

## ENGLISH: *RANSOM*

**‘Despite being a king, Priam is, in the end, simply a man.’ Do you agree?**

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David Malouf’s lyrical novel *Ransom* retells the story of Homer’s *The Iliad* from a modern perspective. The novel challenges the traditional view of Priam as little more than the King of Troy and explores his gradual regaining of his essential humanity. Ultimately, Malouf suggests that while Priam may continue to hold the title of ‘king’, in the end he is simply a man.

Prior to his famous ransom of his son’s body from the ferocious Greek warrior, Achilles, Priam is illustrated to be trapped in his symbolic role as king. Malouf suggests that this is primarily due to the expectations and restraints of his role as the ceremonial figurehead of Troy. Despite his position of honour and symbolic power, Priam is depicted as a man out of touch with his essential humanity. As the novel progresses and Priam himself becomes aware of this, Malouf demonstrates to the reader how his role has left him empty. Although having come perilously close to a life of slavery as a child, Priam has lost contact with the common people and their way of life. His surprise following Somax’ unaccustomed touch and the curiosity and pleasure aroused by the natural world, including dabbling his feet in a cool stream, emphasise this distance that has been created, perhaps unintentionally, between Priam and nature. Hence, Malouf suggests that, through his ceremonial role as king, Priam has lost touch with nature and the natural world.

Perhaps more importantly, however, Priam has unwittingly become estranged from his own family. Despite having played a formal and symbolic role in the life of each of his children, Priam has none of the present and raw feeling described by Somax. While Somax, who is neither a warrior nor a prince, is able to describe the joy of having a child and the pain of losing one, Priam has few memories of his children. Following Somax’ story of lashing out at his son in a moment of fury, Priam realises that such an act of violent intimacy was hardly within his comprehension, and thus begins to recognise the physical and metaphorical divide between himself and his family. Malouf’s portrayal of Somax’ relationships in contrast to Priam’s suggests that the author advocates an emotion and, at times, painful relationship in place of a formal and distant one.

With help from Somax, Priam slowly becomes aware of his true morality and connection with the ordinary man. Somax’ gentle, prattling tales of his daughter-in-law cooking griddlecakes help Priam to understand what it means to love one’s family. Malouf uses religious imagery to demonstrate Priam’s ‘rebirth’ as an ordinary man. The simple act of cooling his feet in the stream is perhaps intended to evoke images of baptism and of the beginning of a new life. Furthermore, as Priam [breaks] bread with Achilles, we are reminded of communion and of Priam’s renewal of himself as a man. The fact that Malouf uses religious imagery suggests that the author approves of Priam’s transformation from a king to simply being a man. Thus, in the aftermath of Hector’s ransom, Priam is depicted as having stepped away from his role as king and become a man, at least in terms of his inner self, like the common people.

Malouf goes on to highlight how Priam is also simply a man in the more physical sense. While Priam’s role as King protected him from aging in the perception of the public, the title can do nothing to prevent his physical aging. At the beginning of the novel, Priam has not yet taken on the lighter burden of simply being a man; however, Malouf describes in some detail his frail and aging body. What’s more, in the final pages of the novel, Priam’s messy death is described in detail. Despite having lived a life of symbolism and detachment from the common people, his death is no less real than anyone else’s. In fact, Malouf does not spare us a perhaps unwelcome description of the stench of shit that fills the air as Priam takes his final breaths. Hence, Malouf demonstrates that no matter how high his ceremonial role may place him above the ordinary man, he is moral like everyone else and, in the end, simply a man.

While Malouf initially depicts Priam as having conformed to the expectations of his role as King, throughout the novel we see his gradual recognition of his true role as simply a man. Moreover,

Ransom demonstrates that Priam's symbolic role as King in no way estranges him from, at least physically, living and dying like a common man. Thus, Malouf suggests that despite being king, ultimately Priam is simply a man.