

Gladiator Film Summary

Gladiator by Ridley Scott

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Context

Gladiator is the story of the great general, Maximus, whom Emperor Marcus Aurelius wants to trust with the Roman Empire after his death. However, the Emperor's son, Commodus, discovers his father's plans, murders his father, and orders Maximus' death. Little does he know that Maximus escapes and returns home only to find that his family has been murdered. After being picked up by a traveling merchant, Maximus begins his new life as a gladiator.

In the beginning, Maximus was a very half-hearted warrior. He did not care if he lived or died. However, he soon discovered that it was possible to win freedom and fight before the Emperor, now Commodus, by performing well. Maximus chooses to beat all others until finally he and Commodus fight at the Coliseum in Rome. Maximus triumphs over Commodus but neither leaves the sand alive.

Director Ridley Scott really became an important contributor to the film-making business when he directed *Alien* (1979). Although he had directed several other films and television series, *Alien* made a lasting impression on the making of American science fiction films. Later, Scott directed such films as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Legend* (1985), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Scott makes an impact with his superior films because of his focus on making history come to life.

Russell Crowe, the star of the film, plays Maximus, a general whose life falls apart after Emperor Marcus Aurelius' death. Crowe's first big films were *Romper Stomper* (1992) and *The Sum of Us* (1994). After his name and talent became known he also received a major part in *The Quick and the Dead* (1995) starring Sharon Stone and Gene Hackman. Crowe continued on and achieved even greater fame with his spectacular performance in *Gladiator* (2000).

Joaquin Phoenix became an actor when he was young and had roles in such films as *Space Camp* (1986) and *Parenthood* (1989). Later, he returned to acting after the death of his brother, River Phoenix, but *Gladiator* was really his first big break. He realistically captures the role of the evil Commodus. Rather than Commodus being simply a villain, he becomes a complicated character with many hurts and insecurities that he takes out on those around him.

One interesting fact concerning the filming of *Gladiator* is that Oliver Reed, the famous actor who played Proximo, died of a fatal heart attack during filming. After his death there were still quite a few scenes to shoot, so a 3-D CGI mask of Reed's face was created, and the rest of his scenes were filmed partially in the shadows. Oliver Reed made a name for himself in Hollywood in films such as *Oliver!* (1968), *The Three Musketeers* (1974), and *Castaway* (1987).

Gladiator (2000) won four awards at the Oscars for the Best Actor in a Leading Role for Russell Crowe; Best Costume Design for Janty Yates; Best Effects, Visual Effects for John Nelson, Neil Corbould, Tim Burke, and Rob Harvey; Best Sound for Scott Millan,



Bob Beemer, and Ken Weston; and Best Picture for Douglas Wick, David Franzoni, and Branko Lustig.



Summary and Analysis

Gladiator starts when the Roman Empire stretched from Africa to England and contained more than one-quarter of the Earth's population. "In the winter of 180 A.D. Emperor Marcus Aurelius' Twelve-Year campaign against the barbarian tribes in Germania was drawing to an end. Just one final stronghold stands in the way of Roman victory and the promise of peace throughout the Empire." The scene then moves to the hand of a man moving through a field of wheat.

A man watches as a redbird flies away in Germania. The man is a general of the Roman army. One man is still missing and has been missing from several hours, but they hope that the troops will still fight. The man finally returns dead on his horse. The Germanian troops refuse to give up and the Romans continue to fight them. Before the general rides off, he says to his friend "Strength and Honor." The Romans finally close in and take the Germanians as Maximus, the general, shows his great bravery and strength. Marcus Aurelius, the Emperor, watches from behind the troops.

As Commodus and Lucilla travel along the road, they discuss the dying Emperor. Commodus arrives at the battlefields and goes to meet the troops. On the field, Marcus Aurelius talks to Maximus and calls him Rome's greatest general. As his reward, Maximus simply asks to go home. When Commodus arrives, he asks whether he has missed the battle; Aurelius tells him that he has missed the war. Aurelius rejects Commodus' offer of help walking and rides off on his horse. That night the soldiers celebrate.

Commodus tries to convince Maximus to help him save Rome from the politicians. Maximus informs him that he plans to return home as soon as he is released. Commodus also tells him that he has not been forgotten by Lucilla. When Aurelius talks to Lucilla, he says, "If only you were born a man, what a Caesar you would have made." He also tells her that her brother Commodus, who loves her, will need her now more than ever.

The next day Maximus meets with Aurelius. He shows the world that he has created by expanding the Empire, knowing only four years of peace in twenty years as Caesar. The men discuss Rome: what it is, who the men fight for, and Aurelius' impending death. Aurelius tells Maximus that he wants to bring back the great dream that was once Rome. Aurelius asks Maximus to become the Protector of Rome after his death--giving the people back their power and ending the corruption crippling the country. Maximus refuses, but he also realizes that Commodus should not rule. Aurelius asks him to agree by sunset.

Lucilla meets Maximus outside Aurelius' tent and she tries to find out what they discussed inside. She understands that her father favors him and loves him like a son. Maximus asks about the well-being of her son Lucius. Maximus goes and prays to the ancestors as he remembers his family. Later, Aurelius asks Commodus if he is ready to do his duty by stepping down from being Emperor in Maximus' stead. Commodus cries



and says that the only thing he ever wanted was his father's love. Aurelius admits he has failed his son by making him weak and selfish. Then, they embrace and Commodus smothers his father to death.

Maximus is called to Commodus and told that Aurelius is dead. Commodus offers his hand to Maximus, but Maximus walks away. Lucilla comes into the room and slaps Commodus before taking his hand and kissing it, saying "Hail, Caesar." Maximus calls the Senators to meet and tells another that Caesar was killed. However, soldiers walk in and tell him that Commodus has ordered his death and that of his family. As he prepares to die, he grabs the sword from the killer and escapes. Maximus hurries toward home.

Viewers watch in horror as Maximus' family is murdered while he is still on his way home. His son is trampled by the soldiers' horses and his wife is murdered. As he enters his property, Maximus' horse dies and he notices that everything has been burned down as he walks to his home. Falling to his knees, Maximus weeps. Some time later, Maximus is picked up by traveling merchants. He is unconscious and he dreams of strange places and his family until he finally awakes, a captive of the merchants.

A man nearby warns him not to die or he will be fed to the lions. His injuries from his escape are beginning to heal. The merchants eventually sell Maximus and the man who rode with him as gladiators to Proximo, who makes money off the fights. By watching the men fight, Proximo decides who should live and who should die; however, Maximus refuses to fight. While alone, Maximus opens up his old wound and removes the sign of the guard. His friend from the journey tries to convince him to fight.

Before the gladiator match, Proximo talks to the men and tells them that they will all fight. He encourages them to meet their death nobly. The gladiators are attacked as soon as they come out of the passageway and they begin to fight immediately, including Maximus. Finally Maximus and his friend kill their remaining opponent, thrilling the crowd.

In Rome, Commodus returns as Emperor and receives a grand welcome from the people. However, the Senators are skeptical about Commodus' ability to reign. They let him know that the Senate has many things that they need him to consider. First on the agenda is ending the plague among the Greeks in the town. However, Commodus reminds the Senators that the people have been forgotten while the Senate; the elite have thought only of themselves. Lucilla interrupts the argument, takes the list, and tells the Senate that she will be sure everything is managed. Lucilla explains to Commodus that the people care about the idea of the greatness of Rome. Commodus retorts that he will give the people the greatest vision of their lives. He plans to bring the people to the Coliseum for gladiator battles in honor of his father, who ironically enough closed down the gladiator battles.

Proximo watches as Maximus becomes his greatest gladiator by single-handedly killing numerous other warriors. However, Proximo is not satisfied. He wants to be able to use Maximus at the Coliseum in Rome, but the Romans want to be entertained. Proximo



explains that he was once a gladiator, but he won his freedom from the Emperor. Maximus tells him that he too wants to stand in front of the Emperor and Proximo tells him to learn from him - the crowd must love you for you to win your freedom. Maximus tells him that he will win the crowd and Proximo gives him his old armor. As Maximus and Juba talk later, Juba discusses how he longs to see his family. Juba tells him that although his family is waiting on him, Maximus' time to die has not yet come. After a long journey, the gladiators arrive in Rome. Proximo kisses the feet of a statue of Marcus Aurelius and Juba sees the Coliseum with shock, saying, "I didn't know men could build such things." Proximo reminds Maximus to win the crowd.

Also in Rome, Commodus watches Lucius sleep. Commodus believes that bringing back the gladiator battles will help bring Rome back to its greatness. Lucilla gives him tonic and sends him to bed, but he asks her to stay with him because he claims to be afraid of the dark. She refuses and kisses him only on the head when he begs for a kiss.

The streets of Rome are filled with spectators and prostitutes as the games go on inside the Coliseum. Proximo is angry that the Emperor plans to give the people a war and by so doing kill all his gladiators. The gladiators wait in cages and Lucius walks past and notices Maximus. They talk, and the boy says he will cheer for him. Lucius says his father is dead, but he is named after him - Lucius Verus. The men prepare for the battle and are warned not to turn their backs on the Emperor. They are told to "Go, and die with honor!"

The men go out, salute Caesar, and wait for the Battle of Carthage to begin. Maximus and Juba are in the group of Barbarians. He asks if anyone has been in the army, and he tells them all that to live, they must work together against whatever comes out of the tunnels, which turns out to be warriors on chariots. The little group is attacked but those working together are able to stay alive. The crowds watch and cheer as the men die. Finally, Maximus and friends overturn the chariots and kill the other soldiers. Commodus is a little concerned that the battle did not turn out like history, but he asks to meet Maximus, now known as the "Spaniard."

Maximus prepares to quickly kill Commodus, but when Lucius runs out, he changes his mind. He refuses to take off the helmet and says only that his name is Gladiator. Maximus finally reveals himself and claims that he will eventually have his vengeance against Commodus. Commodus wants to kill Maximus, but he has won the love of the crowds so he is allowed to live.

Later, Lucilla and Commodus discuss how Maximus survived and how Lucilla and Maximus hurt one another. Lucilla goes to visit Maximus and tells him that she is scared of her brother both for her life and her son's life. Lucilla tells Maximus that the mob is Rome and right now Maximus controls the mob. She asks Maximus to meet with a Senator to bring about right in Rome. Instead, Maximus tells her to go away and leave him alone. Juba and Maximus talk later and Juba warns Maximus to kill before he is killed.



As he prepares to fight again, Maximus is angry about the way that Commodus is conducting gladiator battles, but Proximo tells him that Marcus Aurelius is dead and things have changed. Commodus tells Lucilla that Maximus will die soon - the deed has already been arranged. Maximus is set against one other gladiator and lions. Maximus kills a lion and defeats the warrior, but he refuses to kill the warrior as commanded by the Caesar. The crowd cheers long and loud. Commodus comes down to talk to Maximus again, but Maximus refuses to kill him. Then, Commodus starts taunting him by saying horrible things about his family when they died; however, Maximus simply walks away and the crowd cheers for him again. As he walks through the crowds, Maximus sees his men and sends word to his troops that he lives.

One of the Senators tries to convince Commodus to kill Maximus, but he refuses to make a martyr of Maximus. They decide to lie still, let their enemies come to them, and then make their move. One of Maximus' men comes to him and tells him that the men would be ready to fight immediately. In the streets, everyone is making fun of Commodus and Maximus' power over him. Maximus' man goes to Lucilla in the street and tells her that Maximus will meet her politician.

Gracchus meets with Maximus. Maximus tells him that he can bring his soldiers back within two days. Maximus says he will return Rome to the people because that's what Marcus Aurelius wanted. Proximo does not believe that killing Commodus is a good idea for his pockets and he does not want to give Maximus his freedom. However, Maximus tells him that Commodus killed Marcus Aurelius.

Commodus and Lucilla talk, and Commodus asks whether she has seen Maximus; she denies that she has. He also tells her that both the Senate and Maximus must bleed so that he can keep power. Commodus is distressed and Lucilla tries to comfort him; however, he tries to sleep with her, but she leaves.

Proximo frees Maximus by the demand of Lucilla. Commodus plans to kill him almost immediately, so she has decided to act immediately. Lucilla tells Maximus that Commodus hates him because she and her father both loved him. She tells him that she has "felt alone all my life except with you." Then the two kiss.

That night, Commodus finds Lucius pretending to be Maximus, "the Savior of Rome." Lucius tells him who told him that title. Lucilla is concerned when she returns home to find that Lucius is spending time with Commodus. In front of Lucius, Commodus questions and threatens Lucilla. He expects Lucilla to tell him everything. Later that night, he demands that Proximo let him in to see Maximus. However, Proximo gives Maximus the keys so that he can escape. Maximus asks others to fight so that he can have a few minutes to escape; they all agree. In the midst of the battle, Maximus tries to escape but is captured. The next morning, Commodus is told that the deed is done. Commodus plans to blackmail Lucilla with Lucius so that he can demand her love.

At the Coliseum, the crowds call for Maximus. Maximus is in chains when Commodus visits him. Commodus says, "The general who became a slave. The slave who became a gladiator. The gladiator who defied an emperor. Striking story! But now, the people



want to know how the story ends. Only a famous death will do. And what could be more glorious than to challenge the Emperor himself in the great arena?" Maximus tells him, "I knew a man once who said, 'Death smiles at us all. All a man can do is smile back.'" Maximus tells him that the man was Commodus' father. Commodus stabs Maximus, but he orders that his armor be put over the wound so that they can fight.

The arena is covered with red rose petals as the games begin. The men take to the sand and prepare to fight even though Maximus is terribly wounded. The crowds cheer for Maximus as he knocks the sword out of Commodus' hand. The soldiers refuse to give Commodus their swords. Rather than killing the Emperor, Maximus drops his sword, but Commodus brings out a dagger. Maximus fights with him hand-to-hand and finally kills him. Maximus then walks away. In his mind, he sees himself going home to his family.

Maximus says, "Quintus! Release my men. Senator Gracchus is to be reinstated. There was a dream that was Rome. It shall be realized. These are the wishes of Marcus Aurelius." Maximus falls to the ground, and Lucilla comes to him when he tells her that Lucius is now safe. Then, he dies.

We see Maximus meet his family, and Lucilla cries over him. Lucilla then turns to Gracchus and says, "Is Rome worth one good man's life? We believed it once. Make us believe it again. He was a soldier of Rome. Honor him." Then, Gracchus and the other warriors carry Maximus out of the Coliseum in honor. Later Juba buries Maximus in the center of the Coliseum, saying, "I will see you again, but not yet. Not yet!"



Characters

Maximus, played by Russell Crowe

Description

Maximus is a popular and powerful general in the Roman army. The Emperor Marcus Aurelius has begun to think of Maximus as a second son, and because his own son is not worthy, Marcus Aurelius wants Maximus to lead Rome after his death.

Maximus at first does not want to take on the challenge of leadership. His greatest goal is to return home to his family whom he misses greatly. His wife and son are all-important to him, and though he loves Rome and the Emperor, he is ready to return to them. However, terrible events cause the death of his family and eventually his own death alone in Rome.

Analysis

Maximus is a strong, brave man whose life is destroyed by the envy of Commodus, the Emperor's son. Marcus Aurelius seems to love Maximus more than Commodus and wants him to become the new emperor. Ironically, Maximus wants only to return to his family, but when Commodus discovers the Emperor's plan, he decides to kill his father the Emperor, Maximus, and Maximus' family.

Through everything Maximus perseveres. At first he wants only to die, but once he discovers that by becoming a popular gladiator he can face and destroy Commodus, Maximus uses all his energy to make it to Rome. He partially wants revenge against Commodus for the deaths of his family and the Emperor, but Maximus also realizes what a terrible ruler Commodus is, and he wants to make sure that Rome will survive.

Commodus, played by Joaquin Phoenix

Description

Commodus is the son of Marcus Aurelius. He is in love with Lucilla who cares nothing for him. Commodus has been jealous of Maximus for years because both Marcus Aurelius and Lucilla love Maximus more than they love Commodus. When he discovers that Marcus Aurelius wants to leave Rome to Maximus, Commodus completely snaps.

Analysis

Commodus suffers from a terrible inferiority complex. Because everyone else seems to love Maximus, Commodus becomes envious and evil in order to try to demand the love of others. We first see Commodus' true colors when he murders Marcus Aurelius for



trying to give Rome to Maximus. Later, we see Commodus demanding Lucilla's love by threatening her son's life. Commodus feels that he can never live up to Maximus, and because he becomes so deceitful and hateful, he never will be able to live up to Maximus' legacy.

Lucilla, played by Connie Nielsen

Description

Lucilla is Commodus' sister and Lucius' mother. She and Maximus at one time had a love affair, but Maximus met and fell in love with his wife. Lucilla is a manipulative woman who uses the men around her to get her way, but she is also a strong woman who is trying to protect her child and her country.

Analysis

Lucilla still loves Maximus after all these years and Commodus is desperately jealous. Lucilla realizes that the only thing that could get in the way of Commodus is her son, Lucius, who is the eventual heir to the throne. Since she fears his death and the state of Rome after Commodus' rule, she convinces Maximus to try to take over the throne. Lucilla may be manipulative and self-serving, but much of her striving is due to her love for her son.

Proximo, played by Oliver Reed

Description

Proximo is an entertainer. He owns slaves who he trains to fight as gladiators. Proximo was once a gladiator himself, but Marcus Aurelius freed him after he put on a good show in Rome.

Analysis

Proximo adores Marcus Aurelius because he granted him his freedom. He recognizes a fiery spirit within Maximus and he seeks to push him to become a great gladiator. Once Proximo tells his story of meeting the Emperor, Maximus becomes a fighter of the people so that he can once again confront Commodus.



Marcus Aurelius, played by Richard Harris

Description

Marcus Aurelius is one of the most powerful and most popular Roman emperors in history. *Gladiator* is loosely based on the true story of Rome at this time although the real Marcus Aurelius wanted his son to become Emperor. However, the Marcus Aurelius in the film realizes wisely that Commodus would be the one to bring an end to the Pax Romana (the Roman Peace), a period of time when Rome experienced no in-fighting.

The Emperor has decided that only one who truly loved peace and loved Rome should take over the country - that person is, in his opinion, Maximus. However, once Commodus discovers the Emperor's plan, he murders the Emperor, Maximus' family, and attempts to murder Maximus as well.

Analysis

Marcus Aurelius is presented as a wise and noble leader. Although he wages war against Germania, he truly hopes that Rome can be at peace not only with itself but also with the surrounding countries. In his great wisdom, he realizes that Maximus is the only person who truly loves the country as he does, who would make wise decisions, and who could control both the Senate and the army. Sadly, Marcus Aurelius dies before he can make his decision public.

Marcus Aurelius is devoted to his country. Although he has lived during a time of war, he wants Maximus to lead Rome through a time of peace and prosperity. All the wars have been fought and as his life comes to an end, Marcus Aurelius realizes that his greatest goal is to leave his country safely in the hands of Maximus.

Gracchus, played by Derek Jacobi

Description

Gracchus is a member of his city who truly loves the ideal of Rome. Gracchus realizes what Commodus will do to the empire and he seeks to stop him by getting Maximus to take over.

Analysis

Gracchus exhibits his true love for the country. Despite all odds, he tries to free Maximus so that he can attack Commodus with the army that is still loyal to Maximus. Sadly, Gracchus is not able to make that happen. Maximus and Commodus both die in the end.



Juba, played by Djimon Hounsou

Description

Juba is Maximus' one true friend after he is taken captive by Proximo. Juba helps care for Maximus after he becomes a slave and the two have a strong bond through their experiences and love for their families.

Analysis

Juba is a kind man who has been taken captive and separated from his family. Juba shows a true friendship with Maximus whereas everyone else wants to use him for their own goals.

Lucius, played by Spencer Treat Clark

Description

Lucius is Lucilla's son. Lucius is around 12 or 13 years old and is caught between the fights and conflicts of the adults. Commodus uses Lucilla's love for him to blackmail her into telling of the plans for Maximus' escape and for demanding her love.

Analysis

Lucius is a young, naïve boy who seems largely unaware of the danger that surrounds him. However, when he finally sits with Commodus while he threatens Lucilla, he seems to begin to understand the danger he is in.



Themes

Perseverance

Throughout the entire film, we see the importance of perseverance to a person's survival in the worst situations. Maximus faces life with a strong-willed perseverance that encourages those around him. Even when things become unbearable and seemingly impossible, Maximus stays strong.

Maximus finds that his Emperor is murdered and then Commodus comes after his life as well. When Maximus tries to return home to protect his family, he finds that they are already dead as well. Once he realizes that he has been taken into slavery, Maximus loses his faith for a while. He fights in the gladiator fights but he despises the spectators who gloat over the deaths of others.

However, once Maximus discovers that he has the opportunity to once again face Commodus, he begins to perform well so that one day he can compete in Rome before the Emperor. Maximus realizes that succeeding as a gladiator is his only chance for revenge against Commodus for the deaths of Marcus Aurelius and his family. In addition, Maximus realizes that the only hope for Rome is to have a better Emperor than Commodus. Maximus remains faithful to his goals throughout the film. His perseverance is to be admired as he stays committed to his goals even when the odds against him seem impossible.

Destructive Power of Jealousy

Commodus is destroyed by jealousy. Commodus harbors jealousy for everyone, but especially for Maximus. Maximus is loved by both Marcus Aurelius and Lucilla while Commodus is held in contempt by both. Over time, Commodus becomes more and more consumed with jealousy for Maximus and the love that he garners from everyone.

Eventually, Commodus jealousy leads him to murder his own father and to kill Maximus and his family. Commodus shows no regret for his actions and seems to blame everyone else for his place in life. He considers himself to be innocent since he does not believe that he was loved as he should have been loved.

Not only does Commodus destroy his family and Maximus' family, but also he begins to destroy the nation. In order to entertain the people, Commodus brings back the degrading sport of gladiator fighting. When he discovers that Maximus is still alive and winning the praise of all the people, Commodus is once again consumed by jealousy. Even his nephew, Lucius adores Maximus, and Commodus cannot deal with the rejection. Finally, he seeks any way possible to kill Maximus and ensure that this time he will die. Although Commodus does kill Maximus, he does not survive to enjoy his victory. Commodus is destroyed, both physically and spiritually, by his own jealousy.



Love of Country

Love of country is an important theme in *Gladiator*. Maximus loves his country almost as much as he loves his family. Although vengeance against Commodus partially motivates Maximus' interest in getting to Rome but so does his love for Rome and for Marcus Aurelius. In Maximus' eyes, Marcus Aurelius was Rome and as much as Maximus hates Commodus for killing his family, he hates him even more for killing the Emperor. By refusing to leave the real reason for the Emperor's death quiet, Maximus continues to stand up for his country.

Gracchus also loved Rome. As a powerful Senator, Gracchus could easily have become extremely corrupt like the other senators, but instead he became the one moral and just senator. Gracchus uses his power to work with Lucilla to keep Commodus from destroying the country. Although their plan fails, Gracchus shows his loyalty to Rome by his actions. Additionally, after Commodus and Maximus die, the viewer realizes that the next person to truly take charge of the country will likely be Gracchus. Although Lucius is in line, he is young, so Gracchus will likely be his mentor and director. The love of country that both Gracchus and Maximus showed will pay off as Gracchus directs Lucius in how to lead the people of Rome.

Style and Cinematography

Gladiator is so much more than an action film. This movie explores the depths of a man's soul from the peak of his career to utter desolation. Maximus is one of the best generals in the army of Marcus Aurelius at first. Then the Emperor wants him to take over ruling the country, but his time of glory is cut short by the murders of the Emperor and his own family. *Gladiator* focuses on Maximus' life, his love, and his dreams.

Gladiator is a long, epic film following Maximus' life. At a time of short movies, *Gladiator* was unique simply due to its length, but the longer time frame allows the story and the characters to become well-developed. Viewers have time to evaluate the characters and see many facets of their different sides. *Gladiator* could have easily turned into a simple historic action picture with little substance; however, the characters are not shallow and the story is allowed to come to life. We see Maximus go from a powerful general to a poor slave, from happy to distraught, and from relatively unknown to the most popular person in Rome. Through all these changes, Maximus' character remains honest and realistic.

Another interesting and unique feature of *Gladiator* is the use of computer technology to enhance the images. The real Coliseum was too small to be used as anything more than a model, so computer animators created a larger than life stadium in which thousands of spectators could sit. Additionally, only a few rows are real people while the rest are created by computer animation. This technique is also used to create vivid, dramatic skies at different times during the film. The sky helps to add to suspense, surprise, and excitement with the diverse and bright colors that were used.



Motifs

Family Feuds

What family doesn't have fights, and what story doesn't consist of some type of family feud? *Gladiator* is no different than any other story, or real life for that matter, as the characters deal with their own family problems in both positive and negative manners.

Marcus Aurelius' family has a lot of very complicated problems: Commodus feels unloved; the Emperor feels he can't trust Commodus; Lucilla is manipulative and controlling. Most of these problems come from the fact that Maximus, an outsider, has always outshone Commodus. Commodus feels that both Marcus Aurelius and Lucilla love Maximus more than they love him.

Commodus' insane jealousy destroys the lives of his whole family. Commodus murders Marcus Aurelius when he realizes that he may not be the next Emperor of Rome. Commodus threatens Lucilla with the death of her son, Lucius, when he believes she is betraying him and trying to make Maximus emperor. Commodus kills Maximus when he gets the chance because of his hatred for him. Finally, at long last, Maximus kills Commodus and puts an end to the terrible family feud. Through the family feud we see the story and the themes more clearly.

Class Distinction

Class distinction is a major issue in *Gladiator*. The Emperor's family and the Senators completely control the country. No one else has a chance to live the "good life" while they are in control. We see that the people of Rome live in poor conditions and thrive on the terrible sport of gladiator fighting as a diversion from their daily lives.

As a gladiator, Maximus has moved from being in one of the highest classes as a beloved general in the military to being the lowest of the low. Slaves such as the gladiators had no rights and they were expected to die for the amusement of others. We see that birth is one of the only ways to change classes, but Proximo found another way - a way that inspired Maximus to keep living.

The one redeeming factor about the class distinctions in Rome was that by virtue and ability, a slave could some day win or buy his freedom. Proximo was given his freedom due to his great performance before Marcus Aurelius. Although Maximus has no hopes of freedom from Commodus, he does realize that by performing well he could meet Commodus again and kill him. Maximus ends up being raised above the class distinctions once again by his great performances that make him even more popular than the Emperor.

Power Struggle

Politics seems to be the issue and cause for an ongoing power struggle. Everyone wants a limited amount of power all for themselves. The same thing happens in Rome. Commodus struggles to gain power over everyone else. At first, he does this by killing his father so that he can keep Maximus from becoming Emperor in his place. Then, he goes on to kill Maximus and his family so that he could ensure his place.

The power struggle continues once Commodus takes over the Empire. He struggles to make the Senators believe that he is serious and powerful. He chooses to give the people what they want - gladiator fights - so that he can win their love when he can't win the Senate's respect.

Commodus struggles for power until his death. Eventually, Maximus becomes more powerful because the people come to love him more than Commodus. To make a point, Commodus agrees to fight Maximus publicly (after mortally wounding Maximus while he was tied up), but Commodus loses his one final struggle for power. We see that a power struggle is nothing more than a simple struggle. You may win for a time, but the glory can't last forever.

Symbols

Sword

Swords are presented everywhere in the film. From the first moments, we see swords being used in the fight against the Germanians. Maximus discusses with a friend how these strange people refuse to give up even though they are already beaten and then he grabs his sword and leads the army into battle once again.

Swords in many ways symbolize power. Whoever has the sword seems to be most powerful. At the beginning of the film, Maximus is the most powerful man as he has the sword and is the Emperor's favorite general. On the other hand, he becomes a slave and must use the sword when he performs as a gladiator. Although he doesn't have power over many people in these scenes, he does have power over those he fights because of his skills.

In the end, Maximus holds his sword longer than Commodus. When Commodus dies, Maximus has all the power for a moment until he also dies from the earlier wound he received from Commodus. Maximus' power lasts only for moments, and we learn that power is fickle and can transfer as often as the swords change hands.

Coliseum

The Coliseum is one of the great examples of architecture in the world. In Rome, the Coliseum was the center of everything, and Rome was the center of the Empire. The Coliseum is the heartbeat of Rome. We first see the great Coliseum as Commodus makes his great entry after he murders his father. He takes great pride in coming in as a conquering hero in a war that he never even fought.

The Coliseum is also symbolic of Maximus' ultimate goal. Once he learns from Proximo that he could meet the Emperor someday, Maximus begins to work toward that goal. He knows that fighting in the Coliseum is the only way that he will ever be able to face Commodus and put an end to the horrors that Commodus has caused.

We see that after Commodus becomes Emperor, the heartbeat of Rome becomes bloody and violent. Rather than fighting wars in far off lands, Commodus wants to remain safe by simply bringing the wars to the people. As gladiator fights and other events go on, the heart of Rome becomes more violent. Maximus finally arrives, though, and puts an end to everything by killing Commodus, achieving his ultimate goal of a peaceful Rome.

Dreams

Maximus' dreams about his family are symbolic of the love for his family. Maximus graciously gives part of his life to the Emperor as a general in the army, but once the fights are over, he prepares to return to his family. However, Commodus wants to hurt Maximus one last time and he has Maximus' family killed.

From that point, Maximus dreams of his family before major events and when he is very ill. After he arrives at his old home, he passes out and is picked up by the slave traders. As they travel, Maximus remains in a stupor and dreams of the family he will never see again. Once he becomes a gladiator, his only goal is to die until he learns that there is the possibility of revenge against Commodus.

Maximus' dreams of his family give him the strength to keep fighting and to seek revenge against Commodus. They also give him strength to try to overthrow Commodus and win back the army. Although Maximus fails, once he kills Commodus his work is over. As he dies, Maximus dreams of his family and goes to meet them in the hereafter.

Essay Questions

What is the relationship between Lucilla and Commodus?

Why does Marcus Aurelius believe that Maximus should lead Rome?

What are Commodus' character flaws?

How do the Senators feel about Commodus?

How does Maximus become a gladiator for Proximo?

What becomes Maximus' goal when he learns he could fight in Rome?

Why does Maximus finally agree to try to overthrow Commodus?

Why does the plan not work?

Describe the final scene between Maximus and Commodus?

After each person dies what is the difference between their treatment? What does this tell you about the way they were perceived by the people?