

Reinterpreting Heroism: A Queer Lens on Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*

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ABSTRACT

The Exploration of heroism and queer identity in literature is important for understanding today's values and emotional experiences. While many traditional stories focus on physical strength and bravery, there is a lack of research on how these ideas can be redefined through emotions and vulnerability. This study looks at Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, specifically how the story, told from Patroclus's viewpoint, changes the usual ideas of what it means to be a hero. Using a qualitative approach with close reading and textual analysis, the research shows how love and emotional connections are seen as heroic qualities. The main finding is that true heroism includes empathy and selflessness, challenging outdated masculine ideals. In conclusion, the study suggests that Miller's fresh take encourages readers to adopt a broader view of heroism, highlighting the importance of emotional depth in our understanding of human experience.

Keywords: *Heroism, Western Mythologies, Queer Identity, Heroism, The Song of Achilles*

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INTRODUCTION

In ancient myths, Achilles is seen as the perfect hero—strong, unbeatable, and always seeking glory. However, Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* presents him in a new way, showing a more complicated and emotional side of his character. This change challenges the old ideas of heroism, which often focus only on strength and honour. Instead, Miller encourages readers to think about love, vulnerability, and meaningful connections. This new view shows that Greek mythology still matters today, helping us understand important human experiences in modern stories.

Greek mythology plays a key role in today's culture and literature, influencing many stories and art forms. These ancient tales cover universal themes like heroism and love, making them relatable to modern audiences. According to Pierre Grimal (1996), these myths are not just for entertainment; they also help us think about moral issues and societal values, reflecting what it means to be human (p. ix). While many Western myths celebrate bravery and honour, they often ignore emotional depth. Mahdi (2002) points out, Miller challenges these traditional views by highlighting kindness and care as important heroic traits (p.48).

In this context, *The Song of Achilles* critiques traditional ideas of heroism by exploring the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Miller illustrates that true heroism encompasses not only physical strength but also vulnerability and deep love. This exploration underscores the need to rethink and broaden our understanding of heroism in classic literature. In today's world, where discussions about queer identity and emotional vulnerability are increasingly prominent, Miller's novel provides a fresh perspective that enriches conversations about traditional values. Arafah and Nurfadilah (2022) highlight that Miller reclaims a queer reading of the *Iliad*, often overlooked by

heteronormative literary traditions (p. 115). By focusing on Patroclus—a character typically seen as minor in the *Iliad*—Miller allows for a deeper exploration of emotions, love, and the complexities of being human that are often ignored in typical heroic narratives. Thus, *The Song of Achilles* invites readers to engage with these themes on a more personal level, challenging them to reconsider what it means to be a hero.

This novel is especially important because Miller revitalizes a classic story in a deeply emotional way. By focusing on Patroclus, she shifts the emphasis from traditional themes of war and power to the more intimate aspects of human relationships. This approach allows readers to connect with the characters on a personal level, fostering an understanding of heroism that values love, vulnerability, and emotional depth. As Goldhill (2011) notes that modern adaptations of classical myths serve to question the ideologies that these stories once reinforced (p. 134). By reexamining the *Iliad* through Patroclus's perspective, Miller invites a new interpretation of heroism that prioritizes compassion and connection.

Moreover, centering the narrative on Patroclus enriches the exploration of friendship and loyalty, portraying their bond with Achilles as a profound relationship that transcends the context of war. This emotional complexity resonates with contemporary audiences, making the story more relevant to those who seek narratives reflecting the multifaceted nature of human experience. Ultimately, *The Song of Achilles* challenges readers to embrace a definition of heroism that includes empathy and emotional strength, positioning it as a powerful and timely work in modern literature.

Joseph Campbell's theory, particularly the idea of the Hero's Journey, is used as the framework for this study because it effectively illustrates the hero's journey across different cultures. Campbell (1949) explains that the hero's journey is a universal structure that spans many cultural traditions (p. 23). This theory helps in understanding character development and allows the study to highlight where the novel challenges or critiques traditional heroic narratives. By using this approach, the research aims to show how *The Song of Achilles* offers a more inclusive and emotionally rich definition of heroism while questioning long-accepted values in classical mythology.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), argues that sexual identity and interpersonal relationships cannot be adequately understood through rigid categories. She emphasizes the importance of examining how desire and relationships are shaped by societal and cultural norms. Sedgwick contends that our understanding of homosexuality and heterosexuality often falls into a simplistic binary, which overlooks the complexities and nuances present in real-life experiences. Her approach encourages readers to look beyond labels and to recognize that identity is performative and fluid. This perspective will be utilized in this research to explore how the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in *The Song of Achilles* reflects the intricacies of love and intimacy, challenging traditional constructions of masculinity and heroism.

Several scholars have explored the themes and innovative narrative techniques in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*. In their article, *Queering Greek mythology: The homoeroticism of Achilles and Patroclus in Madeline Miller's The Song of Achilles*, published in the *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, Arafah and Nurfadilah (2022) examine how the novel reinterprets the Homeric myth by focusing on the romantic and sexual bond between Achilles and Patroclus. They argue that Miller offers a queer perspective on the *Iliad*, shifting the emphasis from glory to love as the central theme. This approach challenges traditional ideas of heroism that celebrate masculine strength and valor. Mahdi (2022), in *The Feminist Reimagining of Achilles in Madeline Miller's The Song Of Achilles*, published in *Feminist Studies in Literature*, analyzes the feminist aspects of the novel. Mahdi discusses how Miller critiques patriarchal values and militaristic ideals found in classical literature. The research highlights how the novel promotes qualities like tenderness and emotional honesty as heroic traits, thereby destabilizing conventional power structures. This feminist perspective deepens the understanding of character

relationships and the emotional complexities within the story. Douglass (2017), in *Reimagining the epic: The Song of Achilles and the voice of Patroclus*, published in the *Classical Receptions Journal*, further underscores the importance of Patroclus's voice. By placing Patroclus at the center of the narrative, Miller shifts the focus toward emotional depth and intimate connections rather than traditional heroic ideals. Douglass argues that this change allows for a richer exploration of love, loyalty, and moral challenges faced by the characters, ultimately redefining heroism in both ancient and modern contexts.

Despite these valuable contributions, there is still a clear gap in the current studies. While many analyses have concentrated on the romantic and queer elements of *The Song of Achilles*, fewer have examined how the novel systematically challenges and deconstructs traditional notions of heroism. Instead of simply glorifying physical strength and valor, Miller presents a more human and emotionally nuanced view of what it means to be a hero.

This leads to the research question: How does Madeline Miller redefine heroism and queer identity in *The Song of Achilles* within the framework of classical mythology? The objective of this research is to analyze how the narrative, told from Patroclus's perspective, transforms the traditional understanding of heroism. It will also explore how love and vulnerability are portrayed as heroic attributes in the novel. By focusing on Patroclus's voice, the research aims to uncover how emotional depth and intimate relationships can redefine what it means to be heroic, suggesting that true greatness is found not just in glory but in compassion and connection.

METHOD

Instrument

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach, focusing on textual analysis to explore how heroism is redefined in Madeline Miller's novel *The Song of Achilles*. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research helps researchers understand the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, which is very relevant for this research (p. 24). Close reading serves as the primary tool for this research, involving a detailed and focused analysis of the text that emphasizes key elements contributing to its themes and meanings. The framework includes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on queer identity, highlighting the fluidity of relationships and desire (Sedgwick, 1990), and Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, which allows for a deeper understanding of emotional growth as a form of heroism (Campbell, 1949). By analysing Miller's language, imagery, and themes of love and vulnerability, the research uncovers the complexities of the bond between Achilles and Patroclus, ultimately redefining heroic values in both ancient and contemporary contexts (Silverman, 2016, p. 78).

The primary data source for this research is the complete text of *The Song of Achilles* in its original English version. The collected data includes key moments in the story, the emotional and moral choices of the main characters, and the redefinition of heroic values such as honor (*timē*) and glory (*kleos*). As Silverman (2016) points out, choosing a text rich in meaning and context allows for deeper and more relevant analysis (p. 78).

Data Collection

Data collection is done through close reading, where the researcher carefully analyzes how heroism is portrayed in the novel. This involves looking at character interactions and Patroclus's internal reflections, which reveal emotional and moral dilemmas. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), this method helps researchers identify themes that emerge from the text, which is crucial for understanding shifts in heroic values (p. 101).

Data Analysis

Data analysis follows the approach suggested by Huberman (2014), which includes three main steps: data collection, data reduction, and data presentation. In this context, data collection is achieved through close reading to identify key narrative moments. Data reduction involves grouping emerging themes, such as changes in perceptions of heroism

and the emotional values highlighted by Patroclus. Finally, data presentation summarizes the main findings, showing how *The Song of Achilles* reflects and subverts traditional heroic norms, offering a more human-centered definition of heroism (p. 56).

Through this process, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how *The Song of Achilles* not only reconstructs classical heroic values but also presents a more humanistic perspective on what it means to be a hero.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding

In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller redefines heroism and queer identity by challenging traditional narratives from classical mythology through Patroclus's perspective. This approach provides a deeper understanding of heroism that contrasts with Joseph Campbell's ideas, which often link heroism to physical strength and grand adventures. Miller emphasizes love, vulnerability, and emotional depth as key heroic traits, particularly in the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, which challenges conventional masculinity and societal expectations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on queer identity enhance this redefinition by suggesting that identity is fluid and shaped by relationships rather than fixed categories. The love between Patroclus and Achilles transcends rigid sexual binaries, presenting their bond as a profound and heroic connection. Ultimately, Miller highlights that heroism is intertwined with love and vulnerability, inviting readers to reconsider what it means to be a hero and suggesting that true greatness lies in the emotional richness of our connections with others.

Discussions

Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* intricately reinterprets heroism and queer identity by telling the tale from Patroclus's viewpoint. This discussion will examine how the novel reshapes conventional notions of heroism, highlighting love and vulnerability as essential qualities.

Redefining Heroism

In classical mythology, the concept of heroism has long been tied to ideals such as physical strength, bravery in battle, and the pursuit of glory. Figures like Achilles epitomize these traits, often celebrated for their martial prowess and victories on the battlefield. However, in *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller shifts this perspective by telling the story through the eyes of Patroclus, who offers a more nuanced and expansive interpretation of what it means to be a hero.

Patroclus's Self-Perception

From the outset of the novel, Patroclus grapples with his identity in relation to Achilles. He acknowledges his own perceived shortcomings with a poignant reflection:

"I am not a hero. I am merely the shadow of one." (Miller, 2011, p. 66)

This statement reveals Patroclus's deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and his struggle to find his own place in a world that glorifies traditional heroism. Unlike Achilles, who is renowned for his physical abilities and battlefield exploits, Patroclus sees himself as secondary, merely existing in the heroic shadow cast by his companion. This self-deprecating viewpoint emphasizes that heroism is not restricted to grand acts of bravery or personal accolades. Instead, Patroclus embodies a different sort of courage one that is characterized by loyalty, compassion, and an unwavering commitment to those he loves.

His role as a supportive figure highlights a form of bravery that is often overlooked in traditional narratives. While Achilles seeks glory and recognition, Patroclus's strength lies in his emotional resilience and the sacrifices he is willing to make for the people he cares about. This redefinition of heroism challenges the notion that valour is solely a matter of physical feats, suggesting instead that the strength of character and the courage to love deeply can be just as heroic.

Acts of Courage

Patroclus's journey further exemplifies this redefined heroism when he makes the momentous decision to don Achilles's armour and enter battle. This choice is not

motivated by a desire for fame or glory, but rather by his deep love and commitment to Achilles:

"I will go to him, I will stand by his side, even if it costs me my life."
(Miller, 2011, p. 204)

This declaration is a powerful testament to Patroclus's character. His willingness to face danger not for personal glory, but to protect and support his beloved, illustrates a profound form of courage rooted in selflessness. In choosing to fight in Achilles's place, Patroclus embodies the idea that true heroism can manifest in acts of sacrifice and love.

This act redefines the nature of heroism itself; it is not merely about individual accolades or triumphs but about the willingness to place others' needs above one's own safety. Patroclus's bravery in this moment emphasizes that love can be a driving force for heroic action, transforming the battlefield into a space where emotional bonds and personal sacrifices take precedence over traditional notions of valour.

Through Patroclus's perspective, Miller invites readers to rethink the qualities that constitute true heroism, advocating for a broader understanding that includes emotional depth, loyalty, and the courage to love fiercely. The narrative thus challenges the reader to recognize that heroism can be found in the quiet, selfless choices made in the name of love and loyalty, rather than in the pursuit of personal glory.

The Role of Vulnerability

In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller powerfully illustrates that vulnerability is an essential component of true heroism. Through Patroclus's journey, the narrative reveals that emotional openness is not a weakness but rather a profound form of strength that can drive heroic actions.

Emotional Confrontation

One of the most striking moments in the novel occurs when Patroclus confronts Achilles about his tendency to withdraw into himself following traumatic events:

"You cannot hide away forever. That is not strength; that is fear." (Miller, 2011, p. 175)

This dialogue is significant for several reasons. First, it underscores the importance of emotional transparency in relationships. Patroclus challenges Achilles to confront his grief rather than suppress it, suggesting that true strength comes from facing one's emotions head-on. By urging Achilles to acknowledge his pain, Patroclus demonstrates his deep love and concern, emphasizing that vulnerability is a vital aspect of their connection.

Furthermore, this moment reflects Patroclus's belief that confronting emotional struggles is an integral part of heroism. Rather than simply engaging in physical battles, he recognizes that the fight against internal fears and grief can be just as daunting. This perspective shifts the traditional view of heroism away from the battlefield and toward the emotional landscape, highlighting that the courage to be vulnerable is a hallmark of true bravery.

Moments of Intimacy

The tenderness of Patroclus and Achilles's relationship is also vividly portrayed through their shared moments of intimacy. For instance, when they lie together, Patroclus describes:

"We lay side by side, his breath warm against my skin, the world fading away." (Miller, 2011, p. 107)

This scene encapsulates the profound bond they share, illustrating how vulnerability can manifest in quiet, tender moments. The physical closeness and emotional connection between them demonstrate that love can be both a source of strength and a display of courage. In a world often dominated by martial ideals, these instances of intimacy reveal that acts of love and connection can be just as heroic as any act of valor on the battlefield.

These moments highlight the idea that the emotional risks involved in opening oneself up to another person—sharing fears, desires, and vulnerabilities—require a

different kind of bravery. By showcasing the importance of these intimate interactions, Miller emphasizes that heroism is not solely about grand gestures or physical conquests; rather, it is also about the ability to form deep, meaningful connections and to embrace vulnerability as a strength.

The Song of Achilles presents vulnerability as a crucial aspect of heroism, demonstrating through Patroclus's experiences that emotional openness can empower individuals to confront their fears and deepen their relationships. By challenging traditional notions of strength, Miller invites readers to recognize the courage inherent in vulnerability and the transformative power of love and intimacy.

Exploring Queer Identity

In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller intricately explores queer identity through the lens of Patroclus and Achilles's relationship, drawing on Eve Sedgwick's theory of the fluidity of relationships and the transformative power of love. This exploration challenges traditional norms and reclaims cultural narratives that have often marginalized queer experiences.

Challenging Norms

The relationship between Patroclus and Achilles stands in stark contrast to conventional notions of masculinity. Their bond defies the expectations placed upon men in ancient Greek society, which often prioritized valour and aggression. When Patroclus expresses his feelings for Achilles, he boldly states:

"I love you, and that love makes me stronger." (Miller, 2011, p. 220)

This declaration is significant; it challenges the widely held belief that love is a form of weakness. Instead, Patroclus redefines love as a powerful source of empowerment. By openly acknowledging his feelings, he demonstrates that vulnerability and emotional connection can enhance one's strength rather than diminish it. This perspective not only subverts traditional masculinity but also presents a new model of heroism that celebrates emotional honesty and the courage to love openly.

Cultural Reclamation

Miller also emphasizes the significance of cultural reclamation through the memories shared by Patroclus and Achilles. In a reflective moment, Patroclus recalls:

"We were boys, but we were more than that. We were each other's world."

(Miller, 2011, p. 45)

This statement highlights the depth of their bond and acknowledges that their relationship transcends mere friendship. By framing their connection in such profound terms, Miller reclaims queer identity within a historical context that has often overlooked or marginalized such narratives. This reclamation is crucial, as it allows for a broader understanding of love and companionship that exists outside the confines of heteronormative expectations.

The acknowledgment of their bond as something unique and significant not only validates their feelings but also challenges the historical narratives that have rendered similar relationships invisible. This reclamation of identity serves to empower not just the characters but also readers who may see reflections of their own experiences in Patroclus and Achilles.

Defining Love

The narrative further articulates the complexities of queer love, particularly through moments of sorrow and loss. For example, when Patroclus mourns the death of a friend, he reflects:

"I wept for the one I had lost, but I wept for us too, for the love that we could not always show." (Miller, 2011, p. 300)

This dual mourning is particularly poignant, as it emphasizes the intricacies of queer love in a society that often marginalizes such relationships. Patroclus's grief encompasses not only the loss of a friend but also the unexpressed love he shares with Achilles. This acknowledgment reveals that love can be a source of both joy and pain, highlighting the emotional landscapes that queer individuals navigate.

By intertwining themes of love and loss, Miller illustrates that queer identities are rich and multifaceted. The struggles faced by Patroclus and Achilles are emblematic of a broader societal context where love is often constrained by societal norms and expectations. Their relationship, filled with both tenderness and sorrow, reflects the reality that love can exist amidst challenges, and that it can be a source of strength even in the face of adversity.

Through the exploration of queer identity in *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller challenges conventional norms and reclaims cultural narratives that have historically marginalized such experiences. By presenting a relationship that defies traditional masculinity and articulating the complexities of love, Miller offers a powerful commentary on the nature of heroism and emotional connection. Through Patroclus and Achilles, readers are invited to embrace a broader understanding of love that transcends societal boundaries, revealing the profound strength found in vulnerability and emotional openness.

In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller skilfully reinterprets the concepts of heroism and queer identity by centering the narrative around Patroclus's viewpoint. This shift allows the story to explore themes of love, vulnerability, and emotional complexity, which are essential to a new understanding of what it means to be heroic. Through a rich array of examples, including powerful dialogues and tender interactions between Patroclus and Achilles, Miller challenges traditional notions of heroism, encouraging readers to adopt a more expansive and inclusive perspective.

This redefinition of heroism not only adds depth to the characters but also engages with modern conversations about identity and love, making the narrative resonate strongly with contemporary audiences. By highlighting the importance of emotional connections and the courage found in vulnerability, the novel presents a vision of heroism that is relevant and impactful in today's society, ultimately inviting readers to reflect on their own definitions of strength and bravery.

CONCLUSIONS

In *The Song of Achilles*, Madeline Miller redefines heroism and queer identity by telling the story from Patroclus's viewpoint. This fresh perspective allows for a deeper exploration of love, vulnerability, and emotional depth, challenging traditional ideas of heroism. By focusing on the close relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, Miller shows that true heroism includes emotional connections and selflessness, not just physical strength. The novel critiques traditional masculinity and offers a modern understanding of classic mythology, making it relevant to current discussions about identity and emotions. Miller encourages readers to rethink their definitions of heroism, promoting empathy and compassion as vital qualities. For future research, scholars might explore how other contemporary works reinterpret classical myths and the implications for modern values. Additionally, investigating the portrayal of emotional vulnerability in different literary genres, such as fantasy or science fiction, could provide interesting insights. Another avenue could be examining how various cultures interpret heroism and love, highlighting the diversity of these themes across global narratives. Overall, there is a rich opportunity for exploring emotional depth in literature, which can enhance our understanding of identity, heroism, and human relationships.

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Finally, we hope this journal can provide benefits for the advancement of knowledge, especially in the fields of literature and western mythology studies. We aspire that this research inspires other researchers to explore similar topics and fosters a deeper understanding of how relationships and emotions shape narratives in literature.

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