

Tides of War: A Novel of Alcibiades and the Peloponnesian War Study Guide

Tides of War: A Novel of Alcibiades and the Peloponnesian War by Steven Pressfield

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Plot Summary

Tides of War by Steven Pressfield is a historical novel. It is subtitled "A Novel of Alcibiades and the Peloponnesian War", but also follows the story of Polemides, an Athenian soldier. Indeed, Polemides is arguably the central figure of the novel. The structure of the book follows three broad plots. The overarching story is that of the twenty-seven year long conflict between Athens and Sparta, the two greatest cities of Ancient Greece. Within that is the story of Alcibiades, the Athenian general who was never defeated in battle and was the greatest influence on the events of the war. The third is the story of Polemides, the man who assassinated Alcibiades, but had been his friend and comrade during the war.

The story is told through the reminiscences of Jason who defended Polemides. In preparing Polemides' defense, Jason has Polemides tell him the story of his association with Alcibiades. The bulk of the story is relayed through Jason retelling Polemides' story with occasional interjections of his own to fill in gaps in the tale.

The story of the war is that of the greatest struggle in history at the time. The Athenian empire had grown to be a threat to other city-states that were led by Sparta and needed to contain Athens. What began as a minor struggle became a great conflict that defined a generation and ultimately destroyed both Athens and Sparta, breaking up the empire of the former and irrevocably changing the latter beyond all recognition. Sparta is aided by a succession of Athenian disasters including plague, a devastating defeat that bankrupted Athens, and some disastrous decisions from the Athenian government.

Alcibiades is the central figure of the conflict, moving events at key points in the war. He is a brilliant general and politician who is ultimately brought down by his own flaws which include pride and lechery. Alcibiades begins to build his reputation before he comes of age to actively participate in Athenian politics. As a young soldier he seizes control of a losing battle and saves the troops. He surrounds himself with influential people. Alcibiades is central to Athens' preparations for a massive invasion of the key Mediterranean island of Sicily but he is stripped of his generalship and convicted of treason before he can pursue the campaign, a charge of which he is innocent. Condemned to death, Alcibiades flees to Sparta where he sets in motion the policies that ultimately lead to Athens' defeat. After having an affair with the wife of the Spartan king, he is forced to flee. In the wake of Athens' defeat in Sicily, the populace wants to recall Alcibiades, but he is not ready to return. He does take command of the Athenian fleet, however, leading them to a string of victories.

Alcibiades returns in triumph to Athens and is anointed a de facto dictator, but the bankrupt city is unable to sustain his ambitions and within a year he is forced into exile once more. Soon afterwards, Athens is finally defeated by Sparta. Alcibiades is forced to flee from his enemies, but is ultimately captured and killed by Polemides, his friend, who had been hired for the task.



Polemides awaits trial for a murder. It is not the murder of Alcibiades, but of a simple brawl. His arrest has been arranged by the people who hired him to kill Alcibiades. In preparation for his defense, he tells Jason his story. Polemides was present for most of the major events of the war. He was, at times, part of Alcibiades' inner circle. He fought for both sides in the conflict. He lived through the plague and the Sicilian disaster. Polemides life was shaped by the events of the war. He lost two wives and most of his family to the war. Ultimately, he is forced into killing Alcibiades to save his surviving children and his own life. Jason helps him escape the injustice of his impending execution and he lives out his life soldiering alongside his son.



Book I - Against Polemides (Chapters I-V)

Book I - Against Polemides (Chapters I-V) Summary

Tides of War by Steven Pressfield is a historical novel set during the events of the Peloponnesian War, a twenty-seven year conflict between the great city-states of Athens and Sparta in ancient Greece. The novel follows the story of Polemides, a soldier who lived through the greatest events and fought alongside the key figures of the conflict. It is told by Polemides to his legal counsel Jason as he sits in prison, awaiting trial for the assassination of the great Athenian general Alcibiades.

In Chapter I, an unnamed narrator begins daily visits to his ailing grandfather, Jason. He listens to Jason's tales about his life and experiences. Jason had known great men like Socrates, the philosopher and Alcibiades, the general but he confides to his grandson that his thoughts always returned to a man named Polemides, whom he had once defended in a capital trial. Jason had not known Polemides, but the defendant requested that Jason help in preparing his defense. This was at the time when Jason's mentor, Socrates, was imprisoned and awaiting his own execution. As Jason was at the jail in any case, he visited Polemides to listen to his story. The narrator cannot place the name, although it sounds familiar to him. Jason explains to him that Polemides was the man who assassinated Alcibiades.

In Chapter II, Jason continues his explanation of Polemides' role in Alcibiades' death. Polemides had traveled with the professional assassin, Telamon. Polemides had been Alcibiades' friend and his captain of marines. Alcibiades had trusted him implicitly but years later, Polemides had been paid to kill him. Polemides did not deny this to Jason. The matter for which Polemides was on trial, however, was the murder of a man during a brawl some years previously. Jason did not condemn his actions but recognized that he was a product of his environment or a state of almost constant warfare during his adult life.

Chapter III turns the narration over to Polemides, related to the reader by the unnamed narrator via Jason's recollection of the story. Polemides pleads innocence in the matter for which he is on trial, claiming that the death in question was accidental. He does not deny his other crimes, however, including Alcibiades' assassination, only noting that if he is guilty then so is the whole city of Athens, for he only did her bidding.

In Chapter IV, Polemides relates his early history. At ten, he was sent from Athens to Sparta for education. He spent many years there and had almost completed his education when war broke out between Athens and Sparta, and most thought it would be a swift war. In the initial conflict, Polemides' farm was destroyed by the Spartans and he was forced to return home. The Spartan actions in destroying the farms had been excessive and spurred Polemides and his brother to sign up for the Athenian army.



Upon his initial deployment, Polemides' unit is caught in a bad storm and forced to beach at a vulnerable spot where they came under enemy attack. Under an indecisive commander, they are being slaughtered until a young man named Alcibiades takes control and saves them through unconventional and brilliant generalship. When the commander berates Alcibiades, the troops back Alcibiades and kill the commander. Alcibiades ensures that the commander is given credit for the victory and honored as a casualty of the combat. None of those present ever speak the truth about it and the commander's reputation is preserved in death.

In Chapter V, Polemides joins the Athenian army in a siege of the city of Potidea. Polemides found himself out of favor for objecting to the degenerate actions of his commander. He seeks the aid of the popular Alcibiades to revive his military career, in the process meeting Socrates and witnessing a friendly debate between the future philosopher and Alcibiades. Alcibiades pledges to help Polemides, and they part as friends.

Book I - Against Polemides (Chapters I-V) Analysis

The novel is broken up into several 'books,' and this first book sets the conventions of the novel and introduces some of the major characters. The narrative convention of the novel is somewhat complex. An unnamed narrator relates to the reader the memories of Jason, his grandfather. When the events are being directly related by Jason to his grandson, the text is italicized. The bulk of the narrative, however, is Polemides' story, related by Jason to his grandson and by his grandson to the reader. The sections of Polemides' narrative are set in plain text. The reader is frequently reminded, however, by parenthetical and italicized text that Polemides story is coming to the reader third hand. At first glance, this is a needlessly complicated narrative structure. Upon further examination, however, it becomes apparent that the author creates a structure where hearsay and inaccuracies can be relayed as fact. Inconsistencies in stories, particularly from the chaos of war, are commonplace and the history text of the historian Thucydides, from which the author draws the details of this story is itself riddled with hearsay and inconsistency. Pressfield has deliberately chosen a narrative structure that forces the reader to make allowances for any contradictions and unconfirmed events that arise in the narrative.

The initial conflicts of the war are relayed in this section and it is immediately clear that this war is different from the armed conflicts that have come before it. The Spartan response to Athenian aggression against another city is disproportionate. They target civilians in a way that has not previously been seen. Men are driven to enlist that would have been farmers instead of soldiers. War quickly escalates beyond the initial expectations of a short conflict between two powerful states.

The characters introduced in Book I are Polemides, the central character of the book, Alcibiades the central character of the war, and Socrates, who acts as conscience for Alcibiades and, later, the Athenian nation as a whole. Jason acts merely as an observer of events and one who can tie the narrative together where Polemides' story has gaps.



The unnamed narrator's only purpose is to add another layer between the reader and the central characters. He is deliberately unnamed because he serves no purpose in the story and only acts as a narrative construct.



Book II - The Long Walls (Chapters VI-IX)

Book II - The Long Walls (Chapters VI-IX) Summary

Chapter VI initially returns to Jason's narration as he sets the background of the tale more clearly. He explains that Athens was at the height of her power and influence. The great statesman, had been instrumental in leading Athens into a Golden Age. At sea she was the unchallenged power and she was the "cultural and commercial capital of the world" (pg. 39.) Pericles had led a building program of fortified walls to make Athens an impenetrable fortress, but when war broke out he brought an end to Athenian expansion. Having set the scene through Jason, Polemides narrative resumes.

Having served in several campaign, Polemides returns to Athens after suffering a skull injury in a fall. The Athens that he returns to is ravaged by Plague. He resides with his great-aunt Daphne and his sister, Meri. Daphne, sick with worry over the Plague and the war, promises to find him a bride, and soon.

Jason takes up the narrative again in Chapter VII. He relates how Polemides soon married Phoebe. He rarely mentioned her later in life, though Jason surmises this was not due to a lack of affection for her, but rather because of the pain of losing her so young. In the midst of war, Athens was facing a foe it could not fight. The Plague is getting worse.

In Chapter VIII, Polemides relates the progress of the Plague through Athens. His father has a gift for rudimentary healing and keeps notes about the disease and its spread. As the Plague progresses, extensive notes give way to descriptions of death. Noble and commoner alike lose loved ones, anarchy and lawlessness spread. Polemides' wife and infant son sicken and die. His cousin, Simon, disappears, leaving a wife and infant twins behind. Polemides seeks Alcibiades help in finding Simon, only to discover Alcibiades, Simon and others in the midst of an orgy, desperate to escape the horrors of the Plague through debauchery. He chastises Alcibiades and his cousin before storming out. Polemides' father and sister begin to sicken, and he is forced to kill his sister at her request, rather than allow her to die slowly.

In Chapter IX, Polemides' horror continues. His father dies. People begin to ask Polemides to kill the sick and he agrees. When Athens' leader, and Alcibiades' kinsman, Pericles, contracts the Plague, a sober Alcibiades comes to Polemides, wanting to take charge of the chaos that Athens has descended into. He tells Polemides that Pericles was wrong in halting Athens expansion when war broke out and that Athens salvation lies in expanding her empire. He wants Polemides at his side as he begins Athens' recovery. Alcibiades is clearly Athens' future. Even at a relatively young age and in the midst of disaster, he possesses the charisma and drive of a true leader.

Polemides is approached by Telamon, an assassin, who jokingly complains that Polemides is moving in on his work by killing the sick. He offers Polemides training and



work as a mercenary. Polemides does not accept either Alcibiades' offer or Telamon's, but he senses a change in the air. The worst of the Plague has passed.

Book II - The Long Walls (Chapters VI-IX) Analysis

Polemides' character is forged in the horrors of the plague. He witnesses death on a massive scale and becomes a mercy killer, even killing his own flesh and blood. He loses most of his family, leaving him with almost nothing left to lose.

Athens greatest defense against the Spartans is their ability to stay behind the walls and keep the city and its populace safe. This proves, however, to serve as an aid to the spread of the Plague. It is a mark of just how great Athens was that the devastation of the Plague in a time of war does not prove to be their undoing. Despite losing a devastating number of people in the city and descending into anarchy, Athens' empire endures and the city survives. Survival against the odds, as demonstrated by the city-state itself here, becomes a hallmark of the Athenian characters in the book, particularly Polemides who, as stated earlier, builds the core of his character in the devastation of the Plague.

The Alcibiades we have seen up until now shows little signs of becoming the great man he is to be. He is portrayed as a hedonist. Certainly, he is charismatic, and flashes of militaristic brilliance have been shown, but in the face of the plague he shows no leadership. However, Alcibiades is still a young man and in the shadow of the great Pericles. When Pericles begins to sicken, Alcibiades sees the opportunity to step out of his kinsman's shadow and lead. Having experienced the Plague, which he could not battle, he seeks a foe to fight against.



Book III - The First Modern War (Chapters X-XIII)

Book III - The First Modern War (Chapters X-XIII) Summary

In Chapter X, Polemides discusses life as a soldier. His moral code gets him in trouble when he refuses to massacre a group of men deemed enemies of the state. He becomes a mercenary soldier, fighting for pay instead of for a cause. Even during periods of truce, soldiers were hired. During this period, Polemides learns the multitude of skills needed by a soldier for hire and takes up with a woman called Eunice. Eunice is a camp wife and not a wife in the true sense of the word, but a step above the status of camp whore. Camp wives attach to only one man and the mercenaries honor that agreement. Polemides fights for Athens but runs errands for Sparta when hired to do so. During one of these errands he witnesses the Spartan general, Lysander, ordering the death of another Spartan leader and framing Athens. The action is shocking, but by committing the crime, Lysander saves a Spartan ally from falling to Athens through the inaction of the dead man.

In Chapter XI, Polemides relates the decisive battle of Mantinea. A victory for Athens would have destroyed Sparta and ended the conflict. Alcibiades, though not the Athenian general, has grown in stature and plays a vital role in the battle. Though the Athenians take an early advantage, routing one of the flanks of the Spartan army, they ultimately fall to their foes. In the aftermath of the battle, Lysander and Alcibiades meet. Lysander observes how close Athens came to winning and destroying Sparta. They are rivals but have great respect for each other. The surviving Athenians cannot help but admire their victorious foes.

Chapter XII returns to Jason's narrative. Leaving Polemides for a time after hearing the story of Mantinea, Jason encounters an old comrade, Bruise. Bruise offers to help Socrates escape. He also knows of Polemides and is sympathetic to him despite his betrayal of Alcibiades. In Bruise's mind, all of Athens betrayed Alcibiades. Jason collects Polemides' sea chest of documents and keepsakes and examines them for evidence to help his case.

Chapter XIII returns to Polemides' story. He relates the events of the Olympic games in which Alcibiades was triumphant in chariot races. Alcibiades is acclaimed for his multiple victory and his star is in its ascendancy. At Olympus, he meets Telamon and the two of them are summoned to Lysander. Lysander proposes that Alcibiades be assassinated. He suggests that Alcibiades and his ambition is as much a danger to Athens as to Sparta. Polemides rejects the idea, but Lysander suggests that they may revisit the idea in the future.



Book III - The First Modern War (Chapters X-XIII) Analysis

In the early chapters of Book III, we see Polemides as a shell of a man in the aftermath of the Plague. He exists through the duty of a mercenary soldier, the only meaning in his life coming from the source of his next paycheck and the reliance on repeated comrades. He is present at, and on the outskirts, of important events, witnessing Alcibiades and Lysander competing in the realms of diplomacy and war. Polemides does act during this period, but for the reader, his primary role is that of an observer.

Athens nearly prevails in the war, though it is still in its relatively early stages, falling just short of a decisive land victory over the Spartans thanks, in large part, to Alcibiades leadership. Alcibiades is growing in stature. He is a fine speaker and diplomat, a brilliant military leader, though still too young to be appointed general, and his triumphs at the Olympic games only serve to heighten his fame. Lysander is right to fear Alcibiades and recognize that killing him now might be best for everyone, even the Athenians, as Alcibiades' ambition could prove costly to Athens. This foreshadows the disasters that will befall Athens, though their source is not so much Alcibiades' ambition but Athens inability to follow through properly on his vision for his beloved city.

The introduction of Eunice is important, though low key. She will prove to be a key figure in the events of the novel and her importance to Polemides is demonstrated by his comparison of her to his dead wife. However, she is mentioned only in passing at this stage, remaining in the shadows of Polemides life for the time being.



Book III - The First Modern War (Chapters XIV-XVII)

Book III - The First Modern War (Chapters XIV-XVII) Summary

In Chapter XIV, Polemides continues with an account of how he and his brother took to farming. He finds farming to be much harder than soldiering, though Eunice finds it to be more to her liking than being a camp wife. Rumors begin of a fleet being built to invade Sicily and Euryptolemus sends a message to Polemides saying that Alcibiades will command and Polemides and Lion can name their own position in the fleet. Alcibiades himself appears to pitch his cause to the men of Polemides' clan, though he does not hold any authority to do so officially.

The proposed Sicilian campaign is not universally popular. Indeed, Nicias, one of the appointed generals, opposes it. Alcibiades points out the wealth of Sicily and the benefits to taking it to fund the war against Sparta, currently in a period of truce but by no means over. Alcibiades addresses the fear that people have of his own ambition, but protests that he acts for the glory of Athens and makes a case for the building of a great fleet that will outlast himself and benefit Athens.

Chapter XV begins with Polemides explaining Alcibiades' appeal to people, which accounts for much of his success. He has a forceful personality, delivering his case to people with such a genuine conviction that he sways and turns people's opinion of him when they hear him. He has a lisp, which enhances his appeal. His flaw makes him appear more human and relatable. Alcibiades' appearances cause debate, but in the end most fall on his side of the argument. Building on the fleet begins.

Nicias addresses the Athenian assembly. He is set against the Sicilian campaign, and hopes to turn opinion against it with his arguments. Alcibiades answers him and asks him to lay out what Nicias, as the senior commander, requires to ensure a successful campaign. Nicias obliges by listing an outrageously large list of resources, but Alcibiades has judged the populace of Athens better and when they accept Nicias' needs, Alcibiades wins the day.

In Chapter XVI we return to Polemides' own experiences instead of his narrative of events. He fights with Eunice because she wishes them to be properly wed, yet Polemides will not do this. The fight turns violent. She curses him, yet will not leave him. She even bears him another child. Polemides' farm is failing and he is forced, along with Lion, to return to soldiering, abandoning Eunice in the process.

Jason takes up the narrative in Chapter XVII. He details "the mightiest armada ever launched beneath the banner of a single city" (pg. 137.) Only three weeks before the fleet departs, an incident of mass vandalism happens in the city. The statues of Hermes,



placed in front of government buildings and private residences for luck, are defaced en masse. The desecration outrages the citizens of Athens and Alcibiades' political enemies seize on the incident to accuse him of complicity in the crime. Paranoia and hysteria grip Athens as hundreds are accused of taking part in the blasphemy. Alcibiades wishes a swift trial so that he can be free of the matter before the fleet sails, but he is thwarted. Alcibiades is forced to depart for Sicily, to be tried for his part in the vandalism without his presence.

Book III - The First Modern War (Chapters XIV-XVII) Analysis

Politics is addressed throughout these chapters. Alcibiades is shown in his role as a master politician, campaigning personally for his cause and pursuing it in public debate against his opponents. Alcibiades read on the mood of Athens' populace is keen. He is able to manipulate Nicias in open debate because Nicias has misjudged Athens' desire for glory. Nicias, perhaps, argues for the better course of action, but Alcibiades is able to use his charisma and knowledge of the people to push forward his own agenda. When the mass vandalism happens, however, the mood of the city turns in an instant and Alcibiades feels the bite of the fickle citizenry. In the face of bad omens, Alcibiades' political enemies are the ones who are able to manipulate the mood of the populace, leading to Alcibiades leaving for Sicily without conclusion to his troubles at home and with trial awaiting him at which he will be unable to defend himself.

The events of these chapters foreshadow events later in the book, when Alcibiades and others find themselves beholden to the ever shifting mood of the Athenian masses. From this point forward is an implicit criticism of democracy and the problems that are caused by the shifting mood of an ignorant and easily manipulated voting public. The danger of skillful politicians paired with such a populace is ever present in the events of the story.

Another piece of foreshadowing is the mention that the Sicilian expedition is a disaster. The reader now knows as events unfold that the Athenians will fail in Sicily. What remains to be seen is the manner and scope of their defeat.



Book IV - Sicily (Chapters XVIII-XX)

Book IV - Sicily (Chapters XVIII-XX) Summary

Polemides relates, in Chapter XVIII, how only three months later, Alcibiades is recalled to Athens to face charges of impiety, profanity and treason. The profanity charge was the one that concerned Alcibiades, as it caused outrage amongst the populace. He had believed he had managed to have that charge dismissed through a campaign of letters and allies at home, but he discovers at the last minute that the charge was not dropped. Alcibiades and his agents have been double crossed and he has no time left to fix matters. His counselors propose that Alcibiades return to Athens with the fleet at his back and declare himself Athens' leader, but he refuses this counsel, wishing Athens' approval if he is to become their leader. Knowing that the outcome of the trial is likely to have been fixed, he opts to flee.

Chapter XIX shows the Athenian fleet hampered by the loss of its best commander and the driving force behind the Sicilian invasion. Nicias is neither as good a general, nor motivated to pursue the invasion. The fleet retires for the winter without having made much headway. During winter, word reaches the fleet that Alcibiades has sought asylum in Sparta and counsels the Spartans against Athens. It is a dispirited invasion force that returns to battle in the spring. The flow of money through the fleet is uneven, pay is often late and morale plummets.

Polemides' brother, Lion, begins a chronicle of the war, seeing comparisons between Alcibiades and the great hero Achilles, who was also wronged by his state. The war becomes a siege. Inaction increases the discontent of the men. Telamon predicts that the Athenians are doomed to lose, not because of the Sicilians but because Alcibiades will soon move the Spartans to action against the Athenian fleet. He is correct.

In Chapter XX, Telamon's prediction begins to prove true. Sparta sends aid to Syracuse, the Sicilian city being besieged. The aid is not in the form of a fleet or an army, but a general named Gylippus, who quickly reorganizes the defenses of the city, retrains the Syracusan troops in the Spartan style, and turns the tide of the siege. In response, Athens dispatches a second fleet led by Demosthenes. He brings money to pay the troops and instills a new drive in them, but in order for the campaign to succeed a key battle must be won. The Athenians must take the high ground above Syracuse.

Book IV - Sicily (Chapters XVIII-XX) Analysis

The political results of turning against Alcibiades are immediate and disastrous. A campaign begun with drive and a solid plan descends into chaos without Alcibiades. The fleet runs short of money, hopes for a quick victory swiftly fade. Alcibiades feels betrayed by his city and in hurt runs to her enemy. His skills rouse Sparta to action against Athens, making the Athenian situation worse. Militarily, Athens are in a strong



position. They destroy their own victory through political bickering and fear. However, they are already committed to a course of action and thus send a second fleet to try and salvage matters.

Alcibiades defection to Sparta should not be viewed as hatred towards Athens. He does feel betrayed by his countrymen but believes that, through their actions, they have turned against themselves as much as him. He counsels Sparta because he no longer recognizes Athens as the city he loves. He hopes that through causing her defeat in Sicily, he will be able to return Athens to a state which he can mold towards the glory that he feels it deserves.



Book IV - Sicily (Chapters XXI-XXIV)

Book IV - Sicily (Chapters XXI-XXIV) Summary

Polemides tells of the disaster on Epipolae, the heights above Syracuse. The night time battle seems to go well at first for the Athenians. After a long, hard climb up to the heights, under constant attack from the Syracusans, they are on the verge of routing the Syracusan troops. The Spartan general, however, has led them into a trap. As the Athenian army pursue the fleeing enemy, they are flanked by reinforcements and soundly defeated. The defeat is a crushing blow for the Athenian hopes of taking Sicily. Little option is left to them but to return home defeated.

The Athenian situation gets worse in Chapter XXII. Nine thousand men had been lost in the defeat on the heights. The Athenian fleet prepares to return home. Gylippus recruits a second army from the other Sicilian cities. As the Athenian fleet prepares to flee, a lunar eclipse causes panic amongst the Athenians. It is taken as an ill omen and the priests declare that no ship may sail for twenty-seven days.

The delay proves to be the final disaster for the Athenian campaign in Chapter XXIII. Before the twenty-seven days are complete, Gylippus strikes on land and at sea, routing the remnants of the Athenian force. A great battle is fought in the harbor of Syracuse in which the Athenian fleet is all but destroyed. Polemides and Lion survive the rout. Rumor spreads that Alcibiades himself had been fighting against the Athenians.

In Chapter XXIV, the defeated Athenians attempt to flee by land, but are pursued and captured by Gylippus and put to work in the Sicilian quarries. The Athenian leaders are executed and the soldiers are all branded as slaves. They form a community but those identified as potential leaders are routinely rounded up and tortured or executed. Lion is one of these, though his resilience and bravery give Polemides great pride. Lion asks Polemides to continue his chronicle for him. Polemides himself is taken, expecting to be put to death, but instead he is freed by the command of Lysander of Sparta.

Book IV - Sicily (Chapters XXI-XXIV) Analysis

The Spartan disaster is chronicled in full during this section. Missteps at every turn doom the Athenian expedition. The political decisions against Alcibiades hampered the expedition. The poor leadership doomed it. Polemides lays the blame for the defeat on the heights at the feet of the Athenian commanders, including himself. The total rout of the Athenians can be put down to bad luck coupled with superstition. The eclipse stops the flight of the Athenians, giving Gylippus time to organize against them. What would have been a terrible defeat becomes a total disaster. The fleet is utterly destroyed and the Athenian soldiers enslaved. Their leaders are tortured and executed. Nothing could be a clearer definition of the results of the Greek concept of hubris or pride warned against countless times in Greek literature that leads to disaster. It seems that fate

intervenes to save Polemides. It will soon be shown that it was not fate, but connections that proved to be his lifeline.



Book V - Alcibiades in Sparta (Chapters XXV-XXVIII)

Book V - Alcibiades in Sparta (Chapters XXV-XXVIII) Summary

Polemides begins Chapter XXV in poor health, all but broken by his experiences in Sicily. Indeed it takes almost a half year for him to reach Sparta. In the spring, recovered a little, Polemides sees Alcibiades speak to the populace of Sparta. Alcibiades addresses the depth of the calamity to Athens, which is now bankrupt. He offers advice to Sparta on how to ultimately defeat Athens, though he knows they will not like his advice. He proposes that Sparta begin building an empire and embrace money, which is something they have previously despised. He says they must build a proper navy and ally themselves with their old enemies in Persia. He is derided for his counsel, but as ever his personality gives force to his words. Lysander sees the sense in them, but the Spartan elders despair at the world that men like Lysander and Alcibiades are building.

In Chapter XXVI, Polemides learns that it was Alcibiades that saved him from the Sicilian quarries by urging Lysander to have him brought to Sparta. He observes as Lysander and Endius begin to enact Alcibiades' recommendations. When Polemides is recovered, he talks to Alcibiades who wishes to hear about the Sicilian campaign in detail. When Polemides is finished, Alcibiades comments that he has never felt so hated by any man. Polemides thinks that Alcibiades is the loneliest man in the world at this moment. He instructs Polemides to obey Lysander when he is summoned. Lysander tells Polemides that he knows Alcibiades will betray Sparta soon and then Alcibiades will find himself wanted dead by Sparta, Athens and Persia. Lysander wants Polemides to keep Alcibiades alive, for now. It suits Lysander's political purpose.

Jason returns to his narrative in Chapter XXVII. At this point in Polemides' tale they are interrupted. Jason's investigators have found Eunice and Jason wishes to interview her. She confirms having witnessed the murder of which Polemides is accused. Jason realizes that Eunice's accusation is what led to Polemides' arrest. Jason fills in the next series of events. Alcibiades helps in bringing some of Athens' tributary states into revolt. He also begins negotiations with the Persians. Most notably, however, he has an affair with the wife of the Spartan king, who bears his child. Before long Alcibiades is under sentence of death from Sparta as well as Athens. The decimated Athenians, however, have come to regret their actions against Alcibiades and popular opinion leans towards calling him home. Eventually, Alcibiades returns to Athenian soil, though not the city itself, and addresses the remnants of the Athenian fleet.

In Chapter XXVIII, Alcibiades tells the men of the fleet that he is not the same man he once was and that Athens is not the same city. He pledges his allegiance to the fleet. He whips the men into battle frenzy and maneuvers himself into a position of commanding



the fleet. Before he returns to Athens, however, he plans to bring the Aegean Sea back under Athenian control. Thus he plans to return to Athens in triumph.

Book V - Alcibiades in Sparta (Chapters XXV-XXVIII) Analysis

In Sparta, Alcibiades cements his place as the most influential figure of the Peloponnesian War. He lays out the destruction of Athens to the Spartans and in the process plants the seeds of the destruction of Sparta. His nature is to plan several steps ahead, but to act in the moment. This seeming paradox leads to staggering events such as his speech to the Spartans. Ultimately, his plan will come to fruition, Athens will fall to Sparta, bringing Alcibiades himself to destruction. In the process Sparta will discard everything that makes them unique amongst the Greek city-states. In bringing down Athens, Sparta will, in effect, become Athens.

Alcibiades' flaws change the course of his plans. Even as he leads Sparta towards the course that will destroy Athens, he has an affair with the wife of the Spartan king. Athens had discarded him and he sought to win her back with the aid of Sparta, but he finds himself condemned by both states. His only option is to win back the hearts of the Athenian navy and through success in war, the Athenian populace. In doing so, he must face the consequences of his own plans to destroy Athens. Alcibiades has woven a complex web that ultimately, he will become trapped in.



Book VI - Victory at Sea (Chapters XXIX-XXXII)

Book VI - Victory at Sea (Chapters XXIX-XXXII) Summary

In Chapter XXIX, Polemides resumes the story. Alcibiades, in control of the Athenian fleet, brings victory upon victory to the Athenians. He wins the hearts and loyalty of his men as he has always done. Alcibiades seems to have lost his appetite for debauchery. He has matured and his appetite is now for victory. He leads by example and demands excellence from his men. It works. He gathers a cavalry to counter the Persian cavalry by treating with the Thracians, who are unmatched in horsemanship. Alcibiades proves so successful that the Spartans send an embassy, led by Endius, to treat with him. His victories go a long way to replenishing the Athenian treasury.

Alcibiades concocts a plan, in Chapter XXX, to ally Athens with Sparta and turn against Persia. He believes that in order to make this work, Athens must continue to win victories and demonstrate their strength. He camps by the tombs of the heroes of Troy and talks of bringing unmatched glory to Athens.

Chapter XXXI begins with Jason relating continued victories and stressing the importance of Polemides' return to Athens. Polemides' tale continues with his dispatch as an unofficial envoy to Endius to relate Alcibiades' plan to conquer Persia. During this period, a string of women have gone through Alcibiades' tent, including Eunice who continues to try and hurt Polemides for refusing to marry her. It is Alcibiades' biggest weakness. He seduces women without knowing or caring if they are attached to another man, even one of his friends. Despite this, his men remain loyal to him.

In Chapter XXXII, Alcibiades has begun a relationship with Timandra. She becomes his partner but they do not wed. Timandra becomes something of a gatekeeper to Alcibiades' presence. She is very intelligent and becomes his confidante as well as his lover.

Polemides reaches Athens but the Spartan embassy has already gone. He catches them and relays Alcibiades message to Endius. Endius sends a response that indicates his agreement with Alcibiades, but that Lysander will not countenance such action as it is not politically expedient for him. Endius notes that Lysander may match Alcibiades in many ways, but he is crueller than Alcibiades, and this is why he will triumph. Polemides returns to the fleet, which continues to win victories, gaining control of the seas once again. At last, the time comes for Alcibiades to return to Athens.



Book VI - Victory at Sea (Chapters XXIX-XXXII) Analysis

Alcibiades' brilliance as a general is demonstrated in this section as he takes a demoralized Athenian fleet and wins victory after victory, reestablishing Athenian dominance on the seas in the process. He realizes the situation that he has put himself in by urging the Spartans to build a fleet and ally with the Persians. Necessity drove him to propose that course of action to Sparta. Necessity drives him to come up with a counter to that plan. He realizes that ending the war with Sparta in favor of an allied Greek assault on Persia would solve his problems with Sparta as well as provide the best opportunity for expanding Athens' glory. Though able to persuade Endius of the wisdom of this plan, he has not reckoned with Lysander. Endius' ascertainment that Lysander matches Alcibiades foreshadows how events will unfold. As Alcibiades is the central figure of the Peloponnesian War and the ultimate downfall of Athens, Lysander is the central actor in the downfall of Alcibiades.

Necessity and pride are the driving forces behind Alcibiades actions and both are on full display here. He realizes the necessity of building morale after the Sicilian disaster. He also sees the necessity of diverting Sparta from the plan he concocted if Athens is to thrive. His pride in himself is not misplaced. He is a brilliant general and he is aware of the consequences of restoring Athenian power and pride. Alcibiades walks a tightrope with his pride, however. It benefits him here but will come to hurt him later as it has before.

Polemides has been relegated to a secondary role in the story since Sicily, but he begins to come to the forefront of events again as he is made an unofficial ambassador by Alcibiades. He has come to serve a unique role in events as he is beholden to both Alcibiades, who has his true loyalty and also to Lysander who he owes his life to. Polemides also recognizes the danger to others inherent in both men.



Book VII - Feeding the Monster (Chapters XXXIII-XXXVII)

Book VII - Feeding the Monster (Chapters XXXIII-XXXVII) Summary

Jason fills in a gap in Polemides' story in Chapter XXXIII. Polemides speaks little to Jason of his second bride, Aureore, but Jason presents letters between them that show how deeply Polemides loved her and how much that love was reciprocated. Peace becomes everything to Polemides as his dearest wish is to return to Athens and settle down with his bride.

In Chapter XXXIV, Polemides resumes his story with Alcibiades' return to Athens. Even before his return, Alcibiades is reelected to the Board of Generals even though his death sentence has not yet been rescinded. Despite his new found popularity, Alcibiades still fears treachery, but his fears are unfounded. He returns to a rapturous welcome. As the consummate politician, he plays the crowd, making them fear that he has not forgiven them before whipping them into a state of frenzied adulation. When an old man speaks out against Alcibiades, the mob lynches him.

Chapter XXXV has Alcibiades returning to the Athenian assembly for the first time since his return. His stock is so high that he is unopposed and adored in everything that he does. People follow him everywhere, everyone denies having been part of the events that exiled him and condemned him to death during the Spartan campaign. Alcibiades is appointed, in effect if not in fact, the dictator in Athens because of the approval of everything he says and does. His companion Euryptolemus is uneasy at this change in attitude from the Athenian populace, but is assured that Athens acted in madness when they condemned Alcibiades and now they are acting with reason.

Alcibiades refuses to officially become dictator in Chapter XXXVI. This action makes him even more popular amongst the populace. He does not wish that position because dictator's, historically, have come to brutal endings when they are overthrown. Once again, he is very aware of the mood changes of a large populace, particularly Athens. Soon enough, his enemies begin to emerge and Alcibiades gathers his closest friends and allies around him. Polemides is assigned to important and difficult tasks. He is deeply entrenched in Alcibiades' inner circle, and increasingly drawn into politics. He is snared in the web of dirty politics when he finds himself accused of treason on a bogus charge. The charge is laid in order to soil Alcibiades by association. Polemides is not the only one to find himself in such a position. Alcibiades instructs him to flee, promising that he would be shielded in time. Alcibiades wants to use Polemides exile from Athens to implant him in Sparta without suspicion. Euryptolemus jokes to Polemides that no man is a true Athenian until exiled and condemned to death.



In Chapter XXXVII, Polemides relates how his own situation had come about in retaliation for Alcibiades proposing his plan for alliance with Sparta against Persia. Alcibiades calls his strategy "feeding the Monster", that is providing the Athenian populace with a goal worth of their glory and status. However, in addressing the plan to his political enemies, Alcibiades proposes that they put the plan forward, not him. In doing so, he puts his enemies in the position of adopting all the risk of the plan, while reserving the glory for himself. In response, his enemies begin to target Alcibiades' friends as they cannot get at him directly with the city firmly behind him. Just as Alcibiades is beginning to enact his plan, however, Persian gold is beginning to pour into Sparta.

Book VII - Feeding the Monster (Chapters XXXIII-XXXVII) Analysis

Book VII is full of political maneuvers on both sides, though Alcibiades remains at the center of events and his political machinations have the weight of popular support behind them. He quickly utilizes the triumph of his return to Athens and increases his popularity with displays of benevolence and the master stroke of refusing the dictatorship of the city when it is offered to him. Alcibiades recognizes the dangers of such a position for himself and for the city. He also realizes that his refusal will boost his popularity further. In Athens, his enemies are powerless against him and thus they turn their attentions to his comrades. Polemides is no politician. He is a soldier and is ill equipped to deal with politics. He has no choice but to trust Alcibiades when it is proposed that he flee to Sparta, though it keeps him from returning to his now-pregnant bride.

Through all of this, Alcibiades is aware of the fickleness of the population. He sees the need to act quickly, while his popularity is at its height. This Athens, that adores him, is the Athens that Alcibiades believes in, but he realizes that he must provide them with glory in order to maintain the state of affairs. He also realizes that defeating Sparta will be nearly impossible, particularly since he has provided Sparta with the blueprint for defeating Athens. In effect, an alliance with Sparta is the only option he has left himself. His own political maneuverings have cornered him more neatly than his enemies could have hoped to do.

The ominous ending to Book VII foreshadows the defeat of Athens, which is not far off. Polemides' exile mirrors the fate of his city. Polemides is left with few options and a reliance on Alcibiades for the ending he seeks. The same is true of Athens. Neither will get their wish.



Book VIII - Thrice Nine Years (Chapters XXXVIII-XLII)

Book VIII - Thrice Nine Years (Chapters XXXVIII-XLII) Summary

Chapter XXXVIII begins with an explanation of the volume of gold that Persia fed into Sparta. This enabled the Spartans to outspend Athens in every area. Sparta is able to offer more money to recruits than Athens can and is never late with their payments. This leads to defections from the Athenian navy, and much higher morale among the Spartans. At this point Jason takes over the narrative relating how Polemides' tale was interrupted by Eunice attempting to burst in to speak to Polemides. Jason presents some documents, written by the younger Pericles, they tell how Lysander refused to be brought into battle on the seas, frustrating the Athenians and draining the Athenian treasury. Alcibiades is skilled at holding together the fleet, but there are limits to even his resources.

In Chapter XXXIX, the story returns to Jason's defense of Polemides. He meets with Eunice, who wishes to speak to Polemides. Jason questions her as to the real motives behind Polemides' arrest and discovers that it was Eunice who set events in motion, and that Polemides knew this. Jason surmises that it was revenge for Polemides discarding her for another woman. Jason asks for a woman's view of Alcibiades and she says that no woman could resist him. Just being in Alcibiades' presence made a woman think of the children she could bear to such a man.

Chapter XL sees Polemides travelling with Telamon into Spartan territory. Alcibiades has sent a message with Polemides to deliver to Lysander. Lysander instructs Polemides and Telamon to be present at Ephesus the following day when Lysander is to deliver a speech. In his speech he will give his final response to Alcibiades. In his speech, Lysander speak strongly against Athens and the danger of her ambitions. He claims that Sparta may not be bold, but they are courageous, a trait that, he claims, Athens lacks. He rejects Alcibiades and asserts Spartan superiority. Alcibiades has his answer.

Alcibiades responds to Lysander's speech in Chapter XLI with an assault on Ephesus. Lysander's answer along with the presence of the Persian prince, Cyrus is too much to pass up. Polemides is injured in the initial assault and misses much of the battle, so Jason turns to Pericles account of the fight. It is a fierce fight in which Alcibiades is badly injured, but continues to fight ferociously, increasing the legend that surrounds him. He almost succeeds in capturing Prince Cyrus and causes vast destruction to Ephesus and its shipyards. Both Lysander and Alcibiades claim victory. Alcibiades because most of his aims are achieved and Lysander because the city is held and the prince escapes.



Jason bridges the gap in Polemides' tale in Chapter XLII. The time for Polemides' wife to give birth comes and goes, but he is unable to return home. In Alcibiades' absence, the mood of the city turns against him. The assault on Ephesus, though claimed as a victory, does not ignite the city's imagination. The lack of money in Athens takes its toll on Alcibiades and his fleet. The fleet begins to crumble. Alcibiades becomes desperate. He loses his hold on the fleet and the city. Eleven months after his triumphant return to Athens, Alcibiades flees into exile once more.

Book VIII - Thrice Nine Years (Chapters XXXVIII-XLII) Analysis

Lysander's rejection of Alcibiades dashes Alcibiades' hopes of turning the situation around. A combination of his own plan, Lysander's tactical leadership and Persian money leads to Alcibiades downfall. He simply cannot afford to continue the war against Sparta. Once again, the fickleness of the Athenian population is shown. In less than a year, Alcibiades goes from Athens' hero to an exile once more.

In an odd narrative decision, the author adds a further voice to the narration of the younger Pericles. Ostensibly, this is because Polemides could not provide an account of the assault on Ephesus and Jason was not there. In practice however, it serves to connect the reader more deeply to Pericles, which heightens the emotional impact of Pericles' tragic fate in the coming chapters.

Lysander's tactical victory over Alcibiades lies in not engaging him militarily. Lysander is astute enough to realize the brilliance of Alcibiades as a general. He also recognizes the Athenian need for victory and glory. By refusing battle, he deprives Athens of her glory and drains her already dry coffers. Sparta, thanks to Alcibiades' plan, can afford to wait out Athens. Alcibiades is successful, in a way. His plan along with Lysander's leadership works. Alcibiades, though unbeaten in war and brilliant politically is brought down by his own machinations and the ever-changing mood of the Athenian populace.



Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters XLIII-XLVI)

Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters XLIII-XLVI) Summary

Jason tells, in Chapter XLIII, how Alcibiades' flight was met with relief in Athens, such had the unease of the population grown at his conduct. To avoid such a concentration of power, ten generals were appointed to command the Athenian fleet. For a time, this seemed to work, so broad was the level of command that political rivalries dispersed. Polemides is, however, left in limbo. Without Alcibiades' protection, he remains under sentence of death and cannot return home.

Polemides resumes his story with an account of his return to his father's farm, at great personal risk to himself. Nonetheless he wanted to see his wife and child. Upon arrival, he is assaulted by his brothers-in-law. They tell him that Aurore is dead, poisoned before she even gave birth to their child. Her brothers blame him, his political connections and his absence for the tragedy and drive him away.

At this point, the beginning of Chapter XLIV, Polemides halts his tale. He tells Jason he no longer wishes to be defended at his trial. Jason is furious and wishes to storm out, but has to wait for the jailer to open the cell. In the meantime Polemides shows him two letters. One from him to his aunt, warning her to flee the city as a Spartan invasion force, including Polemides, was on its way. The second is a reply from her disowning him for his treacherous actions. Jason leaves, passing on his way the instruments of Polemides' coming execution. Jason's detectives come to him later with an eyewitness account of the murder Polemides' is accused of. It tells how Polemides killed the man accidentally while trying to reach Eunice after he had discovered that she had poisoned his pregnant wife.

In Chapter XLV, Polemides' and Eunice's son, Nicolaus, comes to Jason with money to aid in Polemides' defense. Jason takes the boy to his father and the two are reunited. Jason tries to render further aid to Nicolaus, but the boy refuses.

Jason returns to the jail in Chapter XLVI for Socrates' execution. His friends are permitted to stay with him for comfort after he drinks the poison he is condemned to take. While there he visits Polemides who has filed an affidavit of guilt. Polemides asks if Socrates intends to escape, as some of his comrades have arranged. Jason tells him that Socrates is stubborn and will not flee. Socrates values the law even if it will lead to his death. Polemides asks Jason to tell him what Socrates believes about the law and in return he will finish his own tale. Jason does so, recounting how Socrates invoked Jason's own defense of the younger Pericles who, along with the other generals, was executed after defeat at sea. Jason was outraged at the injustice of this act. The generals were not so much condemned for the defeat as their failure to rescue shipwrecked Athenians after the fact. Their rescue attempts were hampered and



ultimately abandoned due to bad weather at sea. Further, and contrary to the law, the generals are tried as a group and not as individuals. Jason mounted a passionate defense of Pericles, pointing out that Athens should not be above their own laws. Socrates uses Jason's own argument to show that he, Socrates, is not above the law either. Though he disagrees with his conviction and sentence, to flee would be to disrespect the law of his city, which he has spent his life defending. Polemides shows Jason that he has a copy of Jason's defense of Pericles. He was given it by Alcibiades. Polemides agrees to complete his tale.

Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters XLIII-XLVI) Analysis

The focus of the story returns from Alcibiades to Polemides in this section. It is mostly narrated by Jason. The only part of Polemides' story of the war is the brief reference to the discovery of his wife's death. At this point in the tale, he decides not to contest his case. Through Jason, the reader discovers that Polemides did kill the man he is accused of murdering, but it was an accident. Nonetheless, Polemides meant murder. His intended victim was Eunice who had killed his wife. Polemides blames himself for his wife's death. It is for this that he is accepting punishment.

Woven into this part of the tale is a lengthy digression in which Socrates explains why he cannot flee his execution. He uses Jason's defense of Pericles to support his argument. Through this it is told that the Athenian generals were all executed after a decisive loss at sea, an important act in the finale of the war. Socrates' argument praises Jason and also reveals why Jason felt he should defend Polemides. Jason represents true justice in the book, though true justice is seldom served.

Polemides holds a copy of Jason's speech in defense of Pericles and it can be surmised that it was this that led to Polemides seeking Jason to defend him. Jason's anger at Polemides dropping his defense is rooted in the fact that he has come to care for Polemides despite his flaws and actions. Throughout the book it has been shown that Polemides is not a villain, but rather a victim of the circumstances of his times.



Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters XLVII-XLIX)

Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters XLVII-XLIX) Summary

Polemides tells of the aftermath of the execution of the Athenian generals in Chapter XLVII. Sparta are incredulous at the actions of the Athenians. In quick succession they had exiled their best general and then put ten good men, including Pericles, to death. The result was a boost in morale for the Spartans and huge desertions from Athens. Athens cobbles together one last fleet, but can't afford a loss, while the Spartans can absorb defeats, backed by Persian gold. Polemides, unable to return to Athens, enlists in the Spartan army. He is paired with Telamon and they are appointed assassins, set to kill Spartan traitors at cities coming back under Spartan control. Polemides has no shame at this work. Indeed, he feels that the condemned are given a better end than if others had been sent to kill them. He views his new profession as an honorable one.

In Chapter XLVIII, Polemides falls out of favor with the Spartans, which is a natural consequence of the nature of his new work. He uses his contacts to get reassigned and is sent north to Alcibiades to assess his situation. Alcibiades has taken up residence in Thrace and, as would be expected, maneuvered himself into a position of power. When he reaches Alcibiades' camp, Endius is there too. Alcibiades has put together a fighting force of thirty thousand men or the largest army west of Persia. He proposes that Polemides and Telamon should help train them with an eye to creating a third power in the area between the Greeks and the Persians. Polemides recognizes the desperate plan of a man whose dreams have been dashed, but again he falls under Alcibiades command. Alcibiades sends him into Macedonia to treat for timber and supplies. In the wake of Athens' final defeat by the Spartan fleet, Alcibiades comes to the Athenians with an offer of troops, but is refused and sent away from Athens for the third and final time.

Chapter XLIX addresses the defeat of the Athenian navy. Lysander, as was his style, put the ultimate victory before any sense of honor, and the final defeat was simply the inevitable end of the war, set in motion years earlier. Alcibiades suffers a serious fall from a horse in Thrace, injuring his back severely. This costs him his Thracian army, as they have no patience for an incapacitated general. Though he recovers from his accident, even winning honors in the Thracian games, his reputation is sufficiently damaged to end his plans for good.

Jason resumes the narrative to fill in gaps in Polemides story. He details the final Athenian defeat. The fleet is caught, beached, and destroyed. The men are executed or sold into slavery. Jason then tells of the Spartan entrance into Athens itself. Amongst the Spartan troops was Polemides who has returned to Spartan service.



Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters XLVII-XLIX) Analysis

This section ties up loose ends of the end of the Peloponnesian War, bringing the tale of the war itself to conclusion. Amidst the end of the Athenian empire, Alcibiades continues to try and be relevant in the great conflict, but his glory days are long past and his attempts desperate and futile. The horse accident that incapacitates him is symbolic of how he has been rendered largely irrelevant to his own countrymen and his enemies. His recovery is symbolic of how he still lays on the minds of a few as a danger while he is still alive.

Polemides becomes rather aimless and returns back to mercenary status. He works for whoever will pay him. He still has some loyalty to Alcibiades, despite all that has happened. He yearns to return to Athens. The only way he can now do so is with a Spartan invasion, so this is the path he takes. Polemides has been stripped of everything dear to him and his actions are those of a survivor, without purpose in life other than his basic needs. One of these needs is to go home.

The defeat of the Athenian fleet is a sorry end to a once great empire. The great tragedy of the whole affair is that it has been largely self-inflicted. Sparta has been the instrument of Athenian failure, but Athens' own actions have done more damage to her than the Spartans ever could have alone. This flaw of Athens on a grand scale is mirrored in the fate of Alcibiades and contrasted against Polemides, whose own fall has been through circumstance. Alcibiades drove events and was taken down by his own pride as much as any other factor. Polemides never wanted to be a mover of events, and so events moved him and swept him away. On every level, the conflict is painted as a no-win situation. Even in victory, the Spartans have sacrificed everything that made them uniquely Spartan and lost their identity to win the war.



Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters L-LIII)

Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters L-LIII) Summary

Upon entering the city, in Chapter L, Polemides makes sure that his aunt, Daphne, is safe and rescues her from the invasion of Athens. She is furious with him for betraying Athens, but consents to go with him and they take up residence together outside the city. In Athens, democracy is abolished, lawlessness rules and people disappear shortly after their names appear on various lists. Telamon comes to recruit Polemides as mercenary once more, telling him that war never truly ends. Polemides declines. He is not ready to return to war. Some time later, his aunt having died, Polemides' name appears on one of the lists. He is captured and led to a room where he is presented with two choices. The first is death, the second a warrant to award his children Athenian citizenship. In order to take the second, he has to do one thing, which is to hunt down and kill Alcibiades.

In Chapter LI, Alcibiades has fled into Persia Polemides is not the only one pursuing him. Spartan agents, Persian agents and a pair of brothers whose sister Alcibiades had slept with also pursue him. His vices have again gotten him into trouble and he is now a fugitive from Athens, Sparta, Thrace and Persia. He has nowhere to run. Polemides catches him with others not far behind. Alcibiades has been fighting. He is naked except for a shield and a weapon and badly burned. His face has been mostly destroyed by fire and he is blinded and near death. Alcibiades begs Polemides to protect Timandra, who has been fleeing with him. Alcibiades asks for Polemides to be the one to kill him. Polemides, regretfully, does so. With this act, Polemides' tale is ended.

Jason resumes his own story in Chapter LII. He is spending Socrates' last day in the philosopher's cell to comfort his mentor in his last hours. He has a terrible dream in which he is being executed for Polemides' crime and awakens with the need to leave the prison. On exiting he spies Eunice and Nicolaus. Jason learns that Eunice was not the instigator of Polemides' arrest. She had been manipulated by others in accusing Polemides. The instigators of the plot were the people who had ordered Alcibiades assassination. They wanted Polemides dead. Polemides had dropped his defense in the case to secure citizenship for Eunice and the children. Jason then meets an acquaintance, Simmias, who had arranged an escape for Socrates but neglected to cancel the plan when Socrates refused. Jason asks Nicolaus to persuade Polemides to escape instead. Polemides agrees, the guards are bribed and thus is Polemides' life saved.

Jason ends the tale in Chapter LIII. He receives letters some years later. They are delivered by Telamon, who reports Polemides' death. He had stepped on an iron spike and been killed by infection. The letters are from Polemides and Nicolaus. Polemides has found a note to his friend, Jason, written two years earlier. Nicolaus asks Jason to keep his father's documents. In those documents, Jason finds a copy of Alcibiades' farewell speech upon leaving Athens for the final time. Telamon also gives Jason a coin.



It is a popular form of currency in Asia and bears the marks of the Athenian owl and a ship. It is called an 'alcibiadic.'

Book IX - Tides of War (Chapters L-LIII) Analysis

The final loose ends of Polemides' fate and the truth behind his arrest are revealed. Polemides meets a happy ending, of sorts. He escapes and serves in the military with his son until his accidental death. Jason's kindness to him leads Nicolaus to make Jason the inheritor of Polemides' documents.

Telamon's appearance is noted in Jason's narrative as being surprisingly youthful. It is an interesting point as Telamon is arguably the one character in the book who always follows his own desires and does not allow other people or events to influence him. The inference is that the key to happiness is to be true to one's own self.

The 'alcibiadic' is representative of Alcibiades' immortality. Though he ultimately died an exile on the run from everyone, nobody shaped the events of the Peloponnesian War like Alcibiades. His influence spread far and wide and it is somehow apt that his fame is represented in an Asian coin rather than a Greek one. His influence spread far beyond Greece and a strong factor in his downfall was money. Thus the coin symbolizes Alcibiades well and the author's mention of it in closing the book leaves the reader with that image.



Characters

Polemides, Pommo

Polemides is the central character of the narrative, if not the story as a whole. It is through his eyes that the reader sees Alcibiades and the war as a whole. Polemides is a soldier, trained in Sparta, but an Athenian citizen. He joins the Athenian army in the aftermath of the war's initial conflict. His ethics and morals at the beginning of the conflict put him at odds with his commanders and lead him to a friendship with Alcibiades, who he turns to for help. Polemides is a simple soul who is swept along by events. He is deeply affected by the loss of his wife and child to the plague. It leads him into a dark period and he turns from desire of a family life back to soldiering to fill the void in his life.

Polemides always returns to soldiering despite periods approaching happiness, when he connects with other people outside of military life. He comes close to true happiness with his second wife, but is thwarted again by war and politics. Polemides is unable to escape his connection to Alcibiades, even when it causes him great personal pain. Even at Alcibiades' end, when Polemides kills him, he does so at Alcibiades' request rather than because he has been hired to do the job. Indeed, Alcibiades had identified him years earlier as the man who would kill him. All along, Alcibiades had realized that Polemides was a man who he could depend upon, and use as it suited him. Polemides character is not strong enough to resist the leaders and events around him.

Polemides is likable precisely because of his simplicity. Jason comes to view him as a friend, despite initially viewing him as a villain. Three women love Polemides during his life because he is, at heart, a good man caught in evil circumstances. He takes pride in his work and yet finds himself ashamed of situations over which he had little control. In the end, Polemides can be seen as a victim of circumstance who lived a hard life, but earned a relatively happy ending by escaping and reconnecting with his son.

Alcibiades

Alcibiades is the key figure of the war and the mover of events in the story. He is a brilliant politician, able to connect on a personal level with people and astute. He reads the mood of large groups with skill and is aware of the inherent shifting of such moods. Alcibiades is a visionary whose vision outstrips the capabilities of those around him to enact. As a general he uses his personal charisma to form an unbreakable bond with his troops and his tactical knowledge is nearly unmatched. He remains undefeated as a general throughout the war, only ending up on the losing side when others are in charge or thwart him from engaging in battle.

For all his brilliance, however, Alcibiades is fatally flawed. He is proud, which leads him to make poor decisions, mostly in his personal life, that impact his political brilliance. He



cannot see that his vision for Athens is one which the city itself is not ready to enact and he is so sure of his own plans that he has difficulty understanding when others will not back him. He is also deeply hedonistic. A seemingly endless string of women come through his bedchamber including the Queen of Sparta. These indiscretions ultimately cause him to be condemned and exiled by all and have no home to call his own. He steals women from his friends and companions, not always consciously and often through a casual disregard for who the women in his bed might be.

His brilliance peaks at times, making him the most influential figure in Greece, but these periods are brief and often followed by long periods of exile or disgrace. Though he is central in shaping the outcome of the war, his flaws ultimately overcome him.

Jason

It is through Jason that the whole tale is related. He relates his recollection of Polemides' tale. Jason is an idealist. A student of Socrates, he is a skilled speaker and debater with a strong sense of justice. Initially skeptical of Polemides, he comes to realize that he must defend to see justice served. Though he comes to like Polemides, he becomes enraged when Polemides drops his defense. Justice is the driving force behind Jason's actions.

Narrator

The narrator is unnamed. He is Jason's grandson and through him, his grandfather's recall of Polemides' tale is given to the reader.

Socrates

Socrates is one of history's greatest philosophers. He was also a soldier who fought alongside Alcibiades. He is condemned for corrupting the youth of Athens and, though he knows he is innocent, submits to Athenian justice, which he has always defended. He is Jason's mentor and was instrumental in developing Jason's sense of justice.

Lion

Lion is Polemides' younger brother. He is an eager soldier, enlisting even before he is old enough. Lion is brave and noble. He also chronicles Alcibiades, recognizing in him the hallmarks of a tragic hero. Lion dies a hero's death, resisitng his captors after being enslaved in the Sicilian quarries.



Daphne

Daphne is Polemides' aunt and a mother figure to him. She arranges his first marriage and acts as something of a moral compass for him. Even when he commits the ultimate betrayal by joining the Spartan army, she threatens to disown him, but is unable to actually do so due to their strong emotional bond.

Simon

Simon is Polemides' cousin. An inexperienced but enthusiastic soldier, he is killed in the Sicilian defeat.

Euryptolemus, Euro

Euryptolemus is one of Alcibiades' closest companions. He tries to be a conscience to Alcibiades and often plays devil's advocate to him, but is rarely able to influence Alcibiades' decisions. Nonetheless he remains loyal.

Lysander

Lysander is also a brilliant general and politician who comes to lead Sparta. He has less honor than Alcibiades and a cruel streak. Ultimately this helps him to defeat Athens. Lysander is more concerned with political advancement and glory than in the people around him. Although he brings victory to Sparta, his policies reduce Sparta to a shadow of its former state.

Eunice

Eunice is Polemides' companion and mother of his children. His "camp wife," Polemides never marries Eunice, much to her fury. She poisons his second wife, sleeps with Alcibiades, and is instrumental in his arrest for murder. All of these acts are for revenge upon him, yet she never stops loving Polemides, and he never stops caring for her.

Endius

Endius is a companion of Lysander. A high ranking Spartan, he comes to agree with Alcibiades on the need to unite Greece, but is not influential enough to deflect Lysander from his purpose of destroying Athens.



Nicias

Nicias is an old Athenian general. Although he disapproves of the Sicilian campaign, he finds himself in charge of it. A less than stellar general, his missteps and lack of enthusiasm contribute greatly to the Athenian defeat. Nicias is killed in Sicily.

Gyllipus

Gyllipus is the Spartan general who engineers Syracuse's victory over Athens in Sicily. A strong tactician, he overwhelms the Athenians and turns Athenian defeat into an absolute disaster for them.

Demosthenes

Demosthenes is an Athenian general who is sent to try and rescue the Sicilian campaign. He is able to lift morale for a time, but is ultimately defeated.

Timandra

Timandra becomes Alcibiades' companion. A remarkably intelligent and beautiful woman, she sticks with Alcibiades until the end.

Aurore

Aurore is Polemides' second wife. They are deeply in love but she is murdered by Eunice, who poisons her while she is pregnant.

Nicolaus

Nicolaus is Polemides' son. They are estranged, but Nicolaus idolizes his father and wants to join the army against his mother's wishes. Nicolaus and Polemides are reconciled. Nicolaus helps Polemides escape and they fight together as soldiers until Polemides death.

Telamon

Telamon is a mercenary and assassin. He is a frequent companion of Polemides and trains him as an assassin. Telamon helps Polemides hunt down Alcibiades. He is the one character in the novel that always follows his own path, regardless of outside influences. Arguably he is also the happiest character in the book and certainly the most honest.

Pericles

The younger Pericles is descended from the great Pericles who led Athens to its height of glory and influence. Pericles is an influential Athenian and his account of events is occasionally used by Jason to fill gaps in the story. Pericles is executed by Athens along with the rest of the generals after defeat in battle.



Objects/Places

Peloponnesian War

This is the twenty-seven year conflict between Athens and Sparta, the two greatest city-states of Ancient Greece. The conflict changed the face of the Ancient world. Sparta was eventually victorious, but changed beyond all recognition in the process.

Parthenon

This is Athens' great temple to Athena, built at the top of the Athenian acropolis. A beautiful temple, it continues to dominate the Athenian skyline even today and is a symbol of how great the city was when it dominated the ancient world.

Persia

The greatest empire of the ancient world, Persia dominated a large part of Asia, stretching from modern day Turkey to modern day India. Frequently at conflict with the Greek city-states, Sparta allied with Persia to defeat Athens in the Peloponnesian War.

Athens

The greatest of the Greek city-states, Athens built a large empire in the 5th Century BC and became the most important cultural and political center of the world at its height. Athens fell to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War but remained an important city. It is known as the birthplace of democracy and is the capital of modern day Greece.

Sparta

Sparta lies in the southern part of Greece. It was an important and militaristic city-state and frequently at odds with Athens over their cultural and political differences. Though ultimately victorious in the conflict with Athens, Sparta became a shadow of her former self in the process.

Olympiad

The ancient Olympiad was the precursor to our modern Olympic games. Consisting of multiple sporting events it was an important cultural and religious festival taking place every four years. It was considered so important that all warfare ceased during the Olympiad.



Corinth

Corinth was another of the Greek city-states, situated between Athens and Sparta at the isthmus in Greece, a narrow slip of land connecting the southern area of Greece, the Peloponnese with the northern part. Sparta dominated the Peloponnese and Athens dominated the rest of the mainland. Corinth was frequently caught in the middle.

Argos

Argos was a Peloponnesian city-state. Home of the legendary bronze age King Agamemnon, who led the Greek army in the Trojan War, Argos was still important in the time of the Peloponnesian War, but no longer at the height of its influence.

Patrae

Guarding the entrance to the Gulf of Patras, Patrae sits at an important tactical site and thus was at the centre of a struggle for control of it by Sparta and Athens. It was a busy commercial hub and today is Greece's third largest metropolitan area.

Achilles

Achilles was the greatest of Bronze Age heroes. The central figure of Homer's Iliad, he was reputed to be Greece's greatest warrior and also its most handsome. Invulnerable apart from a small patch on his right heel, Achilles was killed by the Trojan prince Paris who shot an arrow in his heel. The Iliad tells the story of a period during the Trojan War when Achilles, wronged by King Agamemnon, refused to fight, causing problems for the Greeks. In the story, Lion draws parallels between Achilles and Alcibiades.

Sicily

The largest island in the Mediterranean, Sicily sits at the foot of Italy. In the ancient world, it was a crucial strategic point, providing access to the Italian mainland and dominating trade routes in the Mediterranean. Its largest city, Syracuse, was the focus of the doomed Sicilian campaign during the Peloponnesian War.



Themes

The Perils of Democracy in Wartime

Throughout the novel, the actions of the democratic population of Athens are called into question. The Athenian populace are portrayed as fickle and easily swayed by circumstances and the words of skillful politicians. This portrayal might seem familiar to modern readers living in democracies because, fundamentally, democracy has changed little since ancient times. Politicians still rely on the whim of the voting public while also manipulating that public to the best of their abilities to get support for what they want. In the case of the Peloponnesian War and arguably throughout subsequent wars worldwide, democracy has worked against the interests of a state.

Prolonged warfare takes a toll on a populace, leading a democratic state to vote for change more often than not, even if pursuing the status quo would be a preferable course of action. The democratic population can harm their own state's war effort. In the case of Athens, they acted against their interests on several occasions. Upon approving an expensive, risky, yet probably successful campaign against Sicily, paranoia and panic led to them removing Alcibiades from leadership of the campaign, harming the effort and ultimately leading to defeat in Sicily. Athens love/hate relationship with Alcibiades saw them unable to follow through on Alcibiades proposed courses of action more than once. With the advantage of hindsight, they would have been better to follow his leadership.

Individuals can fall victim to the whim of a democracy. Alcibiades certainly suffers from changing political winds, as do those associated with him. He goes from a beloved and revered figure to a hounded villain, a situation that more than one recent US President can identify with. It is not just Alcibiades that suffers from this phenomenon. A single misstep coupled with an angry population leads to Pericles and his fellow generals being executed.

The inference from this story is that a dictatorship, akin to Lysander's position in Sparta, is better suited to war than a democracy. However the portrayal of Lysander as a cruel and ambitious villain clearly marks the author's disapproval of this state of affairs, however problematic a democracy might be.

Pride and Necessity

Alcibiades speaks frequently of necessity. His actions, he claims, are driven by necessity. He does what he believes needs to be done. Others view his necessity as pride. The difference between the two points of view could be viewed as the difference between a visionary and an ordinary person. Alcibiades sees the world in grand brush strokes. It is in his nature to see glory, not necessarily for himself, but for others as well. He is so smart, skilled, and charismatic that he needs to reach for the stars. Thus, for



Alcibiades, his actions are driven by necessity. On the other hand, others do not need to reach as high as Alcibiades and thus in their eyes he is driven by pride, even arrogance.

From Alcibiades' perspective, those who do not fall under his spell are ordinary, even feeble. He needs to surround himself with those who validate his world view. To others, this seems like he is surrounding himself with sycophants and "yes" men. In the end, it is really a matter of perspective. It is not necessarily that Alcibiades is "better" than others. Rather, he operates in a different way to most. His skills and intelligence elevate him to a position where he is both honored as special and derided as dangerous, but he cannot be otherwise. Necessity dictates that Alcibiades behave in a certain way, no matter how that appears to others.

The message behind this theme is to try and view things from different viewpoints to gain greater understanding of where others might be coming from.

Justice and the Law

The concept of justice permeates the book. Polemides is on trial for murder. Though he did kill the man in question, it was accidental. However, even Polemides views his probable fate as justice because of other acts he has committed but not been tried for. Jason, who represents justice in the book, disagrees. He does not see Polemides' actions as entirely his fault and will not condemn him for them when others walk free.

The pending execution of Socrates also raises questions of justice and it is a sufficiently important theme of the book to warrant a sizable digression whereby Socrates opines on justice, referencing Jason's own arguments on the subject. Socrates refuses to flee despite the injustice of his execution because he separates the concepts of justice and the law. What is considered just may not match up with the interpretation of the law, or in other words, the law is not always just.

Natural justice also plays a part in the novel. The fall of Athens can be seen as the just an inevitable end of their aggressive empire building and unjustified warmongering. The Spartan obsession with destroying Athens leads to them fundamentally changing themselves, and what can be more just than people reaping the consequences of how they act rather than what they profess to believe.

Polemides escape can be viewed as a just end to his case because he is more of a victim than a villain. He deserves a measure of happiness in his life, despite past actions that could be viewed as criminal or even evil because circumstances do affect actions. Despite this, it can be argued that natural justice is finally served for, after his measure of happiness, Polemides ultimately suffers a rather unpleasant death from infection. The law could not deal with Polemides justly, but at least within the confines of the novel, natural justice can and does.



Style

Point of View

The point of view in the novel is complex and varies. Polemides' story is told as if in first person, but relayed through two other voices. Jason's contributions are largely first person, though relayed by one other voice and also include fragments of letters which are first person. This complex point of view leads to an unreliable voice. The authenticity of events and emotions can constantly be called into question as they are filtered through multiple voices.

Dialogue is infrequent, although long passages of rhetoric are often related as speeches relayed to large numbers of people. Focus frequently switches between individuals and the larger event surrounding them. This leads to an often confusing and unfocused narrative which can be difficult to follow.

Setting

The setting is the eastern Mediterranean areas of Greece, Persia, and Thrace as well as the central Mediterranean island of Sicily in the latter part of the 5th Century BC. In particular the city-states of Athens, Sparta, and Syracuse are central to the narrative. The events of the war, however, take the central characters of Polemides all over Greece, Persia, and Italy.

The central conflict of the novel occurs in Sparta and Athens. These two regions are quite different culturally and politically despite both being Greek city-states. Athens is sophisticated and the cultural center of the world. It is also greedy to expand its influence and power. Politically, it is a democratic state. Sparta is still ruled by a king. It has a large population of slaves and prefers an austere and militaristic lifestyle. The two city-states are separated by a relatively small geographical distance, but are culturally worlds apart.

Thrace is an area full of nomadic cultures. They are disparate groups that could be a power if united. The land is somewhat barren and they are superlative horsemen. We see only a little of Persia in the story, but it is a great empire, and an ancient culture. It has a history of conflict with the Greek city-states.

The island of Sicily is similar to Greece in that it consists of multiple city-states. Book IV takes place entirely in Sicily. Syracuse is Sicily's greatest city and the key to its conquest. It has a great harbor and is surrounded by high hills.

Much of the novel also takes place at sea in the confines of the Athenian triremes. These ships make up the bulk of the Athenian fleet and sea battles are an important component of the war.



Language and Meaning

The language of the novel mixes ancient terminology with a contemporary feel and excerpts of actual speeches from the historical events of the war. Pressfield favors Latin spellings rather than Greek of most terms and includes an extensive glossary of the less familiar terminology. The language aids in the reader's understanding of the novel by presenting a more modern feel to many of the descriptions and much of the dialogue. Some of the ancient cultural concepts which do not directly impact the story such as the polytheistic nature of ancient Greek culture are portrayed in terms that are easier to understand for the modern reader.

The characters are clearly defined through their speeches. The more educated characters tend to speak in more flowery language while the common soldiers language can be rough and often very blunt and to the point. Pressfield does a good job of making the voices consistent with existing speeches from the historical events, some of which he utilizes in the story. Despite being from starkly different cultures, most of the characters share a common ancestry, which is reflected in their use of language and contrast sharply with characters from non-Greek backgrounds.

Structure

The novel consists of fifty-three chapters split into nine books. Most of the books consist of four or five chapters of varying lengths. Each book is given a name that describes the main thrust of events in that book. Each chapter is given a title that references a concept or event within that chapter. The chapters in which Polemides relates his story to Jason tend to be long and descriptive. The chapters in which Jason fills in the gaps or takes up the narrative tend to be short and to the point.

The plot of the novel is fairly complex, following a linear narrative of the Peloponnesian War within which the stories of Alcibiades and Polemides intertwine. The subplot of Polemides' trial preparation, some years after the end of the war is distinctly separate from the main thrust of the novel. The main events are the decline and eventual defeat of Athens. Alcibiades' story follows the ups and downs of his life during the war, his triumphs and failures and his influence on the major events of the war. Polemides' story follows his own trials during the war and his association with the key figures of the war and the key events.

The novel is slow paced and fragmented due to its multiple subplots. It is frequently unfocused. It can be difficult to follow without a previous understanding of the ancient Greek world and the Peloponnesian War in particular. It owes a lot to the historian Thucydides and his "History of the Peloponnesian War," which the author acknowledges. It is quite difficult to read but worth reading for its presentation of an important historical event that shaped the development of Europe.



Quotes

"I agreed to assist the man in the preparation of his defense. I did so not because I believed he could be acquitted or deserved to be (he himself readily ratified his own inculpation), but because I felt the publication of his history must be accomplished, if only before a jury, to hold the mirror up to the democracy which, by its conviction of the noblest citizen it had ever produced, my master Socrates, had evinced such wickedness as to crown and consummate its own self-immolation" (Jason, Chapter I, pg. 6.)

"His name, Polemides, as you know, means 'child of war'. But he was not a child of just any war, rather one unprecedented in scale and duration and distinguished beyond all previous conflicts by its debasement of that code of honor, justice and voluntary restraint by whose tenets all prior strife among Hellenes had been conducted" (Jason, Chapter II, pg. 9.)

"I am not yet twenty-five, in a nation where forty years is held the threshold of wisdom. To keep back runs counter to every impulse of my nature, but to strike prematurely may finish me before I begin" (Alcibiades, Chapter IX, pg. 65.)

"The rivals spoke at ease, strife forsworn beneath the truce. Lysander remarked the scale of the allied victory in this quarter. Had such prevailed across even another fifth of the field, the outcome had been catastrophe for Sparta" (Polemides, Chapter XI, pg. 100.)

"You have eyes, Polemidas; you are not stupid. Your country's enemy is not Sparta. Her real foe lies twined within her own bosom. Not ourselves, but that thrice-crowned serpent [Alcibiades] whose ambition, fueled to fever pitch, would by its excesses destroy her" (Endius, Chapter XIII, pg. 110.)

"Athens was in his [Alcibiades] view not nation to be served, but consort to be won; to gain her by means other than her own freely offered affection would be to dishonor her and himself" (Polemides, Chapter XVIII, pg. 150.)

"Later, in the quarries, one of our number inquired of a Syracusan warden if Alcibiades had in fact been present at the battle of the harbor. The keeper laughed in his face. "You can concoct handier fictions than that, Athenians. Or can you still not believe you could be beaten other than by one of your own" (Polemides, Chapter XXIV, pg. 201.)

"He did not glance at the envoys of Athens, though plainly he was aware of the enormity he had just pronounced, that is, to define that course which, enacted by his hearers, must bring upon his nation vanquishment and prostration" (Polemides, Chapter XXV, pg. 225.)



"Now the people remembered Alcibiades and longed for him" (Jason, Chapter XXVII, pg. 239.)

"You scare the breath out of me, Alcibiades" (Thrasybulus, Chapter XXX, pg. 270.)

"Lysander possesses all of your [Alcibiades'] virtues of war and diplomacy and one other. He is cruel. He will order assassination, torture, and murder wholesale, which are but tools to him, as perjury, bribery, subornation. He will not scruple to apply terror even to his own allies. Like Polycrates the tyrant, he believes his friends will be more grateful when he gives back what he has taken than if he had never taken it at all. Victory is his solitary standard" (Endius, Chapter XXXII, pg. 280.)

"The demos makes the law, and what it says is the law" (Critias, Chapter XXXV, pg. 300.)

"Spartans are courageous but not bold. Athenians are bold but not courageous" (Lysander, Chapter XL, pg. 333.)

"Alcibiades had left the city with no agenda other than adulation of himself, and without his celebrity about which to construct a consensus, a vacuum arose. Into this flooded his enemies" (Jason, Chapter XLII, pg. 349.)

"You would rather see the state ground to dust by its enemies than preserved by your betters and be compelled to acknowledge this to their faces. This is the most bitter fate you can imagine, men of Athens. Not vanquishment at the hands of them who hate you, but accepting grace from those who seek only your love" (Jason, Chapter XLVI, pg. 376.)

"Heaven had severed Athens from her senses for the excesses of her empire. Such was the Deity's requital, the street-corner prophets proclaimed, for the hubris of imperial pride" (Polemides, Chapter XLVII, pg. 381.)

"Nations are too puny for him [Alcibiades]. His self-conception supersedes statehood, and they are dwarves in his eyes who will not step in his train off the precipice of the world. He is correct of course; that is why he must be made away with. For his vision is the future, which the present uncompelled may not now, or ever, abide" (Endius, Chapter XLVIII, pg. 392.)

"Alcibiades had rendered himself fugitive, thus, from Spartan, Athenian, Persian, and Thracian" (Polemides, Chapter LI, pg. 404.)

"Who is guilty? I and he, and Athens and all Greece, who have fashioned our ruin with our own hands" (Polemides, Chapter LI, pg. 408.)

"You do not need me, brothers. No force on earth can stand up to you. May the gods bear you from victory to victory. The last sight I behold as hell hauls me down shall be your faces. Thank you for honoring me with your comradeship. And now good-bye, my friends. Fare you well" (Alcibiades, Chapter LIII, pg. 415.)



Topics for Discussion

Alcibiades is a brilliant general and politician who is brought down by his flaws. What are these flaws and how do they contribute to his downfall?

The novel seems to portray and implicit criticism of democracy and how the mood of the populace often leads the state to bad decisions, yet no alternative form of government is offered as being preferential. Is the portrayal of democracy a fair one? What other forms of government could have led to a different outcome in the war?

The book presents two men. One, Alcibiades, controls events and the other, Polemides, is controlled by them. Which character lives the better life? Which character meets the better end? Which is the better path to take?

Multiple factors contribute to Athens' defeat. Discuss these factors. Which were the main ones that led to their defeat and how could they have been avoided?

Justice and injustice play central roles in the novel. Which are the major acts of justice and injustice committed? Who benefits or is suffers from these acts?

Lysander and Alcibiades are often painted as equals. In what ways do they differ? Why is Alcibiades credited more than Lysander for altering the course of the war?

The structure of the narrative is complex. The story is relayed to the reader through an unnamed narrator relating his grandfather's telling of another man's story. Is this an effective storytelling method? Why might the author have chosen this narrative structure instead of a direct narrative to the reader from Polemides and/or Jason? What problems does this structure cause for the reader? How does it help the reader?