

## ENGLISH: *TEXT RESPONSE*

**Malouf states that the 'primary interest' of Ransom is in storytelling. How does Malouf explore the importance of stories through the characters in Ransom?**

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In his reimagining of Homer's Greek epic, *Ransom*, David Malouf places an emphasis on the power of words and the considerable potential of story to share lived experience to which all humanity can relate. Whilst the "primary interest" of *Ransom* – as quoted by Malouf in the afterword – pertains to "storytelling itself" as well as the reasons and motivations as to why stories are told, the Ancient Greek concept of 'mythos' regresses to the epoch of Homer, with *The Iliad* being based on a long tradition of unwritten oral poetry, indeed, essentially, storytelling. The afterword, coupled with Malouf's inclusion of metafiction throughout the novel, informs us that the author's desire to connect his personal experience of growing up during World War 2 with the mythical realm of Ancient Greek literature left him to "put together, in an experimental way ... an already existing world to make something new" – ultimately, to revitalise *The Song of Ilium* for a modern audience. Hence, akin to the way Malouf conveys his sentimental childhood experiences, *Ransom* accentuates the importance of stories through the character's sharing of human experience, as well as through the ability of story to immortalise one's actions and affirm the significance of seemingly ordinary moments in shaping the narrative of our lives.

Two recurring ideas throughout *Ransom* are the Ancient Greek concept of 'kleos' and the power of story – combined to highlight the potential of storytelling to immortalise the actions of an individual. The idea of legacy and "the image that other men will keep of one when they are gone" has long been a part of Ancient Greek literature. As *Ransom* is no exception to this, Malouf highlights the importance of language and reiterates that "words are powerful" being the "agents of what is new" to suggest that storytelling plays a major role in the remembrance of one's actions. Malouf exemplifies this through the character of Priam and his iconoclastic quest to ransom the desecrated body of his son, Hector. Following the Trojan king's acceptance of the ineluctability of fate – that the walls of Troy will soon fall – Malouf asserts the agency of man and reaffirms the role of "chance" through Priam's epiphany – that the tyrannos will approach Achilles "in a wagon drawn by two coal-black mules ... dressed in a plain white robe ... stripped of any signs of kingship or regalia" and appeal to his son's killer "not as a king, but as an ordinary man, a father". Hence, it is this exercise of free will – even despite the royal court's bewilderment and scepticism at his plan – and ability to act in the way of the "new" and "unconventional" that ensures Priam will be "remembered for as long as such stories are told". Moreover, Malouf's emphasis on legacy and suggestion that stories act as proof of lived experience is embodied in Priam's defiance of 'nomos', ensuring the "image that will endure (of him) in the minds of men" will be that of a "living one". Ultimately, Priam desires to be remembered for the imaginative courage he shows throughout his life as opposed to being distinguished by his impending doom, consisting of dogs "gnawing at his skull and misshapen feet and tearing without shame at [his] private parts". Hence, Malouf's comments on Ramona Koval's 'The Book Show' that 'personal reputation and fame can give an afterlife or a degree of mythic status to the individual' perfectly encapsulate the importance of story in immortalising the actions of characters.

Malouf explores stories as lessons in humanity, passed on through the generations in order to reveal the universal connection we hold and what it is we share with one another. As described in the afterword, the concept of stories as a means of conveying personal experience has particular relevance to the author, who during his youth, was able to relate his experience of growing up in the midst of World War 2 with the "Troy story" and connect his teacher's "ancient and fictional war with [his] own". By employing himself as a storyteller in "putting together this and that ... to create something new", Malouf seeks to assert the importance of stories in reiterating the common humanity shared by the characters of Achilles and Priam in particular. Although stereotypically depicted as "the boldest, most ferocious, more unpredictable of the Greeks" and as a great tyrannos respectively, in the greater narrative, Achilles and Priam are both introduced anonymously as "these men" – Malouf stripping down these archetypes in an attempt to emphasise their shared human

connection. Through the voice of the third person omniscient narrator, the author humanises Achilles in the narrative's opening, heightening his vulnerability as he yearns for the "fluidity", "weightlessness" and security offered by his "mother's element" following Patroclus' death, also highlighting his ordinariness later in the text as he "walks awkwardly" – quite unlike a hero – with a "drunken gait". Through the shift in narrative voice to Somax's perspective, Malouf adopts a similar approach in his depiction of the character of Priam. By describing the king as having "sunken and deeply scored cheeks" and "milky pale eyes ... deeply set in their sockets", an emphasis is placed on Priam's exhaustion due to the onerous "obligation" of his role as the symbolic "centre" of Troy, to which "all the roads lead out to distant parts of his kingdom". Nonetheless, perhaps beyond the connection of humanity lies an even deeper relationship pertaining to the paternal – best encapsulated by Priam's epiphany to act "not as a king ... but as a father" in the ransom of his son's body. In the concluding stages of the novel, Priam reminding Achilles of the "sore spot he had long repressed" enables Achilles to relate to Priam over their separation from their son(s), hence, Malouf suggesting that the moral of this story is one's ability to act with empathy and implying that the characters' ability to share their experiences ensures the success of the ransom.

Through the suggestion that seemingly ordinary moments have the potential to shape the narrative of our lives, Malouf explores the ability of stories to immortalise events pertaining to the quotidian. The writer relies heavily upon the use of juxtaposition to contrast the characters of Priam and Somax and emphasises that these "two old men ... belong to such different worlds – the humility of the one, the awkward shyness of the other". Particularly during Priam and Somax's journey through the natural, untarnished world between the city of Troy and the Greek encampment, Somax acts not only as a foil character for the Trojan king but Malouf suggests a reversal of roles through the motif of the child, emphasising that Somax acts as a mentor for the inexperienced Priam who is "like an obedient toddler" in the world outside the "royal sphere". Employing the structural feature of embedded narrative, Somax adopts the role of the storyteller in sharing with Priam personal experiences pertaining to his beloved daughter-in-law "flipping griddlecakes ... very deftly so as to not burn her fingers" and also disclosing the treasured relationship he holds with "all that is left of his blood". This revelation of story allows Priam to realise the "kingly distance" he has kept from his sons – "the actual number ... he could not swear to" – and he finally begins to understand the humanity he has repressed due to the onus of being the "symbolic centre" of his city. The seemingly ordinary dialogue between Priam and Somax in Book 3 has a substantial impact on the narrative of Priam's life, as it allows him to reconcile the duality and come to terms with the internal conflict he has held between his role as tyrannos and the child, Podarces, he once was with "seventy years on his back". Moreover, Malouf employs revitalising imagery to describe the power of the seemingly ordinary natural world in restoring and liberating Priam, best exemplified by the way the "cool clean water ... extends its reviving benefit from his feet to his whole being". This idea of Priam's reawakening is furthered by the writer's emphasis on the auditory sense and use of onomatopoeia in the "racketing shrillness" of cicadas and the "continuous rustling, buzzing and humming" – both contributing to the notion of Priam's revival at a pivotal stage in the storyline of his life. Considering Malouf's accentuation of the common humanity shared by characters, it is perhaps not surprising that Priam's liberation following his experience of the quotidian is mirrored in the character of Achilles, who following the 'ordinary', iconoclastic ransom is "visited by a lightness that is both new and a return" and is greeted by an "instant warmth and energy". Hence, particularly through the celebration of the everyday in the character's journey through the natural world, Malouf reaffirms the role of stories in highlight the significance of ordinary moments in the grander tale of our lives.

Through the characters of Priam, Somax and Achilles in particular, Malouf's revival of The Song of Ilium demonstrates the immense potential of stories in immortalising or offering mythical status to an individual long after they are gone. Nonetheless, perhaps the ultimate purpose of storytelling lies in what Malouf attempts to achieve through his creation of Ransom, namely, being to affirm the pivotal role seemingly ordinary moments play in our lives and accentuate stories as a means of sharing personal experience and connecting with each other on a level that is most human.