

Insight Text Guide

Yvonne Smith

7

7

Ransom

3

7

David Malouf

7

H

T

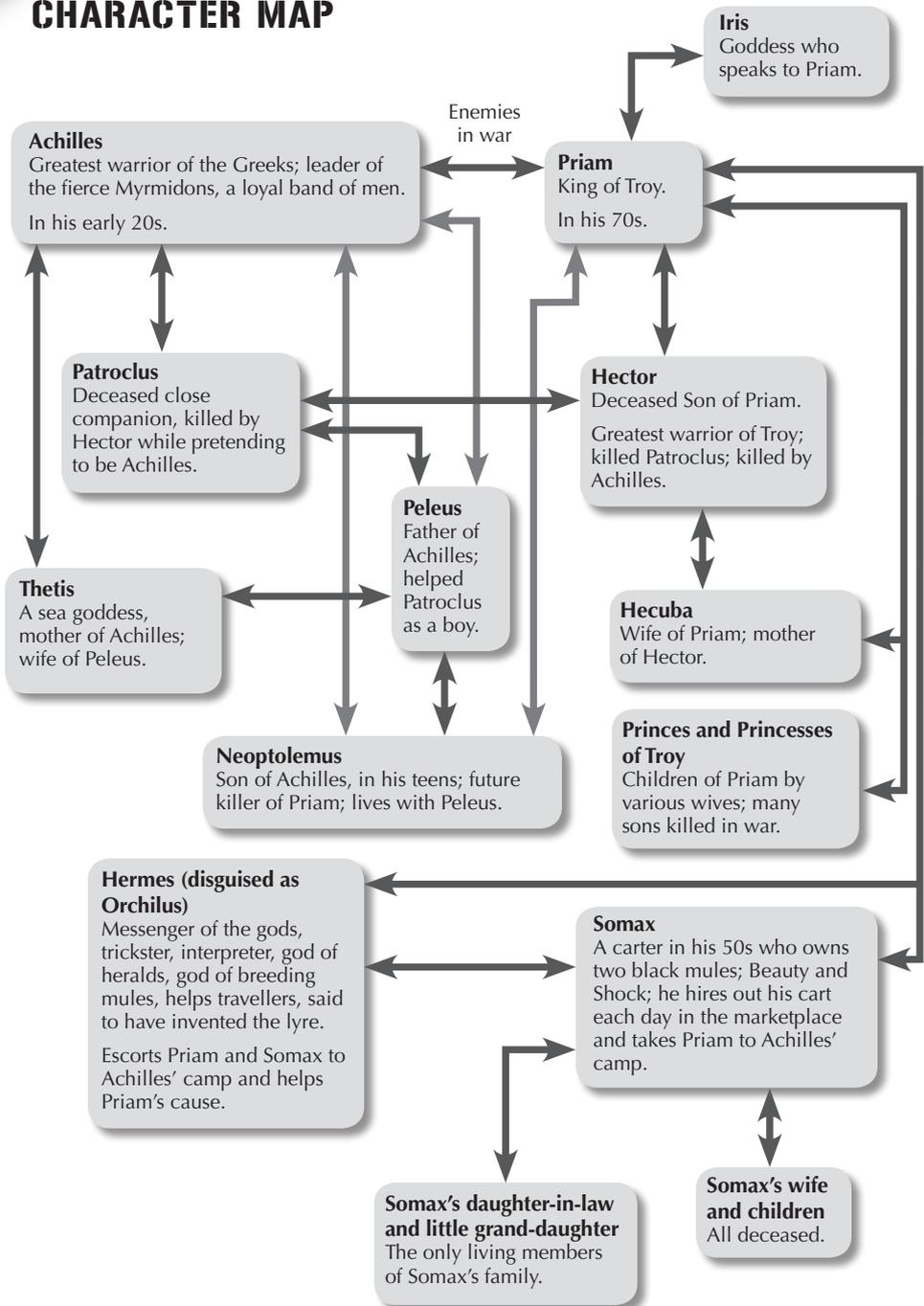


insight

contents

Character map	iv
Overview	1
About the author	1
Reading Malouf's work: sound and meaning	2
Synopsis	3
Character summaries	4
Background & context	9
Genre, structure & language	14
Part-by-part analysis	20
Characters & relationships	31
Themes, ideas & values	40
Different interpretations	49
Questions & answers	53
Sample answer	62
References & reading	65

CHARACTER MAP



OVERVIEW

About the author

David Malouf is an Australian writer who has achieved significant international acclaim. In addition to winning numerous Australian prizes for poetry and prose, he was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1991 (for *The Great World*), the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 1996 (for *Remembering Babylon*) and in 2000 his achievement over four decades of writing was recognised with the Neustadt Prize for Literature in the USA. In 2008 he won the first Australia-Asia Award for his *Complete Stories*.

David Malouf was first published as a poet in the 1960s; his first novel (*Johnno*) appeared in 1975, offering a fresh view of growing up in Brisbane. His novels and short stories often explore aspects of Australian identity, society and landscape, blending fiction and history, allowing past and present to speak to each other. He gives his main characters a rich inner life that reveals what really guides their words and actions in the outer world.

David Malouf's career has shown a similar mix of inward focus and outward action. While dedicated to his vocation as a writer, he has been very active in public life in the creative arts in Australia since 1969. He was named an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 1987 for service to literature. He now resides in Sydney and, after five decades of publishing, his career as a fiction writer, poet and engaging public speaker continues to flourish. *Ransom* is his ninth novel and was published in 2009 to wide critical acclaim.

Reading Malouf's work: sound and meaning

It is important to keep in mind that David Malouf is both a poet and a writer of fiction. In novels he pays close attention to structuring an engaging narrative for readers to enjoy, working carefully to express his stories through lively, closely-woven patterns of images (word pictures), rhythms and sounds. In public talks he often reads his poems and stories aloud so the audience can catch the 'music' of the words and phrases. Malouf uses the dynamic, lyrical (song-like, musical) qualities of language to highlight the many shades of meaning in words. To get the most from his writing, read slowly and take the time to feel the flow of the sentences and rhythmic phrases (see, for example, pp.3–4, the opening of *Ransom*). Layers of meaning emerge through images that engage the reader's senses and imagination as the focus subtly shifts from one character's way of experiencing the world to that of another (p.118 is an example). Although it is a short novel, the story of *Ransom* is part of a larger world that the reader can glimpse, as in the brief yet memorable description of Troy (pp.39–40) and the concise evocation of the war-wracked lives of people surviving on the plain outside the city (pp.205–206).

While his novels explore significant ethical issues such as respecting the identity of others, family tensions, war, violence, displacement and loss, Malouf seeks a balanced view of human experience, recognising its mix of light and darkness. His writing often celebrates imagination and creativity in language, together with the quiet joy and uniqueness of each life, human and non-human, including plants and animals. He likes to shape into words experiences that a person may feel deeply but find difficult to express (Priam's unspoken thoughts about why he was 'sorry they had to move on', for example, on p.142). Alongside scenes of hope, Malouf portrays the destructive forces that persist throughout human history and challenge the survival not only of individuals but of cities and civilisations.

Synopsis

The story of *Ransom* is based on the final sections of Homer's famous Greek epic *The Iliad*, one of the earliest poems in western literature. *The Iliad* tells of characters and events during the legendary Trojan War. Malouf once explained that he looked for the 'cracks' and 'crevices' in *The Iliad* where as-yet untold stories might emerge. He found these spaces by creating a more fully realised inner life for his main characters, Achilles and Priam. He also introduces a new character, Somax, who (with his black mules Beauty and Shock) brings to the story a balancing view of everyday life outside of the court or military camp. Beauty's image on the cover of the book is important in this regard. While the meeting between Achilles and Priam remains central, as it is in the final part of *The Iliad*, Malouf presents its heroic qualities in an 'unheroic' manner, highlighting Priam's moral and imaginative courage in choosing to act beyond the bounds of his formal role as king and Achilles' willingness to step aside from revenge and relentless violence to act with compassion.

The action of *Ransom* occurs in the ninth year of the decade-long war between the Greeks (Achaean) and the people of Troy. The war was caused by the abduction of Helen (wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta) by Paris, Prince of Troy. The novel plays out over one full day and the following morning, although significant events from the years before and after are woven into the narrative. *Ransom* commences on the twelfth day after the death of the Trojan hero Hector, slain by the famed warrior Achilles in revenge for the death of his dearly loved cousin Patroclus. Overcome with grief and anger, Achilles has dragged Hector's dead body behind his chariot each morning for eleven days but the gods keep restoring the corpse so that it looks fresh despite its mistreatment. Achilles feels caught in a web of grief and confusion and wants to break free of it but does not know how. He waits by the sea to hear the voice of his mother, the sea nymph Thetis, who he hopes may guide him.

Meanwhile, Priam, Hector's father and king of Troy, finds that his life is also suspended by grief. He mourns for his son along with Hector's mother, the queen Hecuba, and all the Trojan people. Priam has a vision

of sitting in plain clothes on a simple cart pulled by black mules. The cart, he imagines, will take him to Achilles' camp and carry a ransom of precious goods to be exchanged for the body of Hector before returning to Troy for a ceremonial burial.

Despite strong protests from Hecuba and the Trojan court, Priam leaves Troy with the carter Somax and his black mules Beauty and Shock. Somax has been asked to assume the role of Idaeus, the herald and companion of the king. They stop to rest on the way. Hermes, the messenger of Zeus and the god of heralds and interpreters, appears suddenly in disguise and, visible only to the travellers, guides the cart safely past the guards and into Achilles' camp.

Achilles is amazed that Priam has been able to enter the heavily guarded camp. When Priam says he has been guided, Achilles understands that more than human forces are at work. Priam asks for Hector's body so that honourable behaviour can be upheld and Achilles relents, somewhat awed by the old man's presence.

With Hector's body under the cart's canopy, Priam and Somax return to Troy to begin the official mourning period. Achilles has agreed to twelve days of truce before the war resumes. Years later, Somax lives on after the fall of Troy to tell tales about his extraordinary journey but his listeners find it hard to believe him. The mule Beauty seems more important to ordinary folk and they talk of her rather than of warriors and kings. One story is ending and another might be beginning.

Character summaries

The Greeks (also known as Achaeans; making war on Troy)

Achilles: The greatest warrior among the Greeks, Achilles is the son of a human father (Peleus) and an immortal sea nymph (Thetis). He fights in King Agamemnon's army against Troy but has little respect for that king. He is the leader of a warrior band called the Myrmidons. Achilles is caught between his desire for a hero's death and wanting a long, peaceful life in his homeland of Phytia in Thessaly. According to prophecy, he is destined to die in the Trojan War.



Statue of Achilles at Sissi's Palace, Corfu, Greece

Thetis: The mother of Achilles and daughter of the sea god Nereus. She is the leader of the sea nymphs (the immortal Nereids) and is married to Peleus.

Patroclus: A cousin and close companion of Achilles, Patroclus was taken in by Achilles' father after accidentally killing a playmate. He fights and is killed by Hector while wearing Achilles' armour. His death is greatly mourned by Achilles.

Neoptolemus: The son of Achilles and Deidamia, Neoptolemus lives with his grandfather Peleus after Achilles sails to Troy. Strong, red-haired and trained as a warrior, he is destined to kill Priam, king of Troy.

Agamemnon: King of Mycenae and leader of the Greek army against Troy, Agamemnon is the brother of Menelaus, King of Sparta whose wife Helen was taken to Troy by Paris (son of Priam). A proud, passionate and ruthless leader, he takes the slave girl Briseis from Achilles who then refuses to fight in the Greek army.

Peleus: A respected king, Peleus is the father of Achilles and grandfather of Neoptolemus.

Automedon: A warrior-companion of Achilles, Automedon accompanies Patroclus into his final battle and is with him when he dies. He becomes an aide to Achilles after Patroclus' death.

The Trojans (*defending the ancient city of Troy and its territories*)

Priam (a name meaning 'the price paid' or 'the ransomed one'): The king of Troy for many decades, Priam is now in his seventies and aware of his physical weaknesses. He was named Podarces as a child and was saved from slavery by his sister Hesione. He is able to hear and see the gods from time to time and believes they guide him. Priam wants to accomplish a heroic deed before he dies to redeem his self-esteem and be remembered for something other than his savage death.

Hector: The eldest and dearest son of Priam and Hecuba, Hector is a great prince, warrior and hero. He kills Patroclus in battle, thinking he was Achilles, and is killed by Achilles in revenge. Hector is the husband of Andromache and father of the young Astynax.

Hecuba: The queen of Troy and first wife of Priam. Hecuba is the mother of Hector, Paris and many other children by Priam. She is a small, strong, beautiful and determined woman for whom Priam has great love and respect.

Princes and princesses of Troy: Priam has had over fifty children, though many of them have been killed in battle. Those who appear in *Ransom* include the priest Helenus, the prophetess Cassandra, the princes Paris, Hippothous, Dius, Deiphobus, Panyamus and the young Polydorus.

Polydamas: A wise Trojan courtier who advises Priam not to go to Achilles' camp.

Idaeus: The king's herald, Idaeus is Priam's official companion who always travels with him to act on his behalf and speak for him in public. He is replaced by the carter Somax for the journey to Achilles' camp.

Somax: A simple, well-built, rough but rather wise fellow, Somax is a carter. He is about fifty years old. His cart and mules are chosen by the princes of Troy to take Priam on his journey to ransom Hector's body from Achilles. His wife and seven children have all died, but he loves his remaining daughter-in-law (not named) and his granddaughter (also not named). He is very fond of his two mules, especially Beauty.

Animals

Balius and Xanthus: These two immortal war horses were gifts from the gods to Peleus when he married Thetis. They were given to Achilles by his father. Noted for their beautiful appearance, swiftness and high spirits, they pull Achilles' chariot as he drags Hector's corpse in the dust for eleven days.

Beauty and Shock: Two black mules (hybrid offspring of a horse and donkey) who represent everyday life in Troy. They stand in contrast with Achilles' war horses, who belong to the epic world of battle.

The Greek Gods (*guiding and intervening in human actions*)

Hermes: The messenger of Zeus (the chief of the gods), Hermes is the god of heralds and interpreters, literature and poets, travellers and borders, and the breeding of horses and mules. He is known to be a trickster and joker. Hermes wears a winged cap and travels at great speed to