

# Humanity in the face of war



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Malouf's *Ransom* explores the brutality of war and how this can result in the loss of humanity for some, given that the grief of loss overpowers all other senses. The bloodlust and thirst for vengeance evident in Achilles and Hecuba's thoughts and actions underscore the ravages of war on the human condition, and particularly for the former, how roles set by a deterministic universe can exacerbate this. However, the novel suggests that inhumanity does not necessarily perpetuate, and the ability for new thoughts give rise to the opportunity to transcend one's grief, as reflected in Priam's envisioning of 'something new'. Consequently, the king's new experiences with Somax highlight that one's humanity can be restored through the agency of another. In turn, Priam's plea to Achilles and their bond in mutual fatherhood despite being traditional adversaries in wartime demonstrates the possibility of unprecedented compassion to exist even in the most uncertain of times.

The reality of war lies with death and the grief that results, which often tends to override one's capacity for understanding and sympathy. In the 'rough world of men' and warfare, the loss of his soul mate Patroclus sees Achilles' capability for human emotions to be superseded by his desire for revenge. Achilles is thus inclined to view Hector as the 'implacable enemy', underscoring his inability to see him as anything else but an object for his reprisal. His role as a warrior influences this as he is traditionally expected to view Hector as nothing but his adversary. Instead of seeing him as a man like himself, Achilles dehumanizes Hector, and consequently, the desecration of the latter's body surpasses the Greek's standards, '[breaking] every rule they live by', and thus loses his own humanity. The cyclical nature of the mutilation and then restoration of Hector's body highlights that Achilles is

trapped in a futile search for revenge because of his grief, and despite murdering his enemy this paradoxically results in his own spiritual demise. Similarly, Hecuba's outpouring of grief through violent gestures reinforces the characters' tendency for bloodlust in the face of profound grief. Like Achilles, she dehumanizes her enemy by calling him a 'jackal', demonstrating her inability to consider Achilles as a man, let alone show a measure of compassion. Though she claims she would 'tear his heart out and eat it raw' this only underpins her inability to grieve properly because of her violent inclinations. In this way, the harsh reality of war propels some to express their grief in ways which ultimately cause them to shed their humanity.

Malouf suggests that new thoughts that arise in spite of the traditional conventions during wartime are an opportunity for some to relieve themselves from the grief that has rendered them helpless. Priam, who feels limited by the default inclination to be Achilles' enemy because he is the leader of the opposing force, subjects himself to something 'unprecedented'. In 'wrestling with dark thoughts', the king challenges his impotency through the envisioning of a 'blasphemous' idea which despite being previously unheard of leaves his mind 'clear', underscoring that this notion has lifted a metaphorical weight of his shoulders. The king, in embracing chance, has found a new way to think about his enemy: when he projects his desire of 'the lighter bond of being simply a man' Priam realises what Hecuba fails to see, that Achilles too must be waiting for 'the opportunity to act for himself to try something that might force events on a different course'. Thus, by projecting his own feelings onto Achilles the '

chance to break free of always being the hero' Priam has taken the bold step of connecting with his enemy as men, which underscores the need for compassion to be liberated from traditional expectations. As Achilles, too, waits for a change, Malouf suggests that thoughts which are mutinous to the conventions of war underpin the ability to have pity for one another and also prompt the realization that as men, our enemies must also yearn for a similar release from the restrictions imposed upon them by their fate.

In recalling his son's death, the carter displays an ability to consider Beauty's perspective (she was the agent of his death), reflecting that ' she had no notion of what she'd done', before reacting to the situation. His initial inclination to '[punch] her where she stood' reflects the instinctual violent response to loss that overcomes other characters in the text. However, the rhetorical question the carter poses, ' what would have been the good of that?' suggests that reflection and understanding can result in a different reaction (' taking her head in my arms and sobbing'), and Malouf, by juxtaposing this with Hecuba and Achilles' violent tendencies, underscores that the tolerance of another's actions has a more peaceful outcome, reinforced by the retention of Somax's humanity in comparison with Achilles who, after desecrating Hector's body, is ' like a dead man feeling nothing'. Away from the world of warfare, Priam witnesses an action that is ' unprecedented' and new in light of the customary and violent responses one has in times of grief. His emotional response (' his eyes moistened') to the carter's placidity, in contrast to the ' rough world' that he has been subjected to as the king of a warring nation, underscores that Priam has realized the importance of sympathy through the agency of another. In this way, Malouf

highlights that despite the brutality of war, one's insightful actions are able to inspire another's epiphany.

Consequently, Priam's appeal to Achilles confronts that traditional notion that they must always consider each other as adversaries. By approaching the warrior as a 'father' rather than an antagonist, the king appeals to Achilles as 'one poor mortal to another' in an attempt to connect with him outside of their enmity. In doing so, Priam challenges the traditional notion that they must consider each other in terms of winning and losing, but rather should have 'pity for one another's losses', asserting that a mutual understanding can lead to them 'breaking free of obligation'. Priam's plea through fatherhood 'touches a sore spot' in Achilles, rekindling his humanity and gives rise to the opportunity for the protagonists to be compassionate towards each other in spite of their opposing roles. Though it is a temporary connection, it underscores that though humanity can be lost there is still the possibility for it to be restored in increasing power than before, resting in its ability to challenge the ravages of profound grief. Furthermore, the connection forged through sympathy spurs the protagonists to exercise free will in the face of a deterministic universe in a bid to achieve a measure of control over their fates. The resulting 11 days truce demonstrates a fleeting power over their destinies allows the two protagonists to metaphorically 'pause' the inevitable progression of fate, as the Greeks and Trojans to mourn for the dead before the ultimate destiny is fulfilled. Thus, the inexorable destruction of Troy is juxtaposed with the possibility of 'something new' and Malouf suggests that the intrusion of the latter on the former is a reflection of the (momentary) ability man has to govern himself,

which is achieved by the ability to for one to acknowledge and understand another's perspective.

Ransom raises the key issue of maintaining the human condition in the face of violence and cruelty that is war. Indeed, the inexorable losses sustained by some can be enough to shed someone's ability to understand and sympathize for another. However, Malouf asserts that the opportunity to rekindle one's humanity is more desirable and this restoration can occur in spite of the ravages of war, given that it is the ' something new' that allows us to transcend our brutal tendencies.