the rage to fill him that would be equal at last to the outrage he was committing. That would assuage his grief, and be so convincing to the witnesses of this barbaric spectacle that he too might believe there was a living man at the centre of it, and that man himself.

Related Characters: Patroclus, Hector, Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

In the *Iliad*, Achilles kills Hector in retribution for his friend Patroclus's death. His desecration of Hector's body—dragging it behind his chariot—is therefore an extension of his revenge. In Malouf's version of the scene, however, Achilles is notably *not* angry. In fact, he is all but dead himself (he has even followed Hector's spirit to the underworld), and his actions are an attempt to prove to himself that he is alive. This speaks to the overwhelming preoccupation with mortality that takes hold of Achilles in the wake of Patroclus's death, completely alienating Achilles from the part of himself that is divine. It also, however, perhaps hints at *Ransom*'s interest in recasting the legendary characters of the *Iliad* as more or less "normal" human beings. To a certain extent, Malouf suggests that being a mythical figure is incompatible with being truly human; the characters in epic literature are archetypical figures (heroes, kings, etc.) rather than individuals in their own right. Part of the project in *Ransom*, then, is to make Achilles a man in the sense of being complex and particular.

He is waiting for the break...Something new and unimaginable as yet that will confront him with the need, in meeting it, to leap clear of the clogging grey web that enfolds him.

Related Characters: Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35–36

Explanation and Analysis

As Part 1 ends, Achilles remains stuck in a state of grief so profound that it threatens his entire identity and is therefore comparable to death. More specifically, Achilles has become estranged from what Malouf calls his "runner spirit"—the divine side of his nature that helps make him who he is. Here, however, Achilles senses that there is something that could possibly restore his sense of self to him, although he cannot imagine as yet what it might be. His belief that it must be something "new and unimaginable," however, foreshadows Priam's later description of his plan to visit Achilles as unexpected and even "impossible." In other words, this passage lays the groundwork for *Ransom*'s interest in actions and moments that take place outside the boundaries of what is established or even destined. As Malouf hints here, these "openings" are where change on an internal and personal level can take place.

Part 2 Quotes

He is obliged, in his role as king, to think of the king's sacred body, this brief six feet of earth he moves and breathes in—aches and sneezes and all—as at once a body like any other and an abstract of the lands he represents, their living map.

Related Characters: Priam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Like Achilles, Priam is also split along mortal and eternal lines. In his case, however, it is his position as King of Troy that gives him an identity that extends beyond his own lifespan: although his physical body can and will age and die, his "sacred body"—that is, the body that functions as a symbol for Troy—is immortal. By the time the novel opens, Priam is quite used to living this dual existence, but the obligations of being a "figurehead" have to some extent deadened his ability to appreciate the physical world in its immediacy and particularity. Since even his relationships with his children carry symbolic weight, the experience of going to Achilles *simply* as Hector's father (rather than as, for example, an idealized concept of a father) proves to be life-changing. By the time the novel ends, Priam, like Achilles, has become an individual.

This time, when I look behind me, what is glowing out from under the coverlet...is the body of my son Hector, all his limbs newly restored and shining, restored and *ransomed*.

Related Characters: Priam (speaker), Hector

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Priam concludes his initial explanation of his plan with the above description of Hector's body. The idea of "restoration" occurs throughout the novel and—in its most basic sense—refers to the act of bringing Hector's body back to Troy (i.e. restoring him to his family). In the context

of the passage, however, it is clear that Priam is also referring to the literal state of Hector's body, which would not normally be "shining" after more than a week and multiple attempts at mutilation. In fact, Hector's body *has* been preserved, but Priam does not know this at the time. His words here, though, seem to draw a connection between his own actions and the state of his son's corpse, which he describes as "ransomed." This likely reflects the metaphorical role that "ransoming" plays in the novel, which is often to buy someone back from a death-like state.

> And perhaps, because it is unexpected, it may appeal to him to: the chance to break free of the obligation of being always the hero, as I am expected always to be the king. To take on the lighter bond of being simply a man. Perhaps that is the real gift I have to bring him. Perhaps that is the ransom.

Related Characters: Priam (speaker), Achilles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59-60

Explanation and Analysis

When Priam unveils his plan to ransom Hector's body, Hecuba voices concern about the idea of her husband acting as "any man" might. For Priam, however, this is a key reason the idea is attractive: after a lifetime as King, he wants to experience being an ordinary man and father. Furthermore, he suggests that the "simplicity" of the plan is precisely the reason it may succeed. By humbling himself in this way, Priam argues, he might be able to spark a similar transformation in Achilles, effectively purchasing (or "ransoming") the other man's humanity. In the end, this is exactly what happens: Priam approaches Achilles from a point of fellow feeling (and, especially, shared mortality), which awakens Achilles's own sense of empathy. Achilles, in other words, stops being a "hero" and becomes a "man"—someone capable of sharing in other people's misfortunes.

> It seems to me…that there might be another way of naming what we call fortune and attribute to the will, or the whim, of the gods. Which offers a kind of opening. The opportunity to act for ourselves. To try something that might force events into a different course.

Related Characters: Priam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

When Hecuba protests that Priam's plan to visit Achilles risks leaving Troy without its king in the event that the city falls, Priam responds that they must leave that to the gods "or to chance." Since Greek mythology relied heavily on the concept of fate, this idea of chance is unfamiliar and shocking to Hecuba, and Priam is obliged to explain what he means. As he describes it in this passage, however, the idea of chance is less a statement about the way the world is than it is a way of *approaching* the world. By renaming fate "chance," Priam, argues, it might actually be possible to disrupt events that seem destined. This ultimately proves true, though perhaps not in the way Priam outlines here. By visiting Achilles, Priam does not change the outcome of the war, but both he and Achilles experience internal changes that allow them to "overcome" their fate by living fully in spite of it.

> And I am back there in the very midst of it, looking down that white-dust road into another life. And it means nothing, that other story. In this one the miraculous turnabout has never happened. I am just one more slave-thing like the rest, one among many.

Related Characters: Priam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In his attempt to explain why he feels the need to go to Achilles, Priam eventually resorts to telling Hecuba the story of how he was nearly sold into slavery as a boy. At its most basic level the narrative helps explain why Priam has never felt entirely at ease as king, and why the idea of acting as "any man" might appeals to him: unlike (presumably) the rest of the Trojan royal family, Priam had an early and traumatic taste of life as someone who is simply "one among many."

However, the above passage also connects its treatment of identity to themes of chance and storytelling. Priam's reconstruction of the path his life might have taken is as

viscerally real to him as if it had actually happened. In fact, Priam here refers to his *real* life as the "story." This suggests that storytelling helps alert people to the workings of chance in everyday life by presenting alternate, but plausible, versions of reality. In other words, Priam's ability to imagine life as a slave makes him aware of the fact that his current life is as much the result of chance or luck as it is of fate. It could have played out differently, which suggests that it might still play out differently in the future.

In the end, what we come to is what time, with every heartbeat and in every moment of our lives, has been slowly working towards: the death we have been carrying in us from the very beginning, from our first breath.

Related Characters: Priam (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

When Polydamas objects to Priam's plan to go to the Greek camp, Priam responds with a lengthy discussion of mortality. In part, the speech serves as a rebuttal to Polydamas's main argument—that Priam, in his old age, should spare himself what is likely to be a physical and emotional ordeal. As Priam describes it, however, old age is nothing exceptional. Mortality is in fact the common fate of all humans, and therefore cannot be used as an excuse for inaction.

More broadly, the above passage also points to the relationship between death and human nature in *Ransom*. According to Priam, human identity is inseparable from mortality, both because death is an experience that all humans share, and because the transient nature of life lies behind most human pains and pleasures ("only what we know we must lose is truly sweet to us"). This provides Priam with the grounds on which to appeal to Achilles's compassion, while also heightening his desire to leave a "living" image of himself through his actions. Ultimately, *Ransom* suggests that death itself is inevitable, but that choosing to live fully in spite of it constitutes a kind of victory.

Part 3 Quotes

He had never in his life till now had to do with any but simple folk like himself, eaters of sheep's cheese and raw garlic, women laying out a bit of washing to dry on a bush beside the road, half-naked children, their heads shaven against lice...He would have to rely on native wit, and such bits of experience as are common to all, whether the gods in their wisdom have set us high or low.

Related Characters: Somax

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Part 2's final pages provided a brief glimpse into the workings of Somax's mind, revealing him to be good-natured, practical, and somewhat ill at ease with the splendor of the Trojan court. With the journey to the Greek camp now underway, Malouf here expands on that earlier depiction, tying to themes of fate and the everyday and hinting at the role the carter will play in the novel. In this passage, Malouf associates Somax with a catalogue of ordinary people and actions—far removed from the grandeur of Priam and Achilles's epic lives. Fate also seems to be a less binding force in this everyday world: the casual remark about the "gods in their wisdom" suggests that there may be a plan at work that explains people's lots in life, but also implies that that plan is basically unknowable to humans (and therefore nothing to waste time worrying about). Somax's presence in *Ransom*, then, will deepen and reinforce Priam's encounters with both ordinary life and the idea of chance.

The realm of the royal was representational, ideal. Everything that was merely accidental...all this was to be ignored, left to fall away into the confused and confusing realm of the incidental and the ordinary.

His whole life was like that, or had been. But out here, he discovered, everything was just itself. That was what seemed new.

Related Characters: Priam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

As Priam sits along the banks of the Scamander, he begins to take note of his surroundings—the fish swimming around his feet, the wind blowing in the trees, etc. Although Priam has seen these things before on formal court excursions (e.g. the boar hunt described in this passage), he has never stopped to consider them in and of themselves. This is because Priam's position as King of Troy demands constant attention to the symbolic meaning of things: a boar hunt is not *simply* a boar hunt, but a "mystery [from]...a world of ceremony, of high play, that was eternal and had nothing to do with the actual and immediate."

Priam's discovery of the pleasures of everyday life therefore not only makes a claim about the value of the ordinary (as opposed to the epic), but also overlaps with *Ransom*'s depiction of different forms of language. As Priam notes in this passage, the "realm of the royal" hinges on symbolism and metaphor, because these place ordinary people and events within a well-established system of meaning. This in turn helps preserve order: someone who would consider overthrowing Priam as a man might think twice about overthrowing him as a symbol of divinely appointed royalty. As this passage also implies, however, one cost of this system is that it intentionally minimizes chance (i.e. "accident") since chance, by definition, does not fit into an orderly system. By contrast, the world Priam finds outside the palace is full of things that—because they do not need to refer to anything beyond themselves—are free to be idiosyncratic, particular, unlikely, etc.

❝ It was as if you had found yourself peering through the crack in a door (exciting, Priam found, this imagining himself into a situation he would never have dreamed of acting out) and saw clearly for a moment into the fellow's life, his world.

Related Characters: Somax, Priam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

As Priam listens to Somax describe his daughter-in-law making griddlecakes, he ponders the differences between Somax's talk and the formal, purposeful language used at the Trojan court. Unlike the latter, the stories Somax tells do not serve a specific purpose (e.g. argumentation) or refer to any higher reality (e.g. the realm of the gods). Instead, they are noteworthy mostly because they provide a window into someone else's life. The details of this life may be mundane, but this jibes with Priam's newfound appreciation of the ordinary. More to the point, however, the mere act of experiencing someone else's reality through narrative can be liberating, since it allows individuals to transcend the factors that otherwise limit their perspective (e.g. time and mortality). In this passage, for instance, Priam experiences pleasure imagining himself doing something completely out of character—listening at doors.

❝ Royal custom—the habit of averting his gaze, always, from the unnecessary and particular—had saved him from all that. And yet it was just such unnecessary things in the old man's talk, occasions in which pain and pleasure were inextricably mixed, that so engaged and moved him.

Related Characters: Somax, Priam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139

Explanation and Analysis

When Somax begins to share memories of his now deceased sons, Priam realizes that he has not experienced loss in the same sense that the carter has. Although Priam has mourned many children's deaths, his relationship to those children was always "formal and symbolic"—that is, filtered through his role as king. In a sense, then, Priam's sons were not complete, flesh-and-blood individuals to him; he didn't have any reason to see what was "unnecessary" in them, but it is these idiosyncrasies and contradictions that make people human and, relatedly, that animate the kind of narrative "talk" Somax (and novelists like Malouf) excel at.

❝ It was such a comfort just to hold on to her, and feel the warmth of her, and the scratchiness of her hide against my cheek. But whether it was for grief at my loss, or joy that she was safe, I can't tell you, sir. We're such contrary creatures. Maybe both.

Related Characters: Somax (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Over the course of his conversation with Priam, Somax eventually explains what happened to his second son: he died fording the river when Beauty lost her footing. As a result, Somax was at first furious when he found the mule calmly grazing in a meadow, and had to restrain himself from hitting her. Eventually, however, he broke down and hugged her instead, as he describes in the above passage. Symbolically, the episode is a reminder of the ability of life to continue on even in the face of loss; distraught as he is, Somax is still able to take pleasure in the basic, sensory pleasure of touching another creature. It also, however, speaks to Somax's comfort with the contradictions of human nature. Where Priam has generally attempted to ignore anything (in himself or others) that does not conform to the accepted "symbolism" that guides his life as king, Somax is apparently at ease embracing these tensions and idiosyncrasies.

Part 4 Quotes

He knows what this sudden suspension of his hard, manly qualities denotes. This melting in him of will, of self. Under its aspect things continue to be just themselves, but what is apprehensible to him now is a fluidity in them that on other occasions is obscured.

Related Characters: Achilles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

As Achilles sits brooding in his hut, he hears the sound of strings playing and enters the trance-like state that immediately precedes visits from the gods. The description of this state as a suspension of personal will echoes Priam's earlier experience of being visited by Iris and seems symbolically fitting: the world of the gods is associated with fate, and therefore overrides individual desires and intentions.

Interestingly, however, this passage also bears some resemblance to Priam's description of an "opening" where chance might be able to operate. The idea of physical reality appearing "fluid," for instance, is in part a reference to the dual nature of the human world (with water symbolizing the spiritual), but it also suggests that there is room for change, even as things remain "just themselves" in some respects. This parallels the novel's depiction of personal change, where an individual becomes a person who is both the same as and different from his earlier self. What's more, the description of Achilles's self "melting" points to the way this process of change works in *Ransom*: paradoxically, Achilles and Priam only become fully themselves when they give up key markers of their identity (e.g. Priam's royal status) as well as their sense of themselves as unique (e.g. Achilles's sense of his own losses as all-important).

He isn't [Idaeus]—of course he isn't, he's Somax. A simple workman, who this morning, as on every other morning of his life, just happened to be standing in the marketplace waiting to be hired when two strangers appeared who just happened to be he king's sons, Trojan princes.

Related Characters: Somax

Related Themes:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

To confirm Priam's story, Achilles has his attendants bring Somax into his hut, where he asks the carter whether he is "Idaeus." As he did when Priam initially renamed him, Somax responds with confusion and a degree of discomfort. His annoyance is not just a testament to the power of language—in changing Somax's name, Priam threatens his sense of who he is—but also a sign of how rooted he is in the everyday world. Although Somax has entered a story involving kings and heroes, he resists becoming a part of that world himself through the use of a lofty name. The above passage is also another illustration of Somax's views on chance and fate. As he sees it, his entire involvement in Priam's journey is a matter of happenstance.

[Death] is the hard bargain life makes with us—with all of us, every one—and the condition we share. And for that reason, if for no other, we should have pity for one another's losses.

Related Characters: Patroclus, Hector, Achilles, Priam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

To a certain extent, the case Priam makes in Achilles's hut echoes his earlier remarks to Polydamas on mortality. As in that earlier passage, Priam here suggests that mortality and humanity are inextricably intertwined. Two elements of Priam's argument *are* new, however. First, Priam more explicitly states that humanity's awareness of its own mortality should provide grounds for mutual understanding and respect. Once an individual realizes that loss, aging, and death are not personal insults but instead a fate that all humans share, he can and should empathize with others (as Achilles does when he ultimately agrees to return Hector's body).

The other addition to Priam's discussion of mortality is the idea of death as ransom—that is, the price humans pay for living at all. In this instance, Priam is quite clearly speaking of death in a literal sense, but it is worth noting that *Ransom* also depicts *metaphorical* death as a way of "buying" life. Achilles, for instance, is physically alive at the beginning of the novel, but "dead" in virtually every way that counts, according to Malouf. It is only through the "death" of this old self that Achilles eventually regains a life worth living.

❝ What he feels in himself as a perfect order of body, heart, occasion, is the enactment, under the stars, in the very breath of the gods, of the true Achilles, the one he has come all this way to find.

Related Characters: Hector, Achilles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

As Achilles sis in front of Hector's body, he feels more at peace with himself than he has since the beginning of the novel. On the face of it, this seems like a strange response to the sight in front of him, since it was Hector's killing of Patroclus that plunged Achilles into his earlier state of alienation and despair. Priam's appeal, however, has enabled Achilles to see his own loss in a new light—specifically, the broader context of human mortality. From this perspective, Achilles's loss is not an experience unique to him, but rather one that draws him closer to the rest of humanity. This in turn shifts Achilles's entire understanding of his own killing of Hector, which he now sees as the culmination of both their lives as "honourable" warriors. The result, as this passage indicates, is that Achilles feels as though he has only just attained his true identity.

❝ This is the first world we come into, he thinks now, his world of hot-water pitchers and oil jars and freshly laundered linen or wool. And the last place we pass through before our body is done with it all. Unheroic thoughts.

Related Characters: Hector, Achilles

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

After his moment of "contemplation" alongside Hector's body, Achilles follows its process inside the laundry room to be washed and shrouded. Although Achilles's fascination with the everyday never manifests as strongly as Priam's does, his thoughts in this passage *do* point to a new interest in the details of ordinary, "unheroic" life. It is fitting, moreover that these reflections take place where they do—a room where bodies are prepared for burial—because Achilles's transition from "hero" to "human" grows out of his awareness of mortality as a common human fate. The reference to birth, and Malouf's overall depiction of the laundry room as a feminine space are also striking, given that these spheres of life have previously played no role in Achilles's world.

Part 5 Quotes

❝ Look, he wants to shout, I am still here, but the *I* is different. I come as a man of sorrow bringing the body of my son for burial, but I come also as the hero of the deed that till now was never attempted.

Related Characters: Hector, Priam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

As Priam returns to Troy with Hector's body, his thoughts turn to the significance of the journey he has made in a passage that ties together themes of identity and the epic vs. the everyday. The idea of Priam's selfhood (his "I") as something that can morph into something new while simultaneously remaining the same suggests another way of thinking about the relationship between death and identity in *Ransom*. Like the earlier story of Priam's "death" as Podarces and resurrection as Priam, this passage implies that the old, kingly Priam has "died" in order to be reborn in a more ordinary, human form. Strikingly, however, Malouf here uses language associated with epic literature to describe Priam's transformation, labeling him a "hero." This unconventional use of the term to describe an action that Priam has earlier called "merely human" reveals the extent to which Malouf prioritizes "ordinary" compassionate action over fantastic deeds.

> And for him the misery of this moment will last forever; that is the hard fact he must live with. However the story is told and elaborated, the raw shame of it will be with him now till his last breath.

Related Characters: Priam, Neoptolemus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

The above passage closes the flash forward describing Priam's death at the hands of Neoptolemus. The episode is disturbing, not only because of the grisly murder it describes, but also because of what it reveals about Neoptolemus's thoughts and feelings: far from being the hero he hoped to be, Neoptolemus discovers that he has acted like a confused and frightened boy who cannot live up to his father's reputation. Despite his actions, in other words, Neoptolemus is a pitiable figure who experiences heroism as a burden.

The above passage reinforces this skepticism towards the traditional world and values of epic literature. Although Neoptolemus's actions earn him fame and a place in legend, what he himself is ultimately left with is his private shame. By contrast, *Ransom* itself explores a quieter form of heroism that is rooted in common humanity.

> This old fellow, like most storytellers, is a stealer of other men's tales, of other men's lives.

Related Characters: Somax

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

In the final pages of *Ransom*, Malouf explains that while Somax continues to tell the tale of his trip to the Greek camp for the rest of his life, his listeners eventually stop believing his stories. This is in part a reaction to the story's content—Somax's audience can't imagine King Priam, for instance, wading in the river like an ordinary man—but the above passage suggests that it also reflects an inherent distrust of storytellers. Throughout *Ransom*, Malouf has suggested that storytelling is important because of its ability to erase the lines that separate one person from another. Priam, for instance, "experiences" the life of a slave simply by virtue of imagining it. Here, however, Malouf hints at a dark underside to storytelling's ability to elicit empathy: in some cases, storytelling may be a way of appropriating or feeding off of other people's lives and identities. There is a touch of ironic self-awareness in this, since Malouf has quite literally used someone else's story (Homer's) in writing *Ransom*.

> The most remarkable thing about him was that he was the owner of a little black mule who is still remembered in this part of the country and much talked about. A charming creature, big-eyed and sleek, she bore the name of Beauty—and very appropriately too, it seems, which is not always the case.

Related Characters: Somax

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

The closing words of *Ransom* wrap up Somax's story in a seemingly anticlimactic way. Despite his brush with

legendary figures like Priam and Achilles, Somax is ultimately remembered not for his stories but for his mule. However, given that *Ransom* in many ways aims to humanize (i.e. normalize) the mythical characters of Homer's *Iliad*, this final return to ordinary life is appropriate; it suggests that ordinary pleasures, like the prettiness of a mule, are what ultimately matter and endure. Relatedly, the public approval of Beauty's name is significant in light of the novel's interest in different forms of language. In contrast to (for example) the symbolic language used at Priam's court, Beauty's name means exactly what it says and corresponds to physical reality. This recalls Priam's discovery of the delights of a world where "everything [is] just itself," again underscoring the importance of everything that is immediate and tangible.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

As the sun rises, a man—Achilles—stands on the shore looking out over the **sea**, hoping to hear his mother's voice. Although he came from the sea and still feels its pull, Achilles is also bound to the **earth** as a warrior, farmer, and mortal human.

In Greek mythology, Achilles is a demigod, born from a human father (Peleus) and a divine mother: the sea goddess Thetis. Malouf gives Achilles's parentage deeper meaning, however, by using water in general as a symbol of the spiritual realm. Earth, by contrast, represents the physical world—especially the human body. Achilles's dual nature (human and divine) thus corresponds to a duality present in all humans.

Achilles recalls that as a young child, he could easily summon his mother to him, and even become "eel-like" himself. She told him, however, that this would not always be the case, and sure enough, he woke up one day to find that his human side had taken hold, and that he was subject to pain, loss, and death. Losing easy access to his mother's world also meant entering a world of narrative, "where a man's acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of a story."

Although Malouf suggests that all humans have both a physical and a spiritual side, Ransom also strongly associates human nature with an awareness of mortality. In this passage, "entering the rough world of men" means becoming fully vulnerable to death. Interestingly, it also means becoming the subject of a story, implying a link between mortality, human nature, and narrative. This passage, then, helps set the stage for Achilles's meeting with Priam, where the common bond of mortality (expressed through Priam's story) allows both men to become more fully human.

Back in the present, Achilles feels as if he is looking across time as he surveys the **sea**, and thinks about how he and the rest of the Greek army has been camped on the beaches of Troy for nine years now. The tedium of this does not sit well with Achilles, who feels that wars should keep pace with the natural rhythms of life, like the change of the seasons—or, more personally, the growth of his son Neoptolemus, whom he has not seen since leaving for war.

If Ransom is about humanizing Achilles and Priam, this passage begins to hint at why that humanization is necessary. The sheer length of the Trojan War has distanced Achilles from life's everyday experiences: sowing fields, harvesting crops, and watching his son grow. Because Malouf tightly associates these ordinary events with what it means to be human, their absence constitutes a kind of "death," even for a warrior like Achilles.

As Achilles walks away from the water and toward the Greek camp, he thinks about how he himself will not die in the **sea** but on land. He knows that this is his fate but can't entirely embrace it, which is why he keeps returning to the beach with his "ghosts"—Patroclus and Hector.

Although the goddess Iris will ultimately suggest that some events result purely from "chance," others seem to be set in stone. Here, for instance, Malouf denies Achilles any possibility of changing his ultimate destiny, describing it as ""inevitable." This understandably infuriates Achilles, not only because his destiny is to die young, but also (presumably) because having a "fixed" fate appears to deny humans the possibility of free will. Ultimately, however, the novel will suggest that while fate may govern some external events, humans can, in a figurative sense, free themselves of its confines by changing themselves.

Achilles first met his friend Patroclus as a child, when Patroclus was exiled to the court of Peleus, Achilles's father. Achilles listened, enthralled, as Patroclus's father explained that his son had accidentally killed a playmate in a quarrel. When the story reached its climax, Achilles met Patroclus's eyes and felt as if he himself had been struck.

This passage is the first in the novel that deals explicitly with the power of stories, and it does so in a way that intersects with the theme of chance and fate. As Patroclus's father tells the story of the boys playing knucklebones, there is a "long moment [when] the taws hang at the top of their flight," and those listening to the retelling think the story might end differently than they know it does. Storytelling, in other words, opens up a window into alternate worlds that couldn't exist in real life. Relatedly, it allows people to "live" events outside their own direct experience; Achilles, for instance, feels the blow as if he were actually present during the argument.

Peleus agreed to allow Patroclus to stay, and Patroclus grew up as Achilles's adoptive brother, shaping the kind of man Achilles himself became. Although Patroclus occasionally resented his dependency on Achilles' family, Achilles found Patroclus's vulnerability moving, and would often think about the circumstances of their meeting.

In Ransom, personal identity is actually a social phenomenon, and Achilles's relationship with Patroclus is a good example of this. Achilles only becomes "fully himself" in relation to Patroclus, which helps explain why Achilles reacts so intensely to his friend's death: it undermines his sense of himself. With that said, Malouf does not depict death and loss as entirely bad things, because they provide a point of common understanding between all people. Similarly, in this passage, Achilles finds Patroclus's "daunted look" endearing, which suggests that human weakness can provide grounds for empathy.

Now, however, Patroclus himself is dead. Achilles had withdrawn from the fighting at Troy because of an argument with Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces: Agamemnon had attempted to take Achilles's captured slave-girl, Briseis, to be his own concubine, which Achilles took as a slight to his honor. Patroclus had at first followed his friend's lead, but began to question Achilles' actions as the Trojans, under the command of Prince Hector, gained more and more ground against the Greeks. Eventually, Achilles and Patroclus argued, and Achilles agreed to compromise by allowing Patroclus to wear his armor and lead Achilles' troops in his place. As Achilles watched from the camp, however, Patroclus died at Hector's hands—though Achilles also attributes his death to the gods.

Achilles's close but occasionally troubled relationship with Patroclus in many ways mirrors his own internal splits and contradictions. On the one hand, the two are so connected that they almost seem to share a physical presence; when Patroclus begins to cry as he pleads with Achilles, Achilles not only recognizes that Patroclus is crying for him, but also feels the tears "in his own throat." That said, Achilles and Patroclus clearly have different ideas about what is honorable. This disagreement between the two is painful for Achilles even before Patroclus's death, and foreshadows the much deeper sense of alienation Achilles will feel afterwards. Finally, the circumstances surrounding Patroclus's death also touch on the theme of fate, since Achilles on some level believes that the gods are responsible for the sword-stroke that kills him. This is undoubtedly one reason why Achilles finds his eventual revenge so unsatisfying; Achilles can kill and mutilate Hector, but he cannot directly target Patroclus's "true" killers.


Achilles did nothing but grieve for two days after Patroclus's death, pouring **dirt** over his head in anguish. Eventually, however, Patroclus's ghost appeared and asked Achilles to bury his body so that his spirit could complete its journey to the afterlife. Achilles did as Patroclus asked, looking forward to the day when his own bones would be placed in the same burial mound.

While Ransom *clearly depicts the existence of a spiritual world—in this passage, for instance, Achilles is visited by Patroclus's ghost—the book is ultimately more interested in the physical and earthly. When Achilles looks forward to his own death, for example, he focuses not on the afterlife, but on where his actual remains will rest. He also pours dirt (i.e. earth) over his head, which not only has symbolic significance, but also links him to Priam, who responds similarly to his son Hector's death. In other words, Malouf's decision to focus in this passage on the physical effects of death is tied to his depiction of mortality as a common denominator between all people.*

After tending to Patroclus's body, Achilles sought out Hector for a duel to the death. In the ensuing battle, because Hector had taken Patroclus's (i.e. Achilles's) armor, Achilles had the disconcerting sense that he was fighting himself. Nevertheless, Achilles came out victorious, killing Hector with a wound to the throat. Just before dying, however, Hector (or a god speaking through him) warned Achilles that he would die soon as well, and Achilles seemed to experience Hector's journey to the underworld with him. After returning to his senses, Achilles watched as his men stripped Hector's corpse of its armor. He himself then tied the body to the back of his chariot and dragged it around Troy's walls as Hector's father, mother, wife, and child looked on. Achilles desecrated the body in this way in an attempt to wear out his own grief with the shocking display of anger.

On the surface, Achilles and Hector's relationship is clearly one of mutual hostility (and, in Achilles's case, hatred). Malouf's depiction of the duel, however, is personal and at times almost intimate; he describes them being physically "joined" to one another, for instance, by the length of Achilles's sword. What's more, their identities at times seem to blend together. Achilles, for instance, experiences Hector's death as his own twice (first when he stabs him, and then when he goes with him to the underworld). This again highlights the idea of mortality as a point of commonality, but it also ties into Hector's prediction that Achilles will soon die himself: in Homer's version of the story, Achilles is destined to die soon after Hector, so in killing Hector, he has effectively killed himself.


Back in the present, Achilles returns to the Greek camp, pondering his men as he walks past them. Despite the bonds he shares with his troops—hailing from the same place, speaking the same dialect, etc.—he knows that they think he has lost his mind. Nevertheless, he again orders them to ready his horses and chariot while he himself goes to retrieve Hector's body, which the gods have restored to an unblemished state. Furious, Achilles once more ties the body to his chariot and drags it around Patroclus's burial mound, where Achilles has already sacrificed numerous dogs, horses, and human prisoners in an attempt to assuage his grief. Even as he drives in circles around the mound, however, he feels that nothing he is doing is enough. Eventually, he returns to camp and falls into exhausted sleep.

When Priam explains his plan to visit Achilles, he speculates that Achilles might enjoy the opportunity to cast off his role as a hero. Priam's instinct turns out to be correct, and this passage helps explain why: in the aftermath of Patroclus's death, Achilles feels burdened by his men's expectations of him. His troops are used to leaders who adhere to a particular heroic code, and don't know what to make of a man who "breaks daily every rule they have been taught to live by." In the end, the novel will suggest that there is value in stepping outside the conventions of epic literature in order to be simply human. Achilles, however, has not yet learned how to do that, which is yet another reason for the emptiness he feels despite all his attempts to get revenge.

As Part 1 closes, the narrator explains that Achilles is a runner—not just in body, but also in spirit. Now, however, he has lost his taste for running and feels a sense of "**earth**-heaviness". He senses that something unexpected needs to happen to bring him out of his stupor, but until then, he can only sleep, cry, and "rage."

Although awareness of mortality is central to humanity in Ransom, *Malouf suggests that it is possible to take this awareness too far. At this point in the novel, Achilles's sense of "earth-heaviness" is a sign that he is allowing himself to be defined entirely by death (his own, and Patroclus's). The result of this is a kind of living death that does not allow for personal growth or development. Since death is the ultimate fate of all people, however, Achilles will need to stop thinking of the world entirely in terms of destiny in order to break free of this mindset. More specifically, he will need to learn to appreciate what Priam will call "chance," and what this particular passage refers to as "something new and unimaginable."*

PART 2

It is nighttime in Troy, but the king of Troy, Priam, is having difficulty sleeping, as he has for the past eleven days since his son Hector's death. He suffers from nightmares of Troy in flames, and is tormented by grief not only for his son, but also for everyone whom Hector's death has made vulnerable: Priam's wife Hecuba, his surviving children, and his citizens.

Like Achilles, Priam begins the novel overwhelmed by thoughts of death. In Priam's mind, the destruction of Troy is so inevitable that it has already happened: the Trojans "believe themselves quietly asleep and safe in their beds," but are in fact "the corpses he moves among." This passage also expands on a theme that becomes increasingly important in Parts 2 and 3—namely, the role of language. Although Priam's rest is fitful and unpleasant, his "sleeplessness" is "like so much else in his life…a manner of speaking." In other words, what matters in the Trojan court is not whether Priam is literally unable to sleep, but the use of an expression that seems appropriate to his situation. Part of Priam's personal journey over the course of the novel will involve learning to use language in a different and less symbolic way.

Suddenly, Priam senses a shift in the room's atmosphere and realizes that a god is about to appear. He recognizes the signs—the shimmering air, his own sense of passivity, etc.—because he is frequently on the receiving end of these visits. As he waits for the god to materialize, he thinks about the two children he has who share his power: Helenus uses it professionally as a priest of Apollo, while his daughter Cassandra gives herself over entirely to her visions in a kind of crazed ecstasy. From here, his thoughts drift to the dual life ts he lives as a king—with his body as both a real physical presence and a symbol for the realm in its entirety.

Priam's supernatural gifts are in one sense an indication of his status as an epic figure: he possesses abilities that lie far outside the realm of ordinary human experience. In comparing Priam's style of foresight to his children's, however, Malouf insists on making Priam's abilities as normal as possible. Unlike Helenus and Cassandra, who use their skills in ceremonial and/or dramatic ways, Priam has integrated his divine visitations into the fabric of his everyday life. This passage, then, hints at Malouf's ultimate defense of the everyday, since it depicts even extraordinary events in an ordinary way. Relatedly, it begins to sketch out Priam's discontent with his ceremonial identity as king, which limits his ability to express or even feel common emotions. Like Achilles, Priam will make peace with his identity only once he has learned what it means to be "any" man.


As Priam continues to wait for the god's arrival, he recalls the moment he saw Achilles kill Hector and defile his body. Priam ran down to the city gates and poured **dirt** over his crowned head, which he saw (and sees) as a fitting symbol of how the gods have mocked him by making him king only to overthrow him through this war that seems destined to end in Troy's defeat.

Priam's despair in this passage is not simply a result of his son's death, but also of his entire worldview. In Greek mythology, fate governs everything; in the Iliad, *for instance, even the gods cannot prevent the death of someone fated to die. For Priam, the natural corollary to this is the idea that fate or the gods placed him in power only to humiliate him by taking it away. From this perspective, his entire life seems wasted, because everything he worked for and prided himself on was ultimately a cruel joke.*

The goddess Iris appears, and interrupts Priam's gloomy thoughts. She gently tells him that he is mistaken to see what has happened as mockery, or even as being (entirely) intentional: chance, she says, also plays a role in the course of human life. Priam is confused, but has no chance to question Iris further, because she has disappeared. Alone, he wonders whether Iris was ever there at all, but ultimately dismisses the idea that he himself could have come up with the "blasphemous" idea of chance, even in a dream.

On the face of it, Iris's remarks about chance seem difficult to reconcile with the novel's depiction of certain events (e.g. Priam's death at Neoptolemus's hands) as inevitable. In some ways, however, Ransom *is less concerned with the fate vs. chance debate as a question of fact (i.e. which view is correct) than it is with how humans choose to interpret the world. It may be that certain events are "destined" (e.g. death) and that others become unavoidable at some point along the way (e.g. the destruction of Troy). To a certain extent, however, the very fact that humans can imagine alternate scenarios suggests (to paraphrase Iris) that the way things are is not the way things have to be. This is an important distinction, because* Ransom *hinges on the idea that change is at least possible on an internal level—but not, presumably, if a person is incapable of imagining that change to begin with.*

Already feeling a bit better, Priam sits still as a vision comes to him. In it, he sees himself stripped of any finery, sitting on a mule-drawn cart beside a common driver. The cart is towing a covered load that Priam recognizes as **ransom** for his son's body. Now truly excited, Priam rushes off to find Hecuba. On the way, he ignores the servants he passes who try to help or serve him because he needs to "get used to the unaccustomed."

Priam's vision of going to retrieve Hector's body is a good example of the delicate balance the novel strikes between fate and chance (or free will). On the one hand, the fact that Priam accurately predicts something that hasn't yet happened tends to imply that the future is fixed. That said, Priam has to consciously work to make his vision a reality, which suggests there is a place for free will in the world after all. The details of Priam's vision, meanwhile, reflect another ongoing debate in the novel: the epic vs. the everyday. In this case, however, the implications are very clear, since it is central to Priam's plan that he appear not as a king but simply as an ordinary man.

When Priam reaches Hecuba's room, he realizes that she has been awake all night as well, crying. The two embrace in silence before Priam tentatively broaches his reason for coming, saying that since Hector's death, all they have been able to do is grieve. Hecuba, however, retorts that she is crying out of a sense of powerless fury that she can do nothing to stop Achilles from further mutilating Hector's body. As she goes on, describing what it felt like to carry and give birth to Hector (and her other dead sons), Priam finds himself at a loss, unable to remember the personal details that Hecuba does.

Although she will later react with shock to Priam's desire to experience ordinary fatherhood, Hecuba begins the novel with a connection to her children that is much more personal (and thus "normal") than her husband's. She remembers, for example, milestones in each child's development, like the fact that her son Troilus only began to walk when Priam bribed him with a dagger. The intimacy of Hecuba's relationship to her children seems to stem in part from the fact that she literally shared a body with them during pregnancy. To a certain extent, in fact, she seems to feel that this shared physical presence has persisted over the years, because she describes Achilles's desecration of Hector's body as a mutilation of her own flesh. By contrast, Priam's relationship to his sons has been mostly ceremonial, so he finds Hecuba's words strange, and even dismisses them as "women's talk." This remark lays the groundwork for Priam's later reflections on the pleasures of speech that has no ceremonial or symbolic purpose, but instead reflects an immediate, sensory reality.

Priam attempts to redirect the conversation toward his plan, acknowledging that he is too old to go to battle himself, and that that was never his role as king to begin with. In fact, he says, he has carefully avoided doing anything that would remind his subjects of his bodily presence and mortality, instead constructing an image of himself as unchanging and eternal. Now, however, Priam says that he *has* changed, and that Hecuba herself must have noticed this. Priam then begins to describe his vision to Hecuba. She reacts with shock, thinking to herself that dreams are not supposed to be taken literally.

At heart, what makes Priam's role as king constraining is its denial of any kind of change or impermanence: because Priam is a symbol of the kingdom itself, any instability on his part would suggest that Troy is similarly unstable. As a result, Priam is forced to publically deny the physical changes associated with aging. This is problematic in and of itself, since Ransom *ultimately suggests that mortality (and physical weakness in general) form the basis for empathy. Perhaps even more importantly, however, the pressure to be "unchangeable" risks denying the possibility of internal change and development, which is a major concern in* Ransom.

Priam continues before Hecuba can interrupt, painting a picture of the cart first loaded with **ransom**—coins, plate, armor, *etc.*—and then after the exchange with Hector's body, "all his limbs newly restored and shining, restored and *ransomed*."

In this passage, Malouf begins to explore the symbolic significance of the ransom Priam gives to Achilles. Priam's description of Hector's body as "restored and ransomed" is, on the face of it, a reference to the fact that the payment will "restore" Hector to his family. That said, it's impossible to ignore the fact that Malouf (like Homer) describes Hector's body as "restored" in the much more literal sense of being unblemished. Although this is actually a result of divine intervention, Priam's remarks here hint at a metaphorical connection between his "ransoming" of his son and the preservation of his son's body. In other words, Malouf suggests that by reaching out to Achilles in the way that he does (i.e. humbling himself and appealing to Achilles's humanity), Priam is, in a figurative sense, able to overcome death.

Hecuba is disturbed and objects that Achilles will never agree to Priam's terms, as he already ignored Hector's request that the winner of the duel return his opponent's body for burial. Priam responds that he does not necessarily expect Achilles to agree, but that he thinks the strength of his idea lies in the very fact that it *is* unlikely. Hecuba then points out that Priam will probably be killed before he even reaches Achilles's hut, but Priam simply reiterates his belief that the situation they are in requires unconventional thinking. Furthermore, he says, he thinks that Achilles may seize on the chance to act simply as a "man" rather than a "hero," just as Priam wishes to act as a father rather than as a king.

Priam's sense that his situation demands an unlikely course of action illustrates the novel's ideas about fate and chance. The plan to ransom Hector's body is "unexpected" not only in the sense that it defies social norms, but also in a deeper way: Priam describes it as "impossible," implying that it flies in the face of the basic laws that govern the universe. To a certain extent, of course, those laws have already been flouted, as Hecuba notes when she describes Achilles's desecration of Hector's body as a "thing unheard of…a [violation] of every law of gods and men." However, where Hecuba sees this not only as an insult but also as a threat to the fundamental order of things, Priam sees it as all the more reason to respond in kind with his own "impossible" plan.

Hecuba worries that Priam will not return, and that she will be left to cope with whatever happens to Troy alone. Priam, however, suggests that failing in his quest would mean the end of Troy anyway, and that they should leave matters to the gods or to chance. This reference to chance scandalizes Hecuba, but Priam nevertheless forges ahead, saying that he thinks there may be a place for free will to operate after all. Hecuba remains alarmed. She advises that Priam can discuss his plan with his counselors, but that he should keep his ideas about chance to himself for fear of causing chaos: forgoing traditional ideas about the order of the universe and society could lead to fear and violence.

Ransom *frequently links fate to social convention and tradition, in part because both imply limitations on people's ability to act freely. Priam's reference to chance therefore strikes Hecuba as dangerous both because it questions the power of the gods, and because it could undermine the fabric of Trojan society: if there are limits to fate, for instance, people might feel free to question why the royal family has the power that it does (and, even more problematically, whether it should). Furthermore, this understanding of fate and order has implications for how language should be used. Since words "can be the agents of…what is conceivable," Hecuba feels that they should be chosen with extreme care, and in a way that corresponds to the broader laws of society and the universe.*

Priam, undeterred, says there is more that Hecuba needs to understand: although she has heard the story of his childhood, she has not heard it from him. Before he begins the story, he first asks her to imagine what it was like to *live* the story, not knowing how it would end. Then Priam launches into a description of himself as a boy, standing amongst a group of frightened and orphaned children just after Heracles had sacked Troy. Priam's father Laomedon was King of Troy at the time, and had hidden Priam—then known as Podarces—among the common children for protection during the attack. Even so, now he had been captured. Priam describes looking at one of the roads leading out of Troy and imagining being led down it as a slave. In fact, he says that in some sense he never truly *did* escape, and that he has lived a parallel life as just one more nameless and forgotten slave.

Although Priam's backstory in Ransom *is based on Greek mythology, it is notably not present in the* Iliad. *Malouf's decision to include it is therefore especially striking, and a good example of the importance of storytelling in the novel. Strictly speaking, Priam's childhood ordeal does not seem to have permanently altered the course of his life; "all the gods promised" to him did in fact come to pass, because he is now King of Troy. The experience, however, seems to have made him more receptive to the idea that fate is not all-powerful. Because he can imagine an alternate reality in which he never escaped (i.e. he can tell a story about it), Priam sees his current circumstances as conditional rather than destined. Furthermore, in constructing this narrative about the way his life might have played out, Priam in some sense "experiences" life as a slave instead of a king. This perhaps helps explain his acute awareness of the gap between his royal identity and his human one; Priam has already experienced what it means to be a person like anyone else.*

Continuing his narrative, Priam describes how his sister Hesione, who had herself been taken captive, recognized him in the crowd of children. Since Heracles had told Hesione she could choose a gift, she demanded her brother's life. Heracles agreed, but renamed Podarces "Priam"—"the price paid"—as a reminder that Podarces was saved from slavery only through his generosity. The improbability of his escape, however, combined with the experience of being in the crowd of children, have permanently altered Priam's sense of himself and his life.

Priam describes his renaming as the death of one self and the birth of another. Although Podarces was not literally slated to die, he was bound for the "oblivion" of a life of enslavement, where no one would have known or told his story. His resurrection, though, comes at a cost (another form of "ransom"), since Podarces is now aware of how precarious his lot in life really is. Even his new name—Priam—is a reminder of the fact that his life could have gone very differently. The entire episode, then, ties into the association between mortality and empathy in the novel; by "dying" as a child, Priam learned to feel a sense of kinship with all the people who were not lucky enough to escape.

The "ugliness" of Priam's story causes Hecuba visible discomfort: she dislikes thinking of her husband as simply another abandoned child in a crowd. Nevertheless, Priam continues his narrative, explaining that when he returned to his life of luxury as a prince and then a king, he did not do so as the same boy. Although he has tried to act as if he were completely assured of his divine right to rule, the effort has taken a toll on him. Now, he says, he needs to "**ransom**" himself for the second time in his life by going to retrieve Hector's body. Hecuba remains unconvinced, and asks Priam to avoid making a final decision until after he has spoken with his advisors.

As Priam describes it, Heracles's concession "ransomed" him from a life of slavery and restored his royal status to him. By contrast, the ransom Priam is planning is very different, because there is very little sense that it will radically change the course of Priam's life. Priam will have his son back, but Troy will still be on the verge of destruction. Priam, however, seems to view his plan as a way of redeeming himself after a lifetime of feeling ill-at-ease as King of Troy. By "ransoming himself" with this fatherly action, Priam suggests that he can find peace with himself as an ordinary human. Not surprisingly, none of this sits well with Hecuba. The central message of Priam's story, for instance—that it's only by chance that he differs from the other abandoned children—flatly contradicts her ideas about fate and order. It is therefore a testament to her love for Priam that she even proposes discussing the subject with their children and counselors.

Later that morning, Priam meets with his counselors, as well as his remaining children. Most of his surviving sons are more interested in vying for power than in serving the kingdom, but he is fond of his youngest son, Polydorus, who runs up and kisses him.

Priam's plan to retrieve Hector's body hinges on the idea of approaching Achilles personally and as a father. This is a role Priam has little experience with, but his relationship with Polydorus offers a glimpse of a "normal" father-son relationship (i.e. one that appears largely unaffected by Priam's status as king).

Priam explains his plan to his sons, who feel, like Hecuba, that it is beneath his dignity as a king. Eventually, a prince named Deiphobus speaks up in protest, saying that while he understands Priam's grief, his plan is not worth the risk to either his life or his "royal image." Instead, Deiphobus says, Priam must resist the temptation to indulge human feelings; giving in to them, he suggests, would be an insult to Hector's memory. Tactfully, Priam replies that he understands Deiphobus's concerns, but that he nevertheless feels he needs to experience what it means to be an ordinary person.

Deiphobus's objections, even more so than Hecuba's, center on the idea that Priam's plan will compromise his royal status and everything that it represents. By acting as an ordinary man, Deiphobus argues, Priam jeopardizes the entire "sacred spirit of [Troy]." In keeping with his concern for convention, Deiphobus (the "most smooth-mannered and eloquent" of Priam's sons) makes his argument in a polished and stylized way, prefacing his objections with a lengthy statement about how close he was to Hector and how he would do anything to retrieve his brother's body. This formulaic display of grief exasperates Priam, but he does not show his irritation, choosing instead to reiterate his belief that casting aside his royal status is exactly what this situation demands.

Priam's sons hope that Cassandra will object to Priam's plan, but she has lost her taste for prophesy since her brother's death. Instead, an advisor named Polydamas speaks up, saying he has always respected Priam for fulfilling his duties as king and maintaining order in the realm. He therefore asks Priam to spare himself an experience that would likely be painful and humiliating.

Polydamas's objections, like Deiphobus's, center on Priam's royal identity and the role that it plays in maintaining order on both a cosmic and social level. He notes, for instance, that Priam has always been "punctilious" in carrying out his duties to both the gods and his subjects. Unlike Deiophobus, however, Polydamas seems more concerned with Priam's own well-being. As Polydamas describes it, the realm of fate and ceremony is Priam's proper sphere, and venturing out into a world governed by chance, where any Greek could "happen upon" him, would likely be an upsetting experience.

Priam appreciates what Polydamas has said, but nevertheless explains his reasons for disagreeing: although he is a king, Priam says, he is also a mortal man, and therefore not immune to the suffering that all humans experience. In fact, he says, his status as a king will ultimately mean nothing if Troy falls, since he will die just as horribly as any commoner would. Nevertheless, Priam says, there is something he *can* do in order to ensure his legacy will be a noble and "living" one. The earnestness of Priam's speech convinces his family that he will not change his mind, and they reluctantly agree to go along with his plan.

In this passage, Priam explicitly lays out for the first time his ideas about fate, mortality, and the implications of both for human action. As Priam describes it, death is inevitable, cutting across distinctions of class and status: in wartime, for instance, a king can be killed as easily as anyone else. Nevertheless, Priam says, it is possible to symbolically step outside the limitations of fate and death by striving to do something "new" and "living." More specifically, Priam suggests that it is possible to maintain a sense of dignity in the face of death by acting in a way that affirms the basic humanity of all people. Priam therefore concludes his appeal by saying that he needs to visit Achilles "lest the honour of all men be trampled in the dust."

That afternoon, Priam waits as his sons prepare a cart and assemble the **ransom**—a fortune in treasure. Instead of the simple vehicle he requested, however, they bring him a highly ornamented cart, his usual herald Idaeus, and a procession that includes a chariot pulled by thoroughbred horses. Priam grows angry and tells his sons to find a common cart and driver in the marketplace.

Priam's anger with his sons stems from two separate (though related) issues. The procession the princes initially plan clearly bears little resemblance to the stripped-down and ordinary cart Priam had requested: the chariot and stallions belong in the world of the epic rather than the everyday. Just as importantly, though, the procession is not what Priam calls "new": it reflects a conventional way of thinking that does not admit the possibility of unexpected events. Since Priam's plan relies on the idea of "chance," it is symbolically important that the plan's details exist outside traditional rules and norms.


This time, the princes return with Somax—a middle-aged man who is rough around the edges and overwhelmed by the glamor of Priam's court. Somax suspects that he has been chosen largely because one of his mules, **Beauty**, is unusually pretty and charming.

Given the novel's defense of ordinary life, it is appropriate that Somax—a common carter—is the only original character in Ransom. *In fact, Somax's presence is itself a statement on the pleasures of the everyday, since the confusion and skepticism he displays toward the court provide much-needed humor in an otherwise serious novel. The good looks and lively temperament of Beauty—a working mule—function similarly.*

Priam asks Somax whether he understands what he has been hired to do, and Somax—somewhat intimidated—says that he does. Priam approves of Somax and orders his cart and mules to be brought in, which calms the carter down somewhat. He then tells Somax that he intends to call him Idaeus, since this is the name the king's herald always holds. Somax agrees but is inwardly alarmed, feeling as though his past and identity are under threat. Resentfully, he decides not to tell anyone the names of the mules.

If Priam's journey to Achilles's hut takes him out of the realm of the epic and into the realm of the everyday, the renaming of Somax has the opposite effect: it transforms an ordinary man into a symbol. "Idaeus" is not the name of an individual with highly particular memories, feelings, quirks, etc., but simply the name of someone who has a particular relationship to the King of Troy. Not surprisingly, then, Somax doesn't take kindly to the change, which seems to threaten his sense of who he is. By keeping the names of the mules to himself, however, he ensures that a certain portion of his life remains off-limits to the Trojan court.



As servants load the **ransom** onto the cart, those who are watching feel as if they are witnessing Hector's body taking shape. Hecuba calls for water and wine, and Priam makes an offering to the gods. As he prays, a bird flies overhead, which Somax identifies to himself as a chickenhawk. Priam's son Helenus, however, says that it is an eagle, and thus a sign of approval from the gods.

In this passage, Malouf continues to contrast the grandeur of the Trojan court with Somax's down-to-earth perceptions of his surroundings. The very formal and ritualistic offering appears to culminate in a sign that the gods have blessed Priam's plan: the eagle that Helenus identifies as a messenger from Jove, the king of the gods. Somax, however, thinks that the bird is a chickenhawk, and that it is simply looking for food—that is, that the bird's presence is simply coincidental. The episode, then, ties the epic and the everyday to two different worldviews, associating the first with fate and the second with chance.


The narrator describes the daily routine of Troy's citizens: in the morning, they gather excitedly on the ramparts to watch the army leave, then watch again more somberly in the afternoon to see who has survived. No fighting has taken place since Hector's death, however, so the procession leaving the palace attracts all of Troy's attention. Even the day-to-day activities that have continued in spite of the war come to a halt, and a crowd gathers. The people watch in confusion as Somax and Priam drive by in a cart, accompanied by the king's surviving sons. The princes eventually turn back, but the cart leaves the city and vanishes into the distance.

Malouf's depiction of Troy continues to develop ideas of the ordinary and everyday. In some ways, the city's reaction to Priam's actions mirrors the court's response; the citizens of Troy recognize his departure as a break with routine life. What is normal for the Trojan people, though, is very different from what's normal for the Trojan court. In spite of the war, ordinary and even mundane activities (laundry, pest control, etc.) continue more or less as usual. This idea of day-to-day life going on in the face of great tragedy will be a major focus of Part 3.

PART 3

At dusk, Somax and Priam stop to rest on the banks of the River Scamander. Priam, however, does not immediately climb down from the cart, saying he wants to stay with his son's body. Somax does not point out Priam's mistake (that the treasure under the cloth is not his son's body), but does quietly persuade Priam to disembark.

As Part 3 opens, Somax's interactions with Priam are still somewhat tentative. Somax is especially aware that he does not know the customs that govern addressing a king, so he initially avoids saying anything. Significantly, when Somax does break his silence, it's because he is newly aware of Priam as a father like himself; when Priam mistakes the covered treasure for Hector's body, Somax instantly realizes what has happened and knows what to say. In other words, the exchange illustrates a type of communication based in empathy rather than protocol.

Somax wades into the river and quickly realizes that Priam has not followed. Although still uncomfortable with the difference in status, Somax decides that he needs to take charge of the king, who seems somewhat dazed. Somax therefore encourages Priam to dip his feet in the **water** as well, and even unbuckles Priam's sandals for him. As Priam dangles his feet in the **water**, he watches fish swim by and thinks about Somax's behavior and words, which do not conform to ordinary courtly protocol. Priam does not find this disturbing, however, and even thinks Somax's demeanor might be more appropriate to the situation they're currently in.

Despite his wish to experience life as an ordinary person, Priam is still uncomfortable with the everyday world at this point in the novel. Here, for instance, he seems to be at a loss as to how to act in his new surroundings. Once he has settled in alongside the river, however, Priam begins to take pleasure in the ordinary nature of the scene and his place within it: he is amused, for instance, that the fish ignore him just as much as they ignore Somax. Relatedly, Priam also finds himself grateful for Somax's "rough" manners, which he thinks may be more useful than "a knowledge of the forms." The implication, again, is that the ceremony and symbolism of life at court is not suited to everyday life, which is full of unexpected twists and turns.

Somax unpacks some food and encourages Priam to eat. Priam at first declines, and instead simply listens as Somax describes how his daughter-in-law cooks **griddlecakes**, deftly flipping them with her fingers. Eventually, however, Somax does mange to convince Priam to drink a bit of wine and eat a griddlecake by reminding him that humans are not solely spiritual, but also children of "**earth**." This comment impresses Priam, who has typically tried to distance himself from bodily needs.

Somax's remarks about the dual nature of humanity are presumably not a new idea to Priam, whom Malouf has shown to be highly conscious of both his mortal, human side and his royal and eternal one. The easy way in which Somax connects the earthly to the spiritual, however, does seem to impress Priam. As Somax describes it, a "good comfortable feeling in the belly and the legs" actually "help[s] the spirit along." This idea that the spiritual and physical might be inseparable from one another is clearly very different from the uneasy split Priam feels between the two halves of his identity. The talk about the griddlecakes, meanwhile, begins to hint at the role of storytelling in the novel, which Priam will reflect on in the coming pages.

As Priam settles in on the riverbank, he thinks about how unfamiliar everything he is experiencing is to him. His previous trips outside his palace have always been ceremonial in nature, even when they took him into the natural world; boar hunts, for instance, adhere to a set of formal rules, and anything that deviates from established procedure is simply ignored. Priam is therefore surprised to discover that he takes so much pleasure in the "incidental" details of what is going on around him—the fish swimming around his feet, the swifts flying overhead, etc.—even though these details hold no deeper meaning. He is also unused to being a spectator rather than the center of attention, but again finds that he enjoys the experience.

More than perhaps anything else in the novel, Priam's description of his surroundings as "incidental" reveals the connection between everyday life and chance. What Priam appreciates about the scene is not only its unimportance, but also its arbitrary nature: the fish Priam sees, for instance, could just as easily be different fish. This noticeably contrasts with Priam's experiences as King of Troy, where everything that is "accidental" is either ignored or transformed into a symbol of something idealized and eternal. Boar hunting, for instance, is never about "this particular occasion, or this boar, or this king." Now, however, Priam discovers that he appreciates the immediacy of the ordinary and coincidental.

Priam continues to reflect on the novelty of what is happening, now focusing in particular on Somax's way of speaking. Whereas Priam is used to thinking of language as something that serves very specific functions, Somax seems to talk simply for pleasure, and as a way of passing the time. What's more, Priam appreciates the fact that Somax's speech gives him insight into someone else's life: as Priam eats the **griddlecake**, he pictures Somax's daughter-in-law making it and feels a connection to her.

Priam's thoughts on language in this passage grow out of and reflect his earlier thoughts on chance and the everyday. Somax's speech, like the world Priam has now entered, is "unnecessary" in the sense that has no established purpose; it does not, for instance, reinforce a social relationship, or symbolically represent a truth about the universe. The story of the griddlecakes is not really "about" anything other than itself, but this allows it to offer an uncommonly vivid window into the day-to-day lives of Somax and his daughter-in-law. In fact, the story is so real to Priam that he seems to "taste" elements of it in the griddlecakes. This idea that storytelling can render distant events viscerally present to a listener or reader is central to Ransom, *where it allows characters to step outside their own minds, lifespans, etc. in order to empathize with others.*

Priam finds that he wants to know more about Somax and his daughter-in-law, but he does not know how to ask. Instead, Priam latches onto a reference Somax had made to his sons. Somax, however, says that his only surviving relatives at this point are his daughter-in-law and her own daughter, who is currently sick with a fever. He confesses that he is worried about the girl, and reflects aloud on how fragile the human body is, and how painful that knowledge is for a parent. He dwells in particular on an instance when his granddaughter fell on a stake and bled so heavily he feared she would die, thus ending Somax's entire family line. He acknowledges, however, that life goes on even after enormous loss, and remarks that he once had seven children, all of whom are now dead.

As the conversation strays further and further away from the formal language of the Trojan court, it is Priam who finds that he does not know how to proceed. As a result, the question he eventually asks does not directly involve the topic that had piqued his interest. It does, however, offer new insights into Somax's life, which Malouf suggests is one function of storytelling. More specifically, it prompts an extended meditation on mortality, with Somax noting how strange it is that all the vitality of the human spirit exists in a frail physical frame. This awareness of human vulnerability plays a key role in Priam's later appeal to Achilles, since (Priam says) it ought to inspire compassion.

Somax continues to talk about his children, noting that only two of his sons lived to be full grown. He fondly recalls how cheerful one of them was as a child, and says that he grew up to be particularly strong. Priam presses Somax on what happened to this son, and Somax explains that he died trying to lift a stuck wagon out of the mud: one of his organs ruptured and he was pinned underneath the wagon. The accident was in character, Somax says, because his son was reckless and a bit of a show-off. These traits irritated Somax at the time, but he now regrets ever treating his son harshly, and wonders whether the gods themselves might also regret killing him.

As Somax talks more about the circumstances of his children's deaths, the differences between his worldview and Priam's become more evident. In Book 2, Priam attributed the death of Hector (and all the disasters that might result from it) to a longstanding and malicious divine plan. Somax, however, seems to view even the gods' actions in terms of accident, suggesting that they might have killed his son by mistake. In other words, Somax sees chance (rather than fate) at work even on a cosmic level, imagining that events could have and might have unfolded differently.

Priam thinks about the sons he himself has lost, remembering the role he has played in each one's funeral. In some ways, however, he feels he has not experienced what Somax has, because he did not have particularly personal relationships with any of his children. In fact, he is not even entirely sure how many sons he sired, and he certainly can't imagine having interacted with any of them the way Somax describes interacting with his own children. This is a source of regret to Priam, although he recognizes that the loss of any given son would have been more painful if he had highly particularized memories attached to each one.

On the face of it, Somax's story seems like it ought to be very familiar to Priam, who has also lost a number of sons. As Somax talks, however, Priam realizes that fatherhood has meant something very different to the carter, whose relationships to his children do not carry any deeper symbolic significance but are instead simply about the child as a specific individual. By contrast, Priam cannot even be sure of his sons' number, since even this basic fact has more to do with demonstrating Priam's "godlike activity in the sphere of breeding and begetting" than it does with reality. In other words, Priam's experience of fatherhood is another metaphor, or "manner of speaking." As such, it differs markedly from Somax's extended narratives about his sons, which are literal and rich in detail.

Priam asks Somax about his other son, and Somax points to a spot further along the river, where he says his son died. Somax explains that his son was trying to ford the river when **Beauty** slipped, tipping his son into the **water** and drowning him. Somax found the mule grazing near the river the next day and struggled not to take his anger out on her. Recognizing that it wasn't Beauty's fault, however, he instead hugged her and started crying. Since then, he says, he's been especially fond of her.

Given Beauty's connection to the pleasures of everyday life, it is significant that her presence is what gives Somax the will to continue on after losing his second son. Just as Priam has found—to his own surprise—that he can find beauty and interest in the world despite his son's death, Somax was able to take comfort in the humble pleasures of ordinary life after a similar loss. The passage further links this to the novel's depiction of mortality by suggesting that Beauty was responsible for the death of Somax's son. In Ransom, *the everyday world is also the physical, mortal world. It is therefore inseparable from death, but also the source of much of what gives life meaning.*

Night is now falling, and Somax tells Priam that they should move on. Priam is reluctant to leave, but expects to remember all the details of the spot where they've stopped.

Priam's thoughts on leaving the resting spot confirm the transformation that is taking place within him. Having gotten past his initial discomfort, Priam now truly enjoys Somax's meandering and "unimportant" stories, as well as the similarly incidental surroundings. The fact that Priam intends to commit all these particularities to memory suggests that he himself is becoming more ordinary and human.

As Priam and Somax walk back toward the cart, they see a young man with glossy curls and a vain demeanor standing next to it. When he sees Somax squaring up for a fight, the young man draws a sword and says he could have already stolen their treasure if he wanted to. Claiming to be a Greek named Orchilus, the stranger says that Achilles has sent him to act as an escort. Priam is suspicious but outwardly grateful, since he fears the consequences of a fight between Somax and their escort.

Although it isn't clear at this point in the text, Orchilus is actually Hermes, the Greek messenger god. In traditional mythology, Hermes is also a trickster god, which perhaps explains his secretive and somewhat antagonistic behavior in this passage. Interestingly, however, Priam interprets Orchilus's/Hermes's boastful speech as "play-acting." This is certainly true in the sense that Hermes is acting under an assumed identity, but it perhaps also points to the wide gap between the worlds of gods and men in Ransom. Because humanity and mortality are so tightly intertwined in the novel, even a god who has assumed human form can only "play" at being a man.

Somax attempts to get rid of Orchilus, who has made himself at home leaning against the cart. Priam also finds Orchilus's careless and haughty demeanor off-putting, but senses that it would be unwise to reject his help. He therefore allows Orchilus to pull him up onto the cart, and the trio set off. Somax, however, remains mistrustful, particularly when Hermes begins to pet and fawn over **Beauty**.

Superficially, the friction between Hermes and Somax stems from "Orchilus's" youthful arrogance. In retrospect, however, it is clear that the two characters reside on opposite ends of the epic-everyday spectrum: Hermes is a god and thus an entirely supernatural figure, while Somax is a human and largely unremarkable in strength, intelligence, etc. The tug-of-war between the two therefore embodies two different systems of value. In the end, Ransom will largely favor the everyday world that Somax represents, although it does retain certain elements of an "epic" worldview (e.g. an appreciation for honor and heroism, though in slightly unconventional forms).

The cart begins to ford the river, and **Beauty** loses her footing at one point, nearly pitching both the treasure and her riders into the **water**. She steadies herself, however, and Orchilus, who has been walking alongside the cart, points out a safer place to cross. The cart doesn't slip this time, but the water wells up to Priam's feet, and he finds that he is enjoying the adventure, and already reliving it inside his head. Once the cart is safely across, the group stops to rest for a moment before continuing on, passing through fields that have been destroyed in the war.

In addition to enjoying the immediate, sensory details of the journey (e.g. the feeling of water around his feet), Priam takes pleasure in telling himself the story of crossing the river virtually as soon as the moment is over. Although this is not the first time Priam has told a story in the novel, it is the first time he has done so purely for pleasure. This is significant, because Ransom suggests that storytelling—in addition to heightening people's capacity for empathy—is also a useful vehicle for experiencing the ordinary and visceral events that make life interesting.

Orchilus asks about Somax's daughter-in-law, which irritates and confuses the carter, since he has not mentioned her to their escort. Orchilus ignores Somax's discomfort, however, and reveals more of what he knows about the man—that he drinks, embellishes stories, and often bends the rules. As Orchilus chatters on about the pleasures of life, Somax begins to suspect that their escort may not be who he says he is, and voices his concerns to Priam.

Although Hermes, as a god, belongs to a very different world than most of the novel's characters, his speech in this passage does touch on many ideas central to Ransom. *For instance, his remark about the pleasures of "talk[ing] and hear[ing] news of all that's happening in the world" bears a striking resemblance to Priam's new appreciation for ordinary conversation.*

Priam realizes that their escort is in fact the god Hermes, and Somax becomes alarmed. Since one of Hermes's roles is escorting the dead to the underworld, it occurs to Somax that they might have died while fording the **river**. Hermes, however, clarifies that he has been sent to take them not to the afterlife, but simply to Achilles's hut. Reassuring Somax that his granddaughter is already recovering from her fever, Hermes tells Priam to brace himself, since they will reach the Greek camp soon. Priam, overwhelmed, worries that he may not be able to carry out his plans after all, but he is reassured by both Somax's matter-of-fact attitude and the presence of Hermes. In particular, Priam takes comfort in the fact that Hermes has consistently referred to him as "father," since he is making the journey in his capacity as a parent rather than a king.

The revelation that Orchilus is actually Hermes doubles down on the symbolism of crossing a body of water. Since Hermes is the escort of souls to the afterlife, the implication is that the journey to Achilles's hut is a metaphorical form of death. This speaks to the internal changes Priam has already begun to experience as a result of his actions, casting aside his identity (or "dying") as a king in order to be reborn as an ordinary man. Hermes's persistence in calling Priam "father" is significant in this respect, since it refers to the role Priam has taken on in going to retrieve his son's body. It is also yet another demonstration of the power of language in Ransom, *since Priam immediately feels more confident in his capacity as a parent when Hermes refers to him as a father. Language, in other words, has the ability to shore up a person's identity (or possibly even confer an identity on him).*

The cart reaches a trench and blockade, with a gate that only Achilles himself has the strength to open. Inside, the soldiers who are on guard duty hear someone knocking, and then watch as the gate swings open. Hermes, who has made himself invisible, has lifted the bar. The cart passes into the camp as the soldiers watch, stunned.

Like Priam's departure from Troy, Priam's arrival in the Greek camp marks a major break with what is usual or expected. The soldiers' typical evening pastimes—chatting, playing with dice, etc.—come to an abrupt halt when the gate appears to open by itself. Malouf describes this (and other, similar moments) as a kind of suspension of normal time and activity. Ultimately, these disruptions of routine life provide a window in which change can occur.

PART 4

Inside his hut, Achilles watches listlessly as his men eat, argue, and share memories. His attendant Automedon is nearby, and Achilles thinks about how he resents the man. Automedon may be loyal and tactful, but he is also the one who caught Patroclus when he fell and defended his body from the Trojan army—two tasks Achilles feels belonged to him. For his part, Automedon knows how Achilles feels but is devoted to him regardless. Recognizing this, Achilles eats a bit of food so that Automedon and his squire Alcimus will feel free to do the same. Alcimus eagerly grabs at the food in response, and Achilles thinks indulgently about the boy, whose "overabundance…of an animal nature" reminds Achilles of a younger version of himself.

Achilles's detachment from the world around him stands in sharp contrast to everything that has happened to Priam in Part 3. Priam, for instance, has learned to take pleasure in the meaningless "prattle" of people and things around him, seeing it as an expression of "each thing's presence." By contrast, Achilles shares the sense that chatter—in this case, his men's conversation—is meaningless, but not the sense that it might nevertheless hold "interest" (to borrow a word from Priam). This speaks to the deathliness of Achilles's current state, since he has lost the ability to appreciate the ordinary pleasures that make life meaningful. It also perhaps explains why Achilles feels drawn to Alcimus, since an "animal nature"—an ability to give himself over to the pleasures of the moment—is part of what currently eludes Achilles.

Suddenly, Achilles hears the sound of strings and realizes that a god is in the hut with them. Achilles slips into a frame of mind he associates with his mother and **water**, and the world around him seems to take on a fluid quality.

The trance-like state Achilles enters in this passage is another example of how suspension works in Ransom. *Malouf describes the moment as one where Achilles slips outside the normal constraints of his body, and even his own identity. The external world also seems to become less solid, "as if flow, not fixity, was [its] nature." The fluidity and changeability of this state contrasts with the rigidity of fate and physical reality, providing a space in which change and growth are possible.*

Achilles sees a figure, whom he at first mistakes for Patroclus. As the figure approaches, however, he sees that it is an old man and thinks that he is seeing his father, Peleus. Achilles is highly conscious of how much he himself has changed since he last saw his father, and it saddens him to see how much older his father has grown in the meantime as well. Weeping, Achilles drops to his knees in front of the visitor.

Significantly, Achilles begins to soften to Priam even before the latter has a chance to state his case. In mistaking Priam for Peleus (who has presumably grown old in Achilles's absence), Achilles is forcibly reminded of his father's mortality. However, where Patroclus's death enraged and embittered Achilles, the sight of his "father's" impending death elicits only "tenderness" and thus lays the groundwork for the appeal Priam will later make. Ultimately, Achilles will stop seeing death as a personal insult (as he did when he sought revenge for Patroclus's death) and begin to see it as a universal human experience which should therefore inspire empathy.

Automedon and Alcimus cry out, and Achilles realizes that the visitor is actually a stranger. Still overwhelmed by the experience of "seeing" his father, however, he simply asks the visitor who he is and indicates that his attendants should put away their swords.

Even after Achilles has realized his mistake, the sight of Priam continues to move him. Again, this points to the changes underway in Achilles's character, since he can now recognize the vulnerability and humanity of a complete stranger.

Priam, meanwhile, is unnerved by the sight of Achilles on his knees but manages to explain who he is and why he is there. When Achilles wonders aloud how he got into the camp, Priam says that he had a guide, and is reassured by the fact that Achilles seems to recognize the significance of Hermes's role in bringing the king here. Priam says that his herald (i.e. Somax) is outside the hut, along with the **ransom** he has brought.

For all the changes he has already experienced, Priam still remains somewhat bound to his old ways of thinking at this point in the novel. Achilles's actions in this passage disturb him, for instance, because they do not align with his earlier premonition of the meeting: in Priam's vision, he himself was the person kneeling. This episode, then, in some ways flips the script on Priam, who had previously argued that the "unexpectedness" of his appeal might spark a change in Achilles. Here, the strangeness of Achilles's actions gives Priam pause and (perhaps) greater insight into the man he is pleading with.

As the rest of his men remain absorbed in their meal, unaware of the "extraordinary" events that are transpiring, Achilles motions for Automedon to bring Somax inside. Although he is not entirely sure that Priam is who he claims to be, Achilles feels sympathetic towards him on account of his own father, whose aged image still lingers in Achilles's mind.

This passage is another example of the different meanings of "extraordinary" over the course of the novel. A father pleading for mercy on his child's behalf is "ordinary" in the sense that it rings true to basic human emotions, but within the logic of an epic world, its very normality makes it unusual. Malouf also sets the meeting between Achilles and Priam against a backdrop of routine life within the camp. Although the soldiers' ignorance of what is happening might at first glance seem to undercut the significance of those events, the novel eventually suggests that the continuity of normal, everyday action is important: as Somax has already said, "life goes on" in the face of extraordinary events (good or bad).

Automedon returns, confirming the presence of the **ransom** and bringing Somax along with him. Achilles asks Somax whether he is the king's herald Idaeus, and Somax hesitates, overcome not only by the issue of his name but also by the sheer unlikeliness of everything that has happened to him. Eventually, he begins to explain how he came to be called Idaeus, at which point Priam takes over the story.

Somax's appearance helps ground Priam and Achilles's meeting in everyday, unheroic reality. Like Priam and Achilles, Somax responds to the strange situation he finds himself in with uncertainty. Somax, however, is reacting not to the intensely emotional scene that is unfolding, but simply to the idea that he is participating in these momentous events. In other words, this quick detour into Somax's thoughts reframes Priam and Achilles's meeting from the perspective of an outsider, which helps strip it of its larger-than-life aura. In Somax's mind, Priam and Achilles are secondary characters in a story about the unusual experiences he himself has had over the course of the day.

Priam explains who Somax is and, speaking directly to the carter, thanks him for his service. Meanwhile, Achilles is watching the two men interact with one another, charmed by the fact that neither seems to be paying any attention to him. Eventually, he orders Alcimus to take Somax away and provide him with food.

As Priam did earlier in the novel, Achilles is here learning to take an interest in what is incidental, ordinary, or idiosyncratic—in this case, the exchange between Somax and Priam. More specifically, Achilles finds that the men's temporary inattention has the effect of pleasurably distancing him from his own personality. In other words, the passage provides another example of an "unlikely" event serving as a catalyst for change by breaking down the usual barriers of identity.

Priam begins his appeal, asking Achilles how he would feel if his own son Neoptolemus were in Hector's place. As Priam continues, he says he never imagined he would be in the position he is in now, and that he is aware that no **ransom** can possibly make up for Hector's loss. Nevertheless, he says, the act of offering the ransom is inherently ennobling—as accepting it would be for Achilles.

In this first attempt at persuasion, Priam introduces all the major ideas that ground his argument, explaining that he is appealing to Achilles as a father and as another "poor mortal." Above all, though, he introduces the idea of humanity or humanness as an ideal to strive towards. Priam urges Achilles to accept his offer on the grounds that doing so will "show that [they] are men, not ravening beasts," but in Ransom, *establishing one's humanity proves to be less about "rising above" an animal nature and more about descending from an elevated status as a king, demigod, etc.*

Achilles is taken aback by the mention of his own son, and tries to imagine what his son must look like now at age sixteen. Ultimately, however, he can only picture Neoptolemus play-fighting as a young boy.

Priam's appeal in Ransom *differs in one very notable way from the parallel scene in the* Iliad: *in the latter, Priam invokes Peleus rather than Neoptolemus. Although Malouf's Priam goes on to mention Peleus, it is the reference to Neoptolemus that initially moves Achilles, perhaps because it is an especially vivid reminder of ordinary life. Although Achilles tries to imagine Neoptolemus as a glorious warrior, his thoughts continually circle back to images of his son as a "small mimic hero," play-fighting like any other child. This proves significant later in the novel, where it becomes clear that Neoptolemus feels burdened by his father's towering reputation.*


Priam continues to plead with Achilles, asking him to remember that they both share the same basic human nature and, relatedly, mortality. Death, Priam says, is the price humans have to pay in order to live, but it is nevertheless a painful reality that should elicit compassion from anyone who suffers from it. He then again questions whether Achilles wouldn't do what he is doing for Neoptolemus, or whether Peleus wouldn't do the same for Achilles.

Priam's speech here is his second major statement about mortality and the way it impacts human life. Drawing again on the symbol of ransom, Priam describes death as a "fee" that people must pay in order to experience the world and its pleasures. As a result, death is inseparable from human nature itself and thus grounds for mutual understanding: since everyone experiences death and loss, Priam argues, everyone should be able to sympathize with the losses of others. This, again, is presumably a novel idea to Achilles, who has previously viewed death and loss only in terms of what they mean to him personally.


Achilles thinks about what Priam has said, recalling how he felt standing by the **ocean** that morning, thinking of the water as a symbol of eternity. Priam's speech has had a similar effect, and Achilles now feels as though he is looking into the future, seeing both his father and himself as old men. He knows, however, that he will die long before growing old, and he feels a chill as he thinks about the loneliness of death.

Priam's appeal sparks a complicated response in Achilles. On the most basic level, the "story" that Priam tells allows Achilles to experience events he would otherwise not be able to—e.g. the sight of his father as an old man—which in turn allows him to feel compassion for Priam's plight. Even beyond this, however, Priam's words seem to elicit a reassessment of Achilles's understanding of mortality, selfhood, and compassion. The succession of old men Achilles sees—Priam, Peleus, and himself—points to the universality of mortality. Death itself, though, strikes Achilles as an experience of total isolation—that is, an experience that cannot be shared with other people. It is this realization about the ultimate loneliness of human fate that seems to spark a change in Achilles; since death eventually cuts the individual off from all others, it is even more important to take part in a common humanity while alive.

As Achilles recovers his composure and turns to look at Priam again, he has a vision of the future: he sees his son Neoptolemus killing Priam in retribution for Achilles's own death. Priam sees that Achilles is stunned and falls to his knees in front of him, equally overcome by emotion. Achilles, however, can't bear the thought of Priam begging him and pulls him to his feet, telling him that he will give him Hector's body.

As a later flash-forward will confirm, Achilles's vision in this passage is largely accurate: Neoptolemus will kill Priam in revenge for Achilles's own death. As Achilles envisions the scene, however, Neoptolemus's ferocity makes him barely recognizable as a human (in fact, the text likens him to a "Fury"—a Greek goddess of vengeance). The actual murder, however, though just as brutal, is psychologically very different than what Achilles imagines. Malouf reveals Neoptolemus to be a frightened boy desperate to live up to his father's image. Relatedly, there is a similar, though more minor, discrepancy between the vision Priam has of clasping Achilles's knees and the way the scene actually plays out. Although Priam does eventually kneel in front of Achilles, he does so in "fellow-feeling" rather than "supplication." In other words, Malouf suggests that the future—though perhaps "fixed" in an outward and physical sense—is not set on the level of thoughts, feelings, intentions, etc.

Leaving Priam in the care of his men, Achilles goes to retrieve Hector's body. Automedon sets up a stool for Achilles to sit on in front of the body, and Achilles dismisses him before settling in to contemplate the man he has killed. The gods have again restored Hector's body to an unblemished state, which—for the past several days—Achilles has taken as a personal insult. In repeatedly mutilating the corpse, Achilles has been trying to both assuage and prove his own anger, pride, and love for Patroclus. Now, however, he is able to see the gods' protection of Hector's body as fitting and honorable—to Hector, but also to himself. In fact, he feels completely at ease with himself, and senses a kinship between himself and Hector. After sitting in silent thought for several minutes, Achilles calls Automedon back.

Achilles's new perspective on death and humanity allows him to see Hector in a different light. Where he had previously railed against everything that seemed to thwart his own will—Patroclus's death, the preservation of Hector's body, etc.—he now sees these events within the broader context of the gods' plans for him. In fact, he even feels a sense of kinship with Hector, with whom he shares a common fate: death in general, but also the duel that was in some sense the culmination of each man's life. Although none of this, presumably, erases the pain of the loss Achilles has experienced, his reflections in this passage suggest that he accepts the role that Patroclus's death and all the events that followed have played in his development as a person. For the first time, in fact, he feels that he is "the true Achilles," perhaps because he has learned, through loss, what it means to be human.

Achilles follows as his grooms take Hector's body to a laundry room to be **washed** and shrouded. The female servants there are reluctant to begin while a man is present, but Achilles finds that he is curious about the process of preparing a body for funeral. What's more, the atmosphere of the room reminds him of his childhood nurse, and he ponders the similarities between birth and death. Eventually, however, Achilles leaves, recognizing that his presence is hindering the women's work. As he reenters the yard, the company of his men reminds him of his current strength and vitality, but he remains conscious of the fact that he will soon be lying dead in the care of the women who are now washing Hector's body.

Like the riverbank in Part 3, the laundry room belongs to a world that is very different than the one Achilles (or Priam) is familiar with. For one thing, it is physical and bodily in a way that even Achilles—a warrior—is unused to. The smell is reminiscent of a nursery (or perhaps even a delivery room), and therefore evokes images of bodies that are vulnerable as a result of their infancy (or, in the case of this room, death). The laundry room is also a female space, which likely contributes to the "unheroic thoughts" Achilles finds taking hold as he stands there; the implication is that all men, however great and powerful, will ultimately end up being tended to by common and (by the standards of the day) "weak" women. Interestingly, however, Achilles does not appear resentful when he realizes this, which suggests that he has a newfound appreciation for the humble and everyday aspects of life.

As dawn approaches, Achilles watches Priam sleep on a makeshift bed in his hut, and thinks about his own father Peleus. Eventually, Achilles wakes Priam, who looks frightened before he remembers what is going on. Achilles offers Priam **water** to wash with, and Priam notes with amusement the behavior of the attendants holding the pitcher and basin: when one yawns, the other clicks his tongue in disapproval. Meanwhile, As Priam washes, Achilles is struck by Priam's noble bearing, even in old age.

Perhaps even more than the memory of where he is, it is the behavior of Achilles's attendants that pulls Priam out of his panic in this passage. The "irrelevant happening" is yet another example of the attractions of the everyday and ordinary, and it proves grounding even in the midst of fear and grief.

Priam finds everything around him dreamlike—particularly Achilles, who is both the feared warrior who killed Priam's son and the man watching patiently as Priam goes through his morning routine. Unexpectedly, Priam finds that he wants to know more about Achilles, and even thinks that learning about this enemy might help save Troy from its fate.

Priam's hopes that he might be able to save Troy ultimately come to nothing, which suggests that there are limits to the power of chance in Ransom*: when all is said and done, Troy is "destined" to fall. Throughout the novel, however, Malouf has established a connection between the ability to imagine alternate realities (e.g. in a story) and the ability of those realities to exist. In other words, even though Priam's speculations in this passage do not alter the course of events, the very fact that he is able to imagine them doing so marks a step away from a purely fatalistic worldview: however things actually are, Malouf implies, they might be different.*

The narrative skips backward several hours to when Achilles had a hog slaughtered in Priam's honor. The two men ate dinner together, negotiating a truce of eleven days for Hector's funeral, and the promise of even this brief interval of peace pleased Priam. Nevertheless—and despite the friendly tone of the conversation—he remained highly aware of his host's power and capacity for killing.

The truce that Priam and Achilles negotiate embodies many of Ransom*'s broader ideas about fate and death. Although Priam is well aware that the war will resume on the twelfth day, he no longer feels weighed down by the knowledge of the deaths to come. Instead, he accepts the truce for what it is: a "time for living" fully and happily despite knowing how it will end.*

Back in the present, Achilles and Priam enter the yard, where the cart is ready to leave. Priam pets **Beauty** but is careful not to show any emotion toward his son's body in front of the Greek "invaders." Somax helps Priam back onto the cart. Achilles, who has followed them to the gate, tells Priam to look to him for help if and when Troy falls. Priam, much to his own surprise, retorts that Achilles himself may be dead by then. Momentarily taken aback, Achilles recovers himself and smiles, saying that in that case he will not come to the king's aid. Somax then urges the mules on, and the cart passes out of the Greek camp.

Like the earlier exchange between Achilles's attendants, the simple, down-to-earth presence of Beauty ad Somax seems to have a grounding effect for Priam, who might otherwise be overwhelmed by emotion on first seeing his son's body. The final conversation between Achilles and Priam, however, is a reminder that the time for enjoying these kinds of everyday pleasures is drawing to a close: both men know that their deaths are rapidly approaching. In light of this, Achilles's parting smile is likely a form of grim humor—or, as he puts it, a "dark" joke.

PART 5

The sun is rising as Priam and Somax leave the Greek encampment. As they do so, they pass by burial mounds and watch people hunt for wood and souvenirs among the graves. Some time later, they drive by a burned village, and a few children—orphaned or abandoned—come out to watch them pass.

Priam and Somax's journey back to Troy offers a rare glimpse into the effects of the war on the common people of Troy. Perhaps surprisingly, however, the scene is not one of total desolation. In fact, even the burial mounds are supporting a kind of "life" by furnishing people with wood and valuables. This, again, points to the ways in which life and death are intertwined in Ransom. The orphaned children, meanwhile, are the flipside to the main form of loss depicted in the novel; unlike Priam, who has a lost a child, these children have lost their parents.

Eventually, Priam asks Somax to stop the cart, and the king climbs down, walking around to the back of the wagon to Hector's body. Somax hears Priam crying and thinks about the night he and his wife spent mourning over their eldest son's body. His thoughts eventually drift to the end of this "adventure" and to his reunion with his granddaughter, whom he hopes to surprise with a present.

Priam's actions in this passage contrast sharply with the earlier description of the king publically pouring handfuls of dirt over his head in response to Hector's death. Whereas the latter was a somewhat ceremonial expression of grief, this is an intensely private and personal moment, which suggests that Priam's relationship to his son has become more individualized and human, if only in death. Somax's response underscores this point, since he recognizes the "small sounds" of Priam's grief as ones that he himself has made. The fact that Somax's thoughts turn from this to his granddaughter is a testament to the ability of life to go on in the wake of extreme loss and upheaval. Relatedly, Somax's apparent happiness at the thought of returning to life "as usual" points to the priority Malouf gives to the ordinary and everyday. When all is said and done, the momentous meeting between Priam and Achilles is simply a minor "adventure" for Somax, whose primary focus is on the unheroic details of his own life.

Priam mounts the cart again, pondering what he has accomplished as Somax drives on. Although he recognizes that the moment is bittersweet in many ways, he also feels that it is a kind of victory—not only because of the fame it will bring him, but also because of the way it has changed him.

Priam's reflections during the return journey pull together all of the novel's themes. Priam's rebirth as an ordinary man and father comes at a very late hour in his life, and will do nothing to prevent either his own death or the fall of Troy. Nevertheless, Ransom *suggests that the transformation is an important one, not only for Priam's own sake, but also for everyone who will eventually hear his story. This is in keeping with Malouf's broader ideas about identity and the virtues of ordinary life. In the end,* Ransom *suggests that the most honorable and difficult role an individual can assume is being "merely" human.*

As the cart fords the river once more, Priam thinks back to their earlier crossing, and all of the simple pleasures he had discovered siting alongside the **water**. Troy appears far off in the distance, and Priam feels as though he is being welcomed home by the same divine music that first accompanied the raising of the city's walls.

Far from detracting from his status as King of Troy, Priam's experiences of life as an ordinary man have made him at home in the role as he never was before. Bolstered by the memory of the time he spent sitting on the riverbank, Priam returns home in a state of "exultant wellbeing." He even gives himself over to the same gods that he had earlier suspected of "mocking" him, allowing them to draw him onward with their music. Priam, in other words, is newly accepting of his fate as King of Troy, even knowing where it will lead him.

Back in the Greek camp, Achilles also feels he has a new lease on life—so much so, in fact, that as he practices swordplay he feels his impending death has been "suspended." The narrator, however, reminds his readers that this is not the case, explaining that Neoptolemus is already on his way to Troy, eager to claim his part in the story and fantasizing about killing Priam.

In this passage, Malouf once again uses the idea of suspension to capture an experience that seems to take place outside the bounds of time and mortality. Although Achilles knows on some level that he will die soon, he is no longer defined by this knowledge, instead feeling the "lightness" of his "spirit" at work in him again. That being the case, Malouf's reminder of Achilles's impending death comes across as brutally terse: "It has not [been suspended]." The abrupt change in tone sets the stage for the description of Priam's death that follows.

The narrator skips forward, explaining that Priam's actual death will be nothing like what Neoptolemus had imagined. Instead of mildly accepting his death, Priam watches in terror as Neoptolemus runs towards him, and then tries to twist out of his grip. Neoptolemus, meanwhile, is also frightened—in his case, by all he has to live up to as Achilles's son. Eventually, Neoptolemus manages to slit Priam's throat, but he is unnerved when Priam smiles at him as he dies. As Neoptolemus rises to his feet again, he feels overwhelming despair and shame, and asks his father for forgiveness. The narrator, however, says that Neoptolemus will be haunted by the moment for the rest of his life.

Malouf's decision to include a graphic account of Priam's murder might seem puzzling at first glance. While it certainly underscores the idea that certain aspects of fate are sealed, it does so in such a grisly manner that it risks overshadowing the significance of the internal changes Priam and Achilles have experienced in Ransom. *That said, the scene also functions as a final reminder of the potential hollowness of an "epic" life. Neoptolemus wants to be a "hero" on the same level as his father. His actions, however, are "boyish," clumsy, and ultimately a source of great shame to him, despite the public fame he enjoys as Priam's killer. His actions also run counter to the realizations Achilles has had over the course of the novel. Far from avenging his father, then, Neoptolemus's actions in this passage actually dishonor his memory.*

The narrative skips back to the present, where Priam is pointing out a figure—presumably Helen of Troy—to Somax. Somax, however, is largely uninterested, because he is still trying to settle on what gifts to get for his granddaughter, daughter-in-law, and the two mules.

The blink-and-miss-it reference to Helen in this passage is perhaps the strongest evidence in the novel as to where Malouf's interest lies. The abduction of Helen was what kickstarted the Trojan War, so a reader might plausibly expect any story about that war to deal with her. In Ransom, *however, she is barely present and completely overlooked by Somax in favor of more down-to-earth concerns.*

As Somax thinks about the stories he will be able to tell about this episode, the narrative once more skips forward to describe his future listeners' reactions. At first, the stories will seem real and visceral to them, but after the fall of Troy, the people that Somax is speaking of will slowly take on a legendary quality. Eventually, his listeners will be entirely unfamiliar with the wealthy and sophisticated city Somax is describing, because they will have lived their entire lives in an insecure and brutal world.

If Ransom *is in large part about the transformation of Priam and Achilles into ordinary humans, the novel's final pages reverse the process. Figures that were once "flesh and blood" to the people of Troy become abstract and legendary as time passes. Although Somax's stories themselves do not appear to change, it becomes increasingly harder for his listeners to imagine the characters he describes as real people—in part because the mundane details Somax provides do not jibe with their ideas about how kings, warriors, and gods would act. In a sense, then, this passage traces the process by which Malouf's relatively "ordinary" versions of Priam and Achilles could have been the larger-than-life figures that appear in Greek mythology.*

Even as the world around him changes, Somax keeps entertaining his listeners with his stories, describing how he once met Hermes, convinced Priam to dip his feet in the River Scamander, and ate a meal given to him by Achilles. His listeners accept the basic truth of his stories—that Priam went to visit Achilles during the war—but do not believe that Somax himself was actually involved in the events he described. They don't believe Somax both because he has a reputation for stretching the truth, and also because the little details he provides seem out of keeping with the grandeur of the subject. Instead, they see Somax as an ordinary carter whose biggest claim to fame is the pretty mule he once owned named **Beauty**.

On the face of it, Ransom*'s ending might seem anticlimactic or even inappropriate, given the rest of the novel's tone. Malouf not only ends with Somax (rather than Priam or Achilles), but also seems to dismiss the entire plot of the novel by suggesting that no one believes the carter's stories. It is important to remember, however, that* Ransom *is to a large extent about Achilles's and Priam's rediscovery of the everyday world as a source of pleasure and continuity. In that sense, it is fitting that Ransom ends with Beauty—a source of humble but real delight to those around her. The implication is that life has gone on, even in the wake of Troy's fall.*

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