

The Song of Achilles: A Novel Study Guide

The Song of Achilles: A Novel by Madeline Miller

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Plot Summary

"The Song of Achilles", written by first-time novelist Madeline Miller in 2012, is based on the events preceding the Trojan War and Homer's "The Iliad". Winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction, the novel draws from many sources to present a fresh take on the ancient story.

In a world where Gods, demi-gods and people all live together, "The Song of Achilles" is the love story of Patroclus and Achilles. Both were born the sons of kings, but Patroclus' father exiles him when he is a boy after he accidentally kills a nobleman's son. He is shipped off to be raised by in Phthia, where he meets Achilles, son of the King, Peleus. They are the same age and soon Patroclus becomes the sworn companion of Achilles. They develop an intense bond, despite Achilles' mother's objections. She is a goddess so this is more easily said than done.

When at sixteen years old, they are living in the woods with Chiron, Achilles' teacher, the relationship between them turns physical. Not long later, Achilles is called to war. His mother whisks him away into hiding to protect him but soon he is found. Patroclus joins him in going to Troy. Over the next ten years, they partake in the Trojan War and their fates, and ashes, are sealed in Troy.



Chapters 1-4

Chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1

Patroclus remembers being a young child with his father the king and his mother, who is referred to as simple. Patroclus was also deemed simple, though not quite as severe as his mother. At five years old, he was at the games with his father, watching the runner and holding onto the wreath of leaves for the eventual winner. Patroclus also remembers skipping stones for his mother at the Aegean Sea.

Chapter 2

When he is nine years old, Patroclus is brought by his father to woo Helen, the daughter of the king of Sparta. Patroclus is the least impressive suitor, as the others are much older and many descend from Gods.

Odysseus advises Helen's father that suitors will wage war with him when they are rejected. He proposes that Helen choose instead, and that all suitors must vow to protect the man of Helen's choosing. They all take such a vow, and Helen chooses Menelaus. For Odysseus' cleverness, he is awarded Helen's younger sister.

Patroclus' father is disappointed and never mentions the incident again.

Chapter 3

A nobleman's son demands Patroclus give him his dice. Patroclus refuses and in the ensuing argument, he accidentally kills the boy. The boy's family insists that Patroclus be put to death or exiled. His father the king agrees to exile. Patroclus is sent to be raised by Peleus, the king of Phthia, who is paid for his troubles.

Peleus has one son, Achilles, born of his time with Thetis, a sea nymph bestowed on him by the Gods, who had been his unwilling wife. Achilles is the boy who had won the race witnessed by Patroclus at age five.

At eleven years old, Patroclus is set up to live with the other foster children of Peleus. They are fed very well, though not with meat, which is reserved for royalty. They are trained daily with spears and swords. Patroclus keeps to himself and he is mostly ignored by the other boys. The dead boy visits him nightly in his dreams.

Chapter 4

Achilles joins the foster children at their tables during meals. Patroclus finds these moments to be the highlight of his day. Often, Achilles catches Patroclus staring at him.



One day Achilles sits at the same table as Patroclus and juggles figs, to the delight of the boys. He throws one of the figs to Patroclus.

When the other boys learn why Patroclus is in exile, he keeps his distance from them even further. One day Achilles finds him hiding in a store room. He warns Patroclus that Peleus is thinking of punishing him for missing the morning training sessions. Achilles decides to bring the boy to his lyre lesson so that he can then tell his father the boy had been with him. Patroclus is deeply moved while listening to Achilles play the lyre and sing.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

At five years old, Patroclus watches Achilles win a race. Patroclus' father looks upon Achilles as the perfect example of what a prince should be. Patroclus does not share Achilles' skills, intelligence and strength. He knows he is a let-down to his father.

Patroclus tries to hold onto his dice as a matter of principal. He knows that a nobleman's son would never try to take something from a prince, if the prince were anyone other than him. So he tries to stand up for himself. Unfortunately, the results are tragic.

Patroclus arrives in Phthia with low self-esteem. He is a failure in his father's eyes, he has not successfully been able to stand up for himself, and he has caused the death of a boy- which continues to haunt him. He looks upon Achilles with admiration and anger. He admires Achilles' natural ways; he is not vain or haughty. He resents Achilles for being everything he himself is not. In fact, Patroclus is no longer a prince. But he feels a pull towards Achilles that is powerful. It is clear that Achilles also seems to be drawn to Patroclus.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5

Achilles takes the blame for Patroclus having missed his lessons, and tells his father he has chosen Patroclus to be his Therapon: his brother-in-arms. That night Patroclus moves from his sleeping quarters to share Achilles room. They start to share stories of their lives. At first Patroclus expects to be returned to his regular living quarters, but in time, to his relief, he comes to see this will not happen.

When Achilles was born, a prophecy was made that he would be the best warrior of his generation. For this reason, he does his fighting drills in private. One day, though, he asks Patroclus to come with him. Achilles is faster with his weapons than anyone Patroclus has ever seen. This stirs in him again envy and anger; he challenges Achilles to fight but he will not. He tackles Achilles, hoping to drive him into a fight, but Achilles pins him to the ground. He admits to Achilles there is no one else who fights like that, and he is awash in good feelings towards Achilles once again.

Chapter 6

The friendship between Patroclus and Achilles blossoms. After a year, Patroclus shares what happened when the boy died. Achilles wonders why Patroclus didn't claim self-defense or lie, and Patroclus doesn't have a good answer.

Achilles goes to visit his mother, a sea nymph goddess, during the night and early mornings. One day he tells Patroclus she has asked to see him. When Patroclus meets her, she tells him she wants Achilles to be a god. She seems concerned that Patroclus may have an impact on this but she then realizes that as Patroclus is mortal, he will be dead soon- relative to the eternal lives of the gods. When Patroclus returns and asks Achilles if he wants to be a god, the answer is 'Not yet' and this brings Patroclus comfort.

Chapter 7

Patroclus and Achilles turn 13 years old. The other boys start having nightly visitors- the women who work at the palace- but neither Patroclus nor Achilles take an interest in such things. Patroclus notices a heat stirring in him, though even in his dreams it is not made blatant that he longs for Achilles. One day on the beach, the moment arrives and Patroclus kisses Achilles with passion. The force of his desire startles him and causes him to pull away. Achilles stands and runs away. His mother has witnessed the occurrence, and she emerges from the sea to threaten Patroclus and to tell him Achilles is leaving.



Back in their room, Achilles confirms his mother's words and advises Patroclus he is leaving in the morning to train with a famed teacher.

Chapter 8

Patroclus is at a loss once Achilles is gone. He does not know what to do with himself, and soon he decides to run away. He knows there is little hope of catching up to Achilles on his journey but he is determined to find him. At one point, he does find Achilles, who, it turns out, had stalled continuing into the mountains, hoping that Patroclus would appear.

Achilles' teacher Chiron is eager to get to his home. Chiron is a centaur, a figure with the torso and head of a man and the legs and body of a horse. He suggests the two boys ride on his back for the remainder of the journey, which they do. They arrive at his home, a cave made of crystals. The boys learn that Achilles' mother had advised Chiron to prevent Patroclus from coming along, but after spending time with the boys, Chiron has reached his own conclusion and feels Patroclus is a fine companion for Achilles. He lets the boys stay together.

Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Over the course of the year, the connection between Patroclus and Achilles strengthens. Whereas at first their differing roles - foster child and prince, respectively - were a marked difference, this changes with time. Patroclus feels more and more comfortable, more and more at home with Achilles, without feeling he is unworthy of being a companion to the prince. In fact, the friendship between the boys gives Patroclus a great deal of self-confidence that was lacking before.

Only when Patroclus recognizes his desire for Achilles does he start to get nervous around the prince once again. Yet even for all his nerves, he does reach a moment where he acts on his desires. Patroclus is taken aback by his own actions, and yes, Achilles runs away, yet it seems clear that Achilles did partake in the kiss while it was happening. Patroclus feels he owes the prince an apology yet at this point he is quite unaware of how Achilles feels.

Patroclus has greatly upset Achilles' mother, who does not believe any mortal is good enough for her child, let alone a boy who presumes to kiss him. She ensures the friendship cannot continue by arranging for Achilles to leave the very next morning. Yet Patroclus and Achilles disobey her, as is common with adolescents, despite her status as a goddess. Chiron does not automatically heed her request either. He understands that she comes with the prejudices of her kind, and that it is best if he forms his own, more objective, opinion. This serves the boys well as Chiron finds Patroclus suitable and allows him to stay.



Chapter 9-12

Chapter 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9

Patroclus and Achilles learn much during their time with Chiron. From the basic chores of gathering and hunting for food to first-aid for people and animals, the boys expand their formerly narrow knowledge of the natural world. They learn how to prepare for winter, how to cut a hole in the ice for fishing, how to set broken bones. Thetis checks in from time to time, but after her first arrival, Patroclus learns to stay close to Chiron during her visits with her son.

Achilles asks Chiron to teach them how to fight, but when Chiron sees Achilles' skills, he admits there is nothing Chiron can teach him; Achilles is already the finest warrior of his generation. Chiron is willing to teach Patroclus, but he also points out that being a soldier will not be his greatest strength, and Patroclus desists. Two years pass and the boys turn fifteen.

Chapter 10

On Achilles' sixteenth birthday, Patroclus presents him with figs and a carving he made of a boy playing the lyre. Achilles then has a visit from his mother, and that night he tells Patroclus that his mother cannot see what they do while they are on the mountain. This information is said with much weight. When Patroclus finally turns to face Achilles that night in the bed they share, Achilles is already staring at him, and leans in to kiss him. They share a night of passion and of tenderness.

They do not regret their evening. Their connection blossoms and they take even more pleasure in each other's company. Patroclus is afraid Chiron will not approve, that Peleus will be angry, that Thetis will kill him. Achilles, meanwhile, is confident that he will continue his relationship with Patroclus no matter what Chiron or his parents say.

A visitor arrives telling Achilles his father is summoning him. Achilles and Patroclus prepare to depart. Achilles assures Chiron they will be back in a few days but Chiron is skeptical.

Chapter 11

Achilles and Patroclus return to the palace to find Peleus and Thetis waiting for them. Once everyone in the palace is gathered, Peleus announces his news. Helen has been stolen from her husband by Paris of Troy. Agamemnon is sending armies to take Troy and he has asked Peleus to send a contingent from his kingdom. Peleus has agreed to send whoever who wishes to volunteer for the task. He further announces that those who had been Helen's suitors are called to take up arms to free her, according to the



oath they made. The list of names is familiar to Patroclus and he is thankful his name is written as the son of Menoitius, so nobody knows it is him.

Later Peleus talks to the two boys privately. He hopes Achilles will lead this army but he leaves the decision to Achilles alone. He also asks about Patroclus' obligation but Achilles says he is no longer beholden as he is no longer officially the son of Menoitius. Peleus does not argue the point further. Achilles agrees to meet the men here to speak with him, but he is fairly certain he will not be convinced to go to war.

Chapter 12

When Patroclus awakens the next day and tries to find Achilles, he learns that Thetis took him in the night and left. At first Peleus says he does not know where they are but Patroclus challenges his lie. Soon Peleus gives the name of Scyros, the island where Thetis has taken Achilles. Patroclus demands, and is granted, money so he may follow Achilles. He takes a ship to the island.

When Patroclus approaches the local palace, he is greeted by Deidameia, daughter of King Lycomedes. He asks if she knows of Achilles. She is coy and says she will decide on her answer after dinner. At dinner, she brings in her dancing girls, and soon it is clear that Achilles is disguised as one of the girls. He breaks loose when he sees Patroclus. Deidameia is devastated and goes into hysterics.

Thetis appears and soon all is revealed. Thetis had the girl hide Achilles so he would not have to go to war, and in return for the favor, she finalized a marriage between Deidameia and Achilles. Thetis forced Achilles to consummate the marriage and now Deidameia is pregnant. All of this is news to King Lycomedes, and to Patroclus. Thetis ensures Lycomedes will keep hiding her son, and then she leaves.

At first Patroclus is angered and hurt by the information but Achilles explains he'd had no choice in the matter. Patroclus softens. Achilles swears to Lycomedes that the child will carry Achilles' name. The king then arranges for a room for Patroclus, and Achilles brings him to his room.

Chapter 9-12 Analysis

Patroclus and Achilles spend three years with Chiron. Their learning is not in the form of lessons but rather they learn as life experiences present themselves. They learn what to do when the goats get sick, how to splint bones when Patroclus breaks his arm, and how to set traps so they may catch the evening's dinner. As both had been raised as princes, they'd had no need to learn how to churn butter, make breakfast, or collect berries, so now they are hungry for the knowledge and the work is enjoyable for them.

Patroclus feels a freedom while they are with Chiron that he did not feel at the palace. He had always felt the watchful eyes of the king, the guards, and the other foster boys. He'd always felt criticized and mocked. But here, he has the freedom to leave those insecurities behind. Though Achilles is still a prince, he does not have the traditional

formality of royalty while he is with Chiron, and this is another reason Patroclus feels greater freedom.

Though Patroclus still had longings for Achilles, he'd resisted acting on his feelings, because he thought that Achilles would run away, and further, that Thetis would kill Patroclus. It is only after two years have passed with Chiron that Achilles is bold enough to ask his mother if she watches over him while he is there. He is overwhelmed with her response that she cannot see him. He shares this news with Patroclus, though he leaves it to Patroclus to connect the dots of what this information means for them. Once they cross the line, though, everything opens up. They now both know the feelings are mutual.

It is very difficult for Patroclus to return to the palace, where he will feel stifled again. It is even worse than he thought when he sees Thetis is at the palace as well. It is only once Achilles is missing that Patroclus sheds his inhibitions in order to get the information he needs. He visits Peleus alone, accuses him of lying, and demands money for his journey. This is a part of Patroclus that has not been exercised.

Only when Achilles explains what has happened is it clear to Patroclus that Thetis was not taking Achilles away from him, she was protecting him from going to war. "Not yet" are words she uses, but these are also words Patroclus has used regarding Achilles going into battle. This act of maternal love mirrors Patroclus' own love for Achilles.



Chapters 13-17

Chapters 13-17 Summary

Chapter 13

Patroclus and Achilles stay with Lycomedes and his daughter on the pretense that Patroclus is the husband of Achilles, who is still in disguise as a woman. The four of them share a table at meals, but otherwise Patroclus and Achilles spend their days together. Deidameia is heartbroken; Achilles does not even take note of her, even though she is his wife and carrying his child. Even Patroclus takes pity on her.

One day Deidameia has Patroclus summoned to her room. She says she will be leaving for her confinement. She wonders what Achilles sees in Patroclus; it certainly is not apparent to her. She is very sad and Patroclus is moved by her pain. She indicates she wants to take him to bed. At first he resists but he sees he has little choice in the matter, and he does not want to cause her further pain, so he consents. It is not unpleasant but it is quite a different experience than what he shares with Achilles. Afterwards he is moved to hold Deidameia but she is done with him and has him leave. It is clear that she was looking for solace or a cure that he could not provide.

Chapter 14

Odysseus and Diomedes come to the island. In a clever plan, they ask for the dancing girls, then all hear the warning of imminent danger in the palace, and thereby they draw out Achilles from hiding. They are also aware of Patroclus' presence and the vow he took so long ago. Lycomedes had been warned by Thetis not to have the dancing girls brought out for strangers, so now he is fearful of her wrath.

Chapter 15

Odysseus entreats Achilles to join the war, or he will spread word of his cowardly hiding as a woman. He says Achilles will gain enormous fame, that the gods have said so. If he does not fight, he is destined to be forgotten with time, parked in a corner to grow old. Thetis appears and says the gods have also revealed that if Achilles goes to Troy, he will not return but will die on the battlefield.

That night, Achilles decides to go to war. Patroclus agrees to accompany him. Thetis visits Patroclus to ask him to bring no dishonor to her son. Patroclus asks her when Achilles will die. All she knows is that he will die after Hector, eldest son of the King of Troy, dies.

Achilles warms up to Odysseus while they travel on the ship back to Phthia to collect an army. Achilles asks him for information about the men he will fight beside and against. Patroclus remains less trusting of their new friend.



Odysseus reveals that people know of the intimacy between Achilles and Patroclus. Most boys can engage in such things but they are boys no longer. But Achilles does not care what others think.

Chapter 16

When Achilles returns to Phthia, he is greeted with a hero's welcome. For the next six weeks, preparations are made to set off for war with his army. He is very busy and tries to keep Patroclus close by, but Patroclus moves further and further into the background. He is given a spear sent and carved by Chiron. Achilles decides not to tell his father of the prophecy. With the ships fully loaded, Achilles, Patroclus and their army sets sail.

Chapter 17

Achilles' army gathers with the armies of the other allied kingdoms, in Aulis. Here too he is greeted with a hero's welcome. As he emerges from the ship, he looks bigger, golden. Patroclus realizes that this is the work of Thetis, bringing out the part of Achilles that is of the gods.

Achilles greets the kings but he does not bow to them. He wants to make it clear that he will fight, but that he does not serve Agamemnon.

Chapters 13-17 Analysis

This portion of the tale encompasses Achilles' journey from prince-in-hiding to the greatest Greek warrior. The contrast is extreme. At first he is at one end of the spectrum, posing as a woman to sidestep the perils of war. But ultimately, it is Achilles' choice to take up arms. He is faced with two options- fade into the background for the rest of his life or become the famed warrior who will be the greatest Greek warrior ever to live. Despite his knowledge that the second choice brings him certain death, he cannot bear the thought of obscurity, and he chooses fame and death instead.

Patroclus does not want Achilles to go. He would be happy with a low-key, low-visibility life. But he is careful not to try to sway Achilles in either direction. He lets Achilles know he will support him regardless of whatever his final decision will be. Even Thetis, who was so determined to keep her son from war, now recognizes that the choice must be Achilles' alone.

Achilles is still the too-trusting soul he has always been, and his feelings for Patroclus have not diminished, yet he is willing to firmly plant his feet rather than bow to Agamemnon as he is expected to do. Achilles has always been strong but he is gentle as well. Now he becomes a true leader, setting the boundaries that suit him. He will not be told what to do or what is expected of him. It is also worth noting how much more sympathetic Patroclus is to Deimadeia than Achilles is.



Chapters 18-21

Chapters 18-21 Summary

Chapter 18

The combined armies want to set out for Troy, but the wind doesn't come for two months. Thetis has told Achilles it is because the gods are displeased. Achilles brings this news to Agamemnon, who decides to throw a feast for the gods. Agamemnon also tells Achilles he would like him to marry his daughter. At Odysseus' urging, Achilles agrees, even though he is already married.

When Agamemnon's daughter arrives, she is slaughtered on the spot as a sacrifice to the gods. Achilles and Patroclus are shocked, and Achilles berates himself for not stopping it, though there is no way he could have been able. Angry, Patroclus visits Odysseus to see how this could have happened, but Odysseus is not as unnerved by the ordeal. Athena wanted human sacrifice before sending the men to battle, where they would cause much bloodshed themselves. And then, the wind returns.

Chapter 19

The fleet sets out the next day. They travel by day, and at night they rest at ports along the way. Achilles remains troubled by the death of Agamemnon's daughter.

Soon all of the ships are in line at the shore of Troy. To their surprise, the Trojans are there waiting for them. Achilles makes the first kill, throwing a spear from the ship. Then another. Soon arrows are flying back and forth. Hector, eldest son of Priam King of Troy, soon recognizes the Trojans are outnumbered and they retreat, but Achilles' crew now understands it will not be as easy to take Troy as they had thought.

Chapter 20

The army sets up camp. At the general meeting, Agamemnon determines they will start with raids - raiding the nearby villages and taking the food that had been meant for Troy. This will reduce Troy's supplies and hopefully force their city gates open. Agamemnon gives Achilles one of the key positions in the front line and Achilles is pleased.

Achilles returns from his first raid covered in the blood of others. He is pleased; he has killed twelve men, and it was far easier than he'd thought. Patroclus grapples with his conscience, as he knows these farmers have nothing to do with Paris, who had stolen Helen. He begrudgingly understands though that Achilles is meant to fulfill this role. The raids continue and Priam does not open Troy's gates.

Chapter 21



After a successful raid, the spoils of war are amassed and then distributed according to social positioning. One day a girl with her hands tied is part of the spoils, and Patroclus pleads with Achilles to claim her, which he does. Her name is Briseis. It takes time for Briseis to trust Patroclus, and Achilles keeps his distance, as he had killed the men of her village. Soon Patroclus teaches her Greek and they spend their days together. In time, other girls get distributed as well, and they fill out the campsite with the tasks of daily life. The other girls are subjected to the men who claimed them come evening. The raids continue and still Troy's gates remain closed.

Chapters 18-21 Analysis

It takes a long time to gather so many armies from multiple kingdoms, and finally once the last members are in place, the wind dies. The air is so still that it is clearly not an accident that the wind has ceased. When Achilles shares his mother's assessment, it is easy for the soldiers to believe that the gods have chosen this. Agamemnon's unspeakable sacrifice is done with the best of intentions, but the human sacrifice is something Achilles just cannot bear.

Watching Agamemnon's daughter being murdered is so horrific for Achilles that he starts to doubt if he will be able to kill in battle. But when the time comes, Achilles enjoys his role as soldier and plunderer.

Patroclus is caught in a tough place. He knows the tender, human, gentle Achilles who is not cut out for war and bloodshed. Now, he finds a different Achilles, one who takes pleasure in describing the details of the deaths of his enemies. Patroclus listens, he says, as if these are stories, rather than brutal retelling of the day's actual events. Patroclus must reconcile himself to these two conflicting parts of Achilles. He understands that this is Achilles' destiny, so he does whatever small gestures he can to mitigate the savagery of war.

Encouraging Achilles to claim Briseis is one such gesture. As the camp fills with more girls, Patroclus is no longer alone during the days. Time for him, just like for the girls, is dictated by when the soldiers return from the day's plundering. Yet Patroclus eagerly awaits this moment every day, while the girls dread it.



Chapters 22-25

Chapters 22-25 Summary

Chapter 22

After countless raids, Priam agrees to meet. Odysseus and Helen's husband are selected to meet him. They dine with him, but when they ask for Helen, Priam says that she wants to stay here, and he will continue to protect her. This concludes the attempt at diplomacy.

From that day forth, the army fights the Trojan soldiers on the battlefield. They fight by day and return to their camps at night. At first Patroclus attends every day, but as the days turn into months, he starts to stay away. Achilles is a wonder in battle. Patroclus watches Achilles from time to time and at one point he sees Thetis is present. She does not help her son but she watches him.

Chapter 23

Patroclus now spends his days helping out in the medic's tent while Achilles fights. Two years pass in this way. In the evenings, all gather at the fire for dinner: Patroclus, Achilles, others from Phthia, Briseis and other women who are now under their wing.

Achilles and Patroclus learn from Briseis that Hector's wife, Andromache, who he loves dearly, comes from Cicilia. Achilles pieces things together- it turns out he killed Andromache's father and seven of her eight brothers. Achilles had been keeping his distance from Hector until this point, with the excuse that Hector had never done anything to offend him. But now he knows he has done something to offend Hector.

Chapter 24

After four years of war, the soldiers become restless and many want to return home. They have a standoff with Agamemnon, but Achilles intervenes and inspires the men to stay with the promise of spoils from Troy. Afterwards, work projects are set up to keep the men busy so they will not have time to think of such things again, including the construction of a wall around their compound. By seven years into the war, their camp resembles more of a village; the men have settled in instead of living a temporary existence. The men from the various kingdoms bond as fellow Greek countrymen. Even Patroclus bonds with the men.

One day Thetis warns Achilles that the Gods are angry, and that they need to make a great sacrifice to the god Apollo in order to keep him in their corner. They fulfill this with a sacrifice of a large number of sheep. Thetis also speaks of a prophecy she has heard that the best of the Myrmidons will die within the next two years, but that Achilles will still be alive when it happens.



Patroclus and Briseis exchange knowledge of medicine and the local herbs. One day Briseis kisses Patroclus, and implies she would like to have a child with him. She says that sometimes men have wives and lovers. Patroclus declines but the thought of having a child grows in him. When he mentions this to Achilles, he hears Achilles' jealousy and he backs down.

Chapter 25

One day in the ninth year of battle, when distributing the spoils of the war, Agamemnon claims Chryseis for himself, the daughter of Chryseis, a high priest. Not long afterwards, her father comes to ransom her, with a wealth of gold. Agamemnon shows the high priest disrespect and turns him away, empty-handed. The next day, the plague starts. First it hits the animals, then the soldiers. By the tenth day of the plague, it is clear that no kings or women are targeted. This indicates the disease is sent by a God. Thetis confirms to Achilles that this is the case, as punishment for Agamemnon's actions against the high priest.

Achilles calls a general meeting for everyone in the camp. Agamemnon is unhappy Achilles has dared call a meeting but he cannot shut it down and save face. Achilles suggests bringing their priest forth. Calchas is scared to speak the truth for fear of revenge but Achilles convinces him. Calchas says that Agamemnon must return the girl in order to appease Apollo. Agamemnon does not consent. Achilles does not accept this and they have a standoff. Agamemnon wants Achilles to bow to him, but Achilles reminds Agamemnon that he and the others are kings and princes in their own right, not slaves. Agamemnon says he will take Briseis as recompense for losing Chryseis. Achilles restrains himself from killing the king.

Achilles returns to his tent and Patroclus pleads with Achilles to save Briseis. Achilles refuses. Patroclus breaks the news to her.

Chapters 22-25 Analysis

This segment of the story encompasses nine years of battle. During this time, the soldiers evolve from living a makeshift existence to building a new life. They get married, have children. Achilles and Patroclus go from being teenagers to full adults during this time as well.

Patroclus no longer lives only for Achilles. He develops an interest in medicine and he carves out a niche for himself within the community. The differences between Patroclus and Achilles become more apparent to Patroclus. He heals while Achilles take pleasure in wounding and killing. He knows the names of the people in the camp, their lives, their trials and tribulations. Achilles cannot be bothered even to learn their names. Achilles becomes more and more assertive in his assessment of his worth. He does not think twice to challenge Agamemnon. His vanity and cockiness grow.

Achilles never had to grapple with jealousy before. Learning that Briseis wants to have a child with Patroclus brings him discomfort. When Achilles chooses not to save Briseis, it



is clear even to Patroclus that his reasons are selfish ones. Patroclus is caught off guard by this. Achilles used to be flawless in Patroclus' eyes. Now Patroclus sees Achilles in a new, unfavorable light.



Chapters 26-29

Chapters 26-29 Summary

Chapter 26

Briseis is taken by Agamemnon's guards. Patroclus conveys his anger to Achilles, who only replies that he needs to see his mother. Patroclus is raging with anger. He visits Agamemnon, slits his own wrist to swear with blood the truth of his words, and he convinces Agamemnon that if he beds Briseis, he will lose his kingdom; no man will want to serve a king who takes another man's just spoils of war.

Patroclus is eager to hurt Achilles with the news of what he has done. At first, Achilles is hurt and angry, but Patroclus explains to him that Achilles must be remembered for who he really is, not as a man who would betray his friends in order to have Agamemnon fall. Achilles hears this, and feels bad for what he has done. He says Patroclus is a better man than he is, and he admits he has more to confess.

Chapter 27

When Achilles went to see his mother, they devised a plan whereby Zeus would alter the direction of the war so that the Greeks would lose terribly against the Trojans. Achilles refuses to fight for Agamemnon any longer. The next day, he and the men of his camp do not join the battle.

Chapter 28

Paris sends word that he will accept a duel; whoever wins gets to keep Helen. Helen's husband accepts the challenge, but just as he has Paris on his knees, Paris disappears and Helen's husband is shot with an arrow from a distance. Hector then offers a second duel to make right Paris' deception. Ajax is selected to duel with Hector. After a full day of fighting, the men agree they are equals, shake hands, and call it a day. Back to full-fledged fighting, the Greeks continue to lose. Worse still, another powerful faction joins the Trojans, increasing the size and strength of their army.

Finally, Odysseus and Ajax come to Achilles' tent. They stay for dinner and then they state their offer: if Achilles returns to battle, he will have many riches and Briseis will be returned to him. Achilles refuses to change his mind until Agamemnon apologizes. The Trojans are now less than 1000 paces away from camp, the end is coming.

Patroclus visits Briseis. She is unharmed and adorned in jewels. She tells Patroclus the men in the camp no longer support Achilles in this. She tells Patroclus to be safe.

Chapter 29



It is the next day. Achilles and Patroclus stay together and talk of other things, while they hear the distant cries of battle. Soon, soldiers return on stretchers, and Patroclus lends his help. Then the wall breaks. The Trojans have made it to the beach; they are sitting the ships on fire. Ajax does what he can but soon he is stopped with an arrow through his leg.

Chapters 26-29 Analysis

This is the first time where Patroclus feels anger toward Achilles. They have never had a fight and so this is new territory for them. Patroclus is sure he will never forgive Achilles, but when he sees that remnants of the person he loves still exist, he manages to forgive him.

Achilles is at the height of his pride. His own countrymen are dying all around him and he will not step in to intervene. Even when he is offered riches and the return of Briseis, his pride will not let him cave. Agamemnon is equally proud and stubborn in not apologizing to Achilles. This is a standoff of pride, and many people are dying as a result. The people no longer side with Achilles as they once did. They forget the plague and Achilles' hand in ending it. They only see that he will not lift a finger to save their lives. Patroclus does not beg Achilles to fold. Some soldiers ask him to intervene but he does not.



Chapters 30-33

Chapters 30-33 Summary

Chapter 30

Patroclus finally pleads with Achilles to join the fight, if only for his love for Patroclus. Achilles refuses. Patroclus proposes a plan whereby Patroclus himself will lead their own contingent to battle, and people will think it is Achilles. The Trojans will be so scared they will retreat.

Events unfold exactly as Patroclus predicted. But whereas Achilles made him vow not to soot his spear, engage in battle or leave his chariot, Patroclus does all of the above. And he is convincing as Achilles. Every spear he throws hits its target.

As Patroclus tries to climb the walls of Troy, the god Apollo first gently, and then less gently, removes him and returns him to the ground. The second time, he lands hard. His armor is undone, his helmet is off. It is clear he is only Patroclus. The Trojans are no longer afraid of him. Hector approaches and shoots him with his spear, killing him.

Chapter 31

When the soldiers return with the body, Achilles wants to kill himself, but he does not have his sword with him. He is inconsolable. He learns that Hector killed Patroclus and wants to find him. Agamemnon visits Achilles to settle their differences. He is pleased that Achilles plans to fight the next day.

When Achilles finds Briseis washing Patroclus' body, he demand she leave but she does not. She blames Achilles for this death. She knows Patroclus only went for Achilles, who, she says, only cares for himself.

The next day Achilles hunts Hector down. At one point a river god blocks Achilles' path but he manages to outwit the river god. Finally the two men face each other. Achilles throws his spear to Hector's exposed neck and kills him.

Achilles brings Hector back to his tent. He refuses to return his body to his family for proper burial, despite Thetis' request for him to do so. Thetis is glad Patroclus is dead. She wants Achilles to move on and get back into Apollo's good graces.

Chapter 32

Priam visits Achilles to ask for Hector's body. Achilles listens to the king and agrees to it. He then finally throws Patroclus on a funeral pyre and collects his ashes.



Others come to avenge Hector's death but they all fall at the hands of Achilles, who no longer wears armor and seeks the end. Finally, Paris, with Apollo's help, manages to send an arrow into Achilles' back, killing him and providing his much-wanted relief.

Chapter 33

After Achilles' death and burning, Pyrrhus appears and claims he will take his father's place. People did not know Achilles had a son and they are surprised, but they give him his father's chair. He instructs them to bury his father's ashes with a monument only in Achilles' name. When Briseis suggests to him the bond between Achilles and Patroclus, he kills her.

With Pyrrhus in place, even though he is 12 years old, Troy finally falls, ten years after the start of the war. As the Greeks pack up their camp with their spoils, Odysseus speaks to Pyrrhus to request a proper memorial for Patroclus, whose soul cannot rest until he is properly buried, but Pyrrhus refuses. The Greeks leave Troy, and leave Patroclus' soul behind, that hovers at Achilles' monument.

Thetis often visits Achilles' monument. She is unable to go underground and so has lost her son forever. Patroclus is able to communicate with her. At first he is filled with hate, but over time, he shares stories with her of the Achilles he knew, the one that should be remembered. Thetis adds Patroclus' name to the monument, and Patroclus' soul is released to find peace, and it does, when it finds Achilles' soul waiting for him.

Chapters 30-33 Analysis

Achilles is too blinded by his pride to see how perilous the mission is for Patroclus, and lets him go. Patroclus makes the ultimate sacrifice for the man he loves. He is determined that the Greeks not die unnecessarily and that they still respect Achilles when all is said and done. He saves Achilles from himself, but the price he pays is his life, and Achilles' heartbreak.

Thetis has raised Pyrrhus. She has endowed him with qualities befitting gods, but with no human sympathies. Pyrrhus is without a doubt a great warrior, but Thetis has robbed him of his inheritance of goodness and fairness and deep, deep love.

Thetis, of the Gods, and Patroclus, of men, have always stood at opposite ends of the spectrum on their view points, but one thing they share is their deep love for Achilles. When Thetis finally understands this, she releases Patroclus so her son could be reunited with him.



Characters

Patroclus

In "The Song of Achilles", Patroclus describes the journey of his life from 5 years old until his death. Patroclus is kind, soft. He is perceived as simple and not quite right when he is a child. His father is disappointed in him. Even though he is a prince, other boys push him around. Through his time in Phthia and then on Mount Pelion, Patroclus builds his confidence and self-esteem. It is during this time that he bonds and falls in love with Prince Achilles.

Patroclus is gentle and kind. Though he accidentally kills someone, he would never intentionally hurt another being. There is only one point in the book where Patroclus willingly enters battle, and he gets caught up in the thrill of it. Patroclus is sensitive and tries to mitigate the discomfort and hurt of others who are ignored by Achilles: Deidameia, Briseis. He is interested in medicine.

Achilles

Prince Achilles is the son of Peleus in Phthia and the sea nymph, goddess Thetis. He naturally commands respect, even as a child. People are drawn to him. He is strong, smart, and good. He falls in love with Patroclus and is never ashamed of this. He always insists on Patroclus' presence, no matter what people think.

Achilles at first is not interested in war, but when others appeal to his vanity, he embraces what they say is his destiny. Whereas he starts off a good, fair boy, he develops a pride that becomes his downfall.

Peleus

Peleus is the King of Phthia. Aside from being Achilles' father, he also houses many foster boys who need a place to stay. Patroclus realizes that this in turn will result in a loyal army willing to fight for Peleus. Peleus is known to have been a formidable warrior. He is highly respected and does not get into quarrels.

Thetis

Thetis is a sea nymph. She is a goddess that lives in water. Thetis can appear anywhere she likes except under the earth. Thetis was raped by Peleus and her son Achilles is the result of that rape. The gods then forced her to stay with Perseus for their first year of marriage. Thetis loves her son and she is resentful of humans, Patroclus in particular. She tries to prevent the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus, unsuccessfully.



Thetis is strong and cold. While she has a soft spot for her son, like when she tries to hide him from going to battle, that is her only soft spot, until Pyrrhus is born. She then raises Pyrrhus as she was unable to do for Achilles. She wanted to turn them into gods, but they were mere mortals and both of her sons die.

Chiron

Chiron is highly respected a centaur (half man, half horse) who lives on Mount Pelion. He taught all of the great heroes, and he also teaches Achilles and Patroclus, who live with him for three years. He teaches them medicine and the tasks of daily life.

Deidameia

When Thetis hides Achilles from going to war, she convinces Deidameia to hide him as a woman, and Achilles will marry her. After the wedding she is pregnant, and she is devastated when Patroclus shows up to steal Achilles' attentions. Achilles leaves her behind when he goes to war, and Thetis tells Deidameia that she will take the child when he is born and raise him herself in the sea. At one point, Deidameia plays on Patroclus' sympathies and she seduces him, as revenge for Achilles hurting her.

Odysseus

Odysseus is a respected and wise king, and one of the key players in the Trojan war. He was able to procure the wife of his choice with cleverness, helping the king (her father) avoid conflict. Again he uses his smarts to get Achilles to reveal himself while in hiding. Odysseus is persuasive. He convinces Achilles to go to war on his own account. After the war has ended, Odysseus tries to convince Pyrrhus to let Patroclus' body find peace, but his request is refused.

Agamemnon

King Agamemnon is the general of the war. His brother is Helen's husband, but Agamemnon is the more powerful king and he leads the army. He is sensitive to people questioning his authority and more than once he gets into heated exchanges with Achilles.

Agamemnon at times puts his pride before honor. He is often mean and makes poor choices, like shunning the high priest who tries to ransom his daughter. He is also staunchly religious, so much so that he sacrifices his own daughter to appease the god Athena.

Briseis

Briseis is the first Trojan girl the Greeks take as their own. At Patroclus' urging, Achilles asks to have her, and she is granted to him. She slowly learns their language, and she welcomes and helps settle other girls as they arrive. Patroclus and Briseis become very close, and Briseis develops romantic feelings towards Patroclus. She offers him to have a family and still keep Achilles. In the final standoff between Agamemnon and Achilles, Agamemnon takes Briseis as punishment. It is only at Patroclus' intervention that she is spared from being raped.

Pyrrhus

Achilles' son shows up after his father's death. He is 12 years old and never met his father. He was raised by his goddess grandmother Thetis. He is cold like his mother, and has none of the gentleness found in his father.



Objects/Places

Phthia

Peleus rules over Phthia. It is the kingdom where Patroclus is sent when he is exiled. Patroclus meets Achilles in Phthia and they live there in their youth until they study with Chiron.

Mount Pelion

The centaur Chiron lives on Mount Pelion. Patroclus and Achilles live there for three years with Chiron, learning his ways of medicine and music and of foraging for food. It is remote and quiet, unlike Phthia which is full of activity.

The Sea

Achilles' mother Thetis is a goddess. She is a sea nymph and the sea is her home. She is at the shore when Patroclus first meets her, and later again when he seeks her out. The sea is also the only way to link different kingdoms as they are all on different Islands. When the army makes its voyage to Troy, they spend many days at sea, though they are able to find islands for resting overnight.

The sea is powerful and if Thetis had her way, she would have Achilles join her under the sea to live with her and others of her kind.

Scyros

When Thetis takes Achilles into hiding to protect him from going to war, she brings him to the island of Scyros. It is here where he marries the princess in return for her complicity in hiding Achilles, who is disguised as a woman.

Troy

Priam is the King of Troy. His son Paris has captured Helen and brought her to Troy. Now Helen's husband and former suitors form an army to go to war with Troy and claim it as theirs. Troy is securely walled-in and it is impossible to breach the walls unless the gates open.



Dice

Dice is a common pastime for soldiers and village people. Patroclus stands his ground when a nobleman's son tries to take his dice, and the boy dies as a result of their skirmish.

Achilles' monument

The ashes of Achilles and Patroclus are mingled in an urn, and they are placed on a hill with a monument honoring Achilles. After the Greeks have gone, Patroclus' spirit hovers there. Thetis also visits the monument often.

Pyres

There are many fires in the tale, most of which are to burn dead bodies. The plague is a particularly active time of burning, where usually one body is submitted per fire, here a wealth of bodies are cremated at once.

Lyre

When King Perseus takes in Patroclus as a boy, he is given Patroclus' mother lyre as payment for his troubles. Achilles often plays this lyre and sings.

Armor

Armor is essential in battle. The armor of the time was heavy and laborious to wear, slowing the pace and weighing down soldiers. But the metal breastplates and other pieces saved lives. The armor also hides Patroclus from being discovered, when he is pretending to be Achilles.



Themes

Pride

"The Song of Achilles" is about love, but even more, it is a story about pride. The Trojan war lasts such a long time because neither camp is willing to say 'enough.' Agamemnon is a shining example of how pride can get in the way of victory. He wants to be perceived as the leader. The high priest who seeks his daughter walks away without her because Agamemnon has become too proud.

Achilles does not bow to Agamemnon as all of the other kings have done, because of his pride. Achilles is fiercely proud and he will not bend to anyone. Patroclus is always willing to hide in the background but Achilles will have no such thing. He hides for no one. When Agamemnon takes Briseis, Achilles is more concerned about receiving an apology from him than anything else. His fellow countrymen are dying and Briseis is in Agamemnon's custody, but Achilles feels an apology is in order and he will settle for nothing less. Thetis feeds Achilles' pride. He is the son of a goddess. He can do anything. He is needed by all, and people are nothing without him. He cares not for others; his concern is that others care for him. Finally his pride is his downfall, as he simply refuses to pick up arms to save his army.

Love

Through the ages, the love story of Patroclus and Achilles had never been told until this novel. The Trojan War and the characters have been written of many times, most notably in Homer's "The Iliad". And through these writings, the author perceived a love story that had yet to be told.

Patroclus and Achilles find each other in childhood, and their romance survives all the twists and turns of their tale, even death. Achilles ensures nothing bad happens to Patroclus, and Patroclus does his best to keep Achilles grounded, to be the boy he always was. Patroclus sacrifices himself for this love; he offers it freely. Achilles is devastated by his death and no longer wishes to live himself.

Thetis' love for her son is powerful. She appears when she needs to, and she joins in as a spectator to marvel at his strength and agility. Her love for Achilles keeps him out of harm's way more than once, but also she loves him enough, that in the end, she sends Patroclus' spirit to him, when she had the power to deny it.

Destiny

There are prophecies in the story, and they all come true. This is a world where fates are sealed by gods and people are powerless against this. Achilles does not want to be a warrior but it has been determined that he will be the greatest warrior of all Greeks. It

is Achilles' choice alone to go to war, yet it seems there was really no other option for him.

It is also said that Achilles will die in Troy, following Hector's death. The entire length of the war Achilles knows that he cannot change this fate. Achilles makes an effort to keep Hector alive for the ten years of the war, so that he himself may live. Yet finally, it is Achilles who seeks Hector's death. At this point, he cares not for his own life.



Style

Point of View

Patroclus is the narrator of "The Song of Achilles". Even once he is dead, it is still Patroclus narrating the events. The first-person singular account offers insight into the depth of Patroclus' love for Achilles, his blindness about Achilles, and it allows for glimpses of Achilles that outsiders do not see. Patroclus has insight into events that he shares in the tale.

The power of Patroclus' voice is that it takes the reader as long as it takes Patroclus to see how much Achilles has changed.

Setting

The novel takes place in many islands of Greece and in Troy. Waterways are key as they are the sole mode of transportation between kingdoms.

Phthia is home to Achilles. Mount Pelion is home to Chiron and to the boys while they study with him. Scyros is home to Deidameia and the palace where Achilles hides from those who would send him to war. Troy is the final stop in the novel, where the war rages on for ten years.

Language and Meaning

The language of the book is somewhat formal, reminiscent of days long ago. Patroclus speaks naturally and from his heart, but he depicts scenes of high civility and structure. During the war, each night the sides go home and take a break. Both armies also take days off from writing. Hector and Ajax battle a full day, then shake hands and accept they are equal. This sort of world is not replicated in today's reality, and the language reflects that.

Meaning in this novel is spelled out as it happens. There is no subtlety here. The gods are loud and clear when they want to send a message. The people are sometimes more clever in their diplomacy, as is Achilles when he credits Agamemnon with the idea of summoning the high priest during the plague. But the diplomatic measures are standard fare in this world, and everyone understands exactly what is really happening.

Structure

"The Song of Achilles" is divided into thirty three chapters. The novel is 369 pages and spans twenty two years. At first, Patroclus is five years old, then the story jumps when

he is nine years old, then another jump to twelve years old. At twelve, he leaves his home and is exiled to Phthia. From that point forward, there is no more jumping in time.



Quotes

"Already Odysseus had shown himself too clever by half. Our ragged alliances prevailed only when no man was allowed to be too much more powerful than another." (p. 13)

"He said what he meant; he was puzzled if you did not. Some people might have mistaken this for simplicity. But is it not a sort of genius to cut always to the heart?" (p. 44)

"We were like gods at the dawning of the world, and our joy was so bright we could see nothing else but the other." (P. 103)

"Athena has no child to lose." The words grated from Thetis throat, hung in the air." (p. 166)

"Our men liked conquest; they did not trust a man who was conquered himself." (p. 176)

"Perhaps he simply assumed: a bitterness of habit, of boy after boy trained for music and medicine, and unleashed for murder." (p. 189)

"There were no words to speak to him of how I felt. Our world was one of blood, and the honor it won; only cowards did not fight. For a prince there was no choice. You warred and won, or you warred and died." (p. 220-221)

"It was a strange war. No territory was gained, no prisoners were taken. It was for honor only, man against man." (p. 240)

"I want to shatter the cold mask of stone that has slipped down over the boy I knew." (p. 289)

"He is a man," Apollo says. "Not a god. Shoot him and he will die." (p. 353)



Topics for Discussion

Why is Patroclus' father unhappy with him? Who wins when Patroclus and his father watch the games together? Why does Patroclus' father ultimately exile him?

What happens when Patroclus becomes a suitor to Helen? How old is he at this point? How is the choice of husband made? What binds all of Helen's suitors?

What is Patroclus' daily life like in Phthia before he becomes Achilles' companion? How does Patroclus' daily life change once they are friends? How do they become friends? Why do you think they are drawn to each other?

Does Achilles change over time? If so, how? Does Patroclus change over time? If so, how? In what ways do Patroclus and Achilles take care of each other?

What does Thetis want for her son? What is she willing to do to get it? What is her relationship with Patroclus and how does it evolve over time?

Why do the Greek kings engage in war with Troy? Do they get what they came for?

Why does Agamemnon have his daughter killed? What does Achilles think of this? How do the two men interact? How are the men similar? How do they differ?

What does Patroclus want for Achilles? What does Thetis want for him? What are the forces driving Achilles to go to Troy? Is legacy important in this story, and if so, how?

Why can't Patroclus' soul rest? What needs to happen to fix it? Who tries to fix it? Who fixes it in the end, and why?

Does this story of love and war apply to today's world, and if so, how?