

The Song of Achilles: An Epic of Empathy by Panayiota “Nayia” Siderakis

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Received Date: 06th June 2022

Accepted Date: 14th September 2022

Published Date: 22nd September 2022

Citation: “Nayia” Siderakis, P., Yanqiu, X. The Song of Achilles: An Epic of Empathy by Panayiota “Nayia” Siderakis. *Innovative Journal of Language, Education & Technology*, 2, 2022. 005.

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Abstract

In *The Song of Achilles*, novelist Madeline Miller seeks to instill a wellspring of empathy within her readers. She achieves this by empowering her audience to engage with an array of characters from the first-person narrative perspective of a profoundly empathetic young man named Patroclus.

Through Patroclus’ eyes, readers bear witness to an assortment of relationships characterized by differing levels of empathy. His interactions with the enslaved Briseis, for example, illuminate her humanity despite the societal marginalization that she endures. Furthermore, Patroclus’ relationship with Achilles elucidates the empathy prevalent in their ill-fated romance in spite of societal homophobia, warfare, and death. Lastly, the parental relationships that exist in the lives of Patroclus and Achilles also reflect varying levels of empathy as evident through these characters’ respective interactions with Menoitius and Thetis. Overall, Miller’s character renderings and relationships ultimately challenge her audience to gauge the extent to which they exhibit empathy in their own lives.

Background on the Literature-Empathy Connection

Fiction can allow readers to feel characters’ emotions as if they were their own in a process of empathy cultivation. Empathy is defined as an understanding and awareness of the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others (Merriam-Webster). Fictional stories, including Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*, require readers to understand the multiple perspectives of differing characters. People who read such fiction are therefore likely to have highly-developed faculties of empathy (Zunshine, 2006). Literary works like Miller’s novel can thereby “...provide detailed moment-by-moment descriptions of the inner thoughts and feelings of its protagonists, thereby providing rich opportunities for readers to experience...empathy” (Lodge).

Through the novel’s emotive and intricate character relationships described in this paper, Miller captivates her readers on a profound level. Numerous studies show that such immersive literary works empower readers to gain “...higher levels of emotions that have been associated with...empathy, such as warmth, compassion and sympathy” (Stansfield and Bruce, 2014). This finding suggests that if individuals are able to infer fictional characters’ mental states as a result of literary engagement, then they may also be better equipped to empathize with people in real-world settings from a foundation of kindness. Studies have also found that empathy shown towards fictional characters can directly translate to empathy exhibited on behalf of real human experiences and feelings. Indeed, there is a positive relationship between the level of empathy garnered from a literary text and readers’ “...performance in a subsequent ‘real-world’ helping task” (Stansfield and Bunce, 2014). From this lens, Miller’s work can galvanize her readers to ultimately embody her message of empathy within the fabric of their lives.

Patroclus

Miller depicts Patroclus as a paradigm of empathy. This is partly because of his deep sensitivity to others’ experiences and willingness to act for their benefit. Patroclus “...would rather hide in the Greek camp healing the wounded, maintaining their glory, than attempting to gain glory for himself” (Lalerty). By designing the narrative from Patroclus’ point of view, Miller places empathy at the heart of her literary work. This is a striking contrast to *The Iliad*, which centered around Achilles and his militaristic feats. In *The Iliad*, Patroclus is hardly present. Although he had a gentle heart, this attribute was typically not characteristic of prominent male characters in classical works. As Miller stated, such protagonists were generally “...the strong-men, the clever diplomats, the unbending leaders...” (Otero 6). In contrast, Patroclus is a moral compass who prioritizes compassion “...when

all the other male characters are being guided by their eagerness of power and glory” (Otero 32). He is clearly not a warrior and instead tries to tend to the needs of underserved prisoners of war in Achilles’ camp. In alignment with his personality, Patroclus also perceives Achilles through empathetic eyes of compassion. “He focuses less on Achilles’ wrath and more on his beautiful qualities – his singing and his lyre playing, his grace. The first-person narrative puts us in Patroclus’ head, and so he does not emphasize his own qualities – his kindness, his empathy – but we recognize them” (Lloyd, 2022).

By privileging Patroclus’ perspective, Miller engages in minor-character elaboration. This is a literary technique in which a minor character from a canonical text becomes the protagonist of a new text. This choice allows Miller to enter “...the story from its margins...” (Struzziero and Maria, 2021). In so doing, she builds empathy in her audience for those who are marginalized by prioritizing their underrepresented perspectives. From the textual position of Patroclus, Miller can voice this character’s most compassionate feelings and grant them a position of prominence in her literary work. Through Patroclus’ eyes, she can thereby “...take a critical stance on the power dynamics between characters and the ongoing struggle for dominance based on a strategy of aggressive arrogation of roles” (Struzziero and Maria, 2021).

Patroclus and Briseis

One way in which Miller seeks to engender a sense of empathy in her readers is through her description of the relationship between Patroclus and Briseis. By way of background, Briseis is a widow who was captured by Achilles. In turn, she is treated as a slave and war prisoner who is a victim of Achilles’ whims. Interestingly, in *The Iliad*, Briseis is never referred to by her name. Instead, she is merely called the “daughter of Brises.” Furthermore, she appears on scant occasions that emphasize her enslavement. This accords with the common occurrence that, “[i]n *The Iliad*, women function as... property” (Leidich 2019). The only time Briseis is actually given a voice is when she speaks sorrowfully about Patroclus’ death.

Yet Miller imbues Briseis with a far more profound sense of personhood than that afforded her in *The Iliad*. Honoring Briseis’ humanity is a foundational step in Miller’s efforts to cultivate empathy for this character. Miller begins this process by revealing to her readers Briseis’ deeply personal backstory.

Readers bear witness to this young woman who commences her imprisonment without any knowledge of her captors’ language. She also lacks any sense of social standing due to her status as a war prisoner. Despite these setbacks, Briseis is able to draw upon her inner resilience to transform from timidity to fierce courageousness. She proactively learns the language of her conquerors in order to voice the evils of warfare that she experiences – despite the fact that this course of action can jeopardize her life. In fact, Briseis’ profound strength and insistence on her personhood empowers her to confront Phyrus, who threatens to sexually assault her. Although she was unsuccessful at killing him before he could commit this heinous crime, she manages to escape by jumping into the sea and meets her demise. At the sight of this innocent woman’s drowned body, Miller instills empathy in her readers because “...[h]er final gesture is the only alternative she is left with to take the narrative of her life in her own hands and assert her personal freedom.

With her final refusal to see her body appropriated and brutalized, helpless to defend herself, she subverts the rape script waiting for her – for any woman – taken prisoner” (Struzziero, 2021).

Prior to Briseis’ death, Miller forges a sense of empathy with her readers through her rendering of the relationship between Patroclus and Briseis. In the process of constructing their friendship, Miller leverages the few lines that Briseis is alorded in *The Iliad* when lamenting Patroclus’ death: “Patroclus - dearest joy of my heart, my harrowed, broken heart” (Homer, 1990), and “So now I mourn your death...you were always kind” (Homer, 1990). Miller builds upon these lines to convey Patroclus’ compassionate nature towards the captured Briseis. “[Miller] reinvents Briseis’ position and role, and makes her fully visible by adopting the sympathetic and close power of observation of Patroclus. He proves to be a precious ally for a vulnerable woman who has no protection, and is lonely, as he himself had been before meeting Achilles” (Struzziero, 2021). When Patroclus first meets her, he is emotionally moved by her wounded expression as a prisoner of war. Fueled by the empathy that he feels for her, Patroclus intervenes on her behalf before Agamemnon can draw upon “...his appetites” (Miller, 2022) to force her into sexual enslavement. To save her from this fate, Patroclus asks Achilles to claim her instead of Agamemnon. Patroclus’ deep empathy for Briseis’ plight sparks his much larger empathetic outpouring towards the traumatized conditions of many other girls who find themselves in a similar situation in his surroundings. He begins to see that their faces are filled with “large smears of grief that kept their eyes [...] wobbling and sloppy [...]. And bruises too, from fists or elbows, and sometimes perfect circles – spear-butts, to the forehead or temple” (Miller, 2012). In light of their disenfranchised circumstances, Patroclus endeavors to advocate on behalf of these innocent, captive girls. In turn, his empathy can inspire Miller’s audience to champion the plight of similarly disempowered people in their own lives.

In an act of reciprocity for Patroclus’ outpouring of empathy, Briseis begins to deeply care for Patroclus and Achilles. Her actions reinforce for Miller’s readers that empathy can be a self-perpetuating cycle that positively impacts both parties and fuels further empathetic acts. “She entertains them with strange and dreamlike tales, in an atmosphere of domestic tranquility that balances and contrasts the brutal world of war inside the Camp” (Struzziero, 2021). Rather than discriminate against this homosexual couple, Briseis’ empathy fosters a sense of inclusivity for their mutual love. Indeed, through her empathy, Miller forges for both Patroclus and Achilles a “...near-normative existence as a monogamous couple” (Cox-Wilmott). Although Briseis started out as an enslaved concubine who lacked social stature, her empathy empowered her to ultimately gain increasing prominence in Achilles’ and Patroclus’ tent. In fact, she gradually became “...a member of [their] circle, for life” (Miller, 2022).

Patroclus and Achilles

The relationship between Patroclus and Achilles is a focal point for Miller in her attempts to instill empathy within her readership. Miller expands upon Homer’s initial suggestion in *The Iliad* that Achilles felt deep empathy for Patroclus. Miller stated that a major inspiration for her novel was a burning desire to understand why Achilles – a demi-god – had a “...reaction so shocking in its intensity...” (Struzziero, 2022) when hearing about Patroclus’ death.

Consequently, she was driven to inquire into “...what it was about Patroclus and their relationship that could create that kind of crisis” (Miller). In the process of answering this question, she begins by exploring their possible backstory.

Being only thirteen, Patroclus is puzzled by the waves of empathy and love that he feels for Achilles. Achilles holds the status of a demi-god, which means that he is far more handsome and supple than any of his mortal peers. Enamored by Achilles’ striking attributes, Patroclus longs for a loving union with him. Patroclus “...greet[s] Achilles in the morning, helping him don his armour, and receives him at night, tending to wounds and soothing his mind and body. They are intimate, and there are touches, caresses, and kisses” (Gentzler, 2019). Essentially, Patroclus is strongly “...drawn toward the ideal Other. [It] is a love that magnifies the individual as a reReflection of the unapproachable Other whom [he] loves and who causes [him] to be” (Kristeva, 2014). This empathetic process of identification with the Other empowers Patroclus to progress from being rejected by his father and peers to gaining a sense of unity with Achilles. “Achilles and Patroclus epitomize the perfect bond of unconditional loyalty and allegiance between human beings, and care for each other, so theirs is a model of human relationships at large” (Struzziero, 2022). Throughout the novel, their mutual empathy surfaces amidst an ill-fated relationship, homosexual expressions of love, warfare, and death.

III-Fated Relationship

Unfortunately, a lingering malign harbinger besets the relationship between Patroclus and Achilles. In fact, this harrowing phenomenon is one avenue through which Miller seeks to forge empathy in her readership. A prophecy that followed Achilles from birth stated that he must choose between a short-lived life of glory or a longer life overshadowed by obscurity. In an attempt to instill empathy for their plight, “Miller ramps up the dramatic irony inherent in their story. Both know Achilles will never return from Troy: he is fated to die there. But Patroclus is too obscure to figure in prophecies, so he dreads the horror of life after Achilles’s death” (Haynes, 2022). Patroclus’ profound thoughts and emotions surrounding this jarring premonition instills deep empathy. Upon learning of the prophecy, Patroclus vows to Achilles, “I will never leave him. It will be this, always...” (Miller, 2020).

Despite the insurmountable obstacle that this couple confronts, Patroclus’ unshakeable resolve reverberates from the pages. Indeed, Patroclus’ stream of consciousness continually ruminates on this heinous prophecy about Achilles’ pending death at Troy. Patroclus frequently attempts to imagine “how it would end – spear-tip or sword point, or smashed by a chariot” (Miller, 2012). Wholly immersed by an overwhelming sense of empathy for his lover, Patroclus finds it difficult to even imagine life in his absence. Without even knowing that he will be the first to die, Patroclus was so moved by such empathy that he starts to pine for his own death: “I did not plan to live after he was gone” (Miller, 2022).

From Patroclus’ empathy-filled perspective, “...it is a death that liberates the lover from living a life-in-death without the beloved... (Struzzier, 2022). For his part, Achilles courageously reciprocates this empathetic sentiment. Achilles achieves this through “...his capacity for action in the full knowledge

of its fatal consequences to himself...his devotion to a friend or partner [and] his discovery of empathy” (Hedreen). In so doing, Miller challenges her readers to exhibit a similar sense of empathy-driven care on behalf of their own loved ones.

Homosexual Love

Through the homosexual relationship between Patroclus and Achilles, Miller also fosters empathy for the LGBTQ+ community. Her novel “...depicts young Achilles as a man not very concerned about his legacy, glory, or kleos, but rather one who is satisfied by sharing happiness in peace with his love Patroclus. In fact, when Patroclus warns him that if people find out about their relationship, ‘your honor could be darkened by it,’ Achilles simply responds: ‘then it is darkened’ (Miller, 2012)” (Lafierty). The stigma against the LGBTQ+ community to which Patroclus alludes is blatantly confronted by the empathy that Miller seeks to cultivate to combat homophobia in her readers’ contemporary context. As literary scholar Leticia Gonzales-Perez has noted, “This situation appeals to what we see nowadays, when people are still rejected for their sexual orientation or to the debate in many countries about gay marriage; through literature we can change the way many people think about homosexuality” (7). All too often, individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ face discrimination and other negative repercussions. Unfortunately, such relationships are “...conceived within the homophobic signifying economy as both uncivilized and unnatural” (Butler). Even Miller herself indicated that she wrote the novel, in part, in the hope “...that it might help to combat the homophobia that I see too often” (MadelineMiller.com).

Despite such obstacles, the intimate relationship between Patroclus and Achilles reveals a profound embrace of their self-awareness and gender identity. In fact, “By giving Patroclus and Achilles different characteristics in terms of their sexuality and desires, Miller widens the possibilities of forms of homosexuality...” (Van den Bogaard, 2018). Throughout their most intimate moments, Miller underscores their profound love for one another on both sensual and spiritual levels (Van den Bogaard, 2018). In so doing, their mutual love inspires readers to both honor their sexual identities and empathize with the humanity of members of the LGBTQ+ community. “The novel’s focus on the intimacy, respect and deep spiritual bond between the two heroes, on the tender eroticism of their relationship, should provide valuable insights into contemporary debates and perceptions of same-sex relationships” (Struzziero, 2022).

Warfare

The Patroclus-Achilles relationship also serves as a powerful empathetic commentary on the horrors of warfare. Through their bond, Miller “...reconfigures [The Iliad] by installing a different set of values and priorities, and offers an anti-war reading of the epic” (Struzziero, 2022). Toward the beginning of their relationship, Achilles and Patroclus sharply diverge with respect to their perspectives on engaging in acts of war. “Patroclus values compassion for others and their honor, over the acquisition of personal glory, whereas Achilles values his own glory over all...Achilles represents the archetypal hero, who uses a steel fist to serve justice gaining glory along the way, whereas Patroclus...values what Miller believes to be the main characteristic of a hero: compassion for others” (Lafierty). Patroclus was

often overwhelmed by the specter of Achilles returning from war covered in his victims' blood. Patroclus' thoughts along these lines also meander to empathizing with the prospect of victims' families suffering because of Achilles' deeds. During these instances, Patroclus associates Achilles with a Rood, "gush[ing] down from the mountain tops, gathering strength to sweep away what stood in its path: animals and houses and men" (Miller, 2022).

Patroclus' understanding of Achilles' militaristic actions problematizes war and champions empathy. When Patroclus is forced to engage in battle, he defies the attributes of traditional warmongers. Instead, Patroclus concedes, "Fear was twisting inside me, a wobbling cup of panic that threatened each moment to spill" (Miller). The sheer terror that Patroclus feels when battling at the prospect of taking another person's life underscores his empathy. His stream of consciousness reinforces the severe damage that war exacts on everyone involved. His memories in this regard appear in the form of traumatic visions of corpses and violence. Rather than envisioning bloodshed as a form of triumphant glory like Achilles does, Patroclus sees "...a burst of spraying splinters of bronze and blood. A writhing mass of men and screams.. the crash of shields...a jumble of bodies" (Miller, 2012), actually "...just body parts..." (Miller). Moved by such profound empathy for his opponents, Patroclus is overcome by nausea, vomits profusely, and is unable to kill others. Indeed, Miller's richly developed, empathetic lens on warfare can ignite a profound sense of pacifism in her readers.

Death

Patroclus' death heralds the culmination of Achilles' empathy for his beloved. Despite Achilles' best efforts to save his partner, Patroclus ultimately perishes on the battlefield in Achilles' arms.

Patroclus' stream of consciousness during his last remaining seconds of life reveals Achilles' palpable empathy for him. Patroclus says, "[Achilles] holds me so tightly I can feel the faint beat of his chest, like the wings of a moth..." (Miller). In fits of uncontrollable grief, Achilles screams Patroclus' name continuously and pulls his hair out of his own scalp. "The great half-god warrior—who carelessly defies rules, and condemns a whole army to death—comes completely unglued, desperate with grief and rage" (MadelineMiller.com)."

In the midst of his overwhelming empathy, Achilles longs for his own demise. "The hero's intense grief and anger over his dead friend drives him to thoughts of self-destruction, similar to those Patroclus cherishes when he imagines that Achilles will die before him" (Struzziero, 2022). Miller's prose enables Achilles to embody the empathetic statement that he made in *The Iliad* upon Patroclus' death when stating, "My dear comrade's death — / Patroclus—the man I loved beyond all other comrades,/ loved as my own life — I've lost him — Hector's killed him.../ My spirit rebels —I've lost the will to live" (Homer, 1990).

At the funeral, Achilles' spirit rebels against his heartbreaking loss when he Ragrantly grieves in public (Liedich). Nevertheless, Patroclus' demise did not terminate the empathy that each of these lovers experienced for one another. After Patroclus' cremation and before Achilles rejoins his fellow militia on the battlefield, Achilles tells his men: "When I am dead, I charge

you to mingle our ashes and bury us together" (Miller 334). This empowers Achilles to fulfill their mutual wish to remain joined in perpetuity. "Their souls as one, still united in a companionship that began in childhood and survives death" (Struzziero, 2022). At the same time, Miller's empathetic rendering of their relationship enables her readers to seek similarly powerful loving relationships in their own lives – despite mortality.

Parental Relationships

Patroclus and Menoitius

Miller leverages the relative lack of empathy prevalent in the respective parental relationships of Patroclus and Achilles to underscore the importance of this attribute among her readership.

Throughout the novel, Patroclus seeks empathy from his father Menoitius – but to no avail. "Menoitius...lacks any feelings of fondness for his son and is interested only in scrabbling to keep his kingdom" (Struzziero, 2022). Menoitius is described as "...a king and the son of kings" (Miller) who stands in stark contrast with his son, who he considers to be woefully inadequate by comparison. For example, Menoitius observes with disappointment how Patroclus is too slow to compete in even the youngest athletic tournament. While gesturing to Patroclus' faster cohorts, Menoitius turns to him and expresses his frustration by stating, "'That is what a son should be'" (Miller). Menoitius considers with disdain how his son does not possess the archetypal qualities of a hero in his historical context, such as swiftness and physical strength. As such, Menoitius designates Patroclus as unworthy of empathy.

Being an impressionable youth, Patroclus begins to internalize his father's glaring lack of empathy for his plight. Patroclus underscores his own inadequacy by using mostly negative adjectives to introduce himself to Miller's readership. Patroclus states, "I was not fast. I was not strong. I could not sing" (Miller, 2012). Due to his father's attitude, Patroclus begins to define himself in terms of all that he cannot do – rather than his more positive qualities. "In time, Patroclus is affected by his father's disregard and scorn that he persuades himself that he is 'unsightly, unpromising, and uninterested'" (Struzziero, 2022). The fallout of Menoitius' dearth of empathy for his son is that Patroclus views himself as "...negligible" (Miller, 2022). Throughout the novel's opening pages, Patroclus is beset by his father's continual scowls and scorn.

Menoitius postulates that one of the only possible redeeming qualities for his son is to marry into an honorable family (Van den Bogaard, 2018). Menoitius' lack of empathy for Patroclus engenders a view of his son as utterly dependent on others for any modicum of value. In turn, Menoitius invites nine-year-old Patroclus to Tyndareus' court as a suitor for his daughter Helen's hand in marriage.

Upon Patroclus' rejection, his ostracization by his father is nearly complete. The ultimate blow occurs when Patroclus accidentally kills a boy at the age of ten. In response, Menoitius unhesitatingly orphans his son, exiling him to Phthia. Taken to its worst extreme, Menoitius' lack of empathy contributes to Patroclus' doubts of his own inherent worth as a human being. Patroclus asks, "Was I a changeling, inhuman?" (Struzziero, 2022). Although Menoitius' lack of empathy blinds him from recognizing his son's positive qualities,

it illuminates for Miller's readers its profound importance within their own real-world parental roles.

Thetis and Achilles

Miller further underscores the critical role that empathy plays in human development when describing the relationship between Achilles and his mother Thetis. Her lack of empathy for Achilles and his love for Patroclus leave Miller's readers with an impression of her callousness. Patroclus perceives her intense displeasure with him as a suitor for her son and cannot even lift his gaze to meet her cold eyes. In fact, when Patroclus and Achilles kiss for the first time, she does not empathize with her son's love for Patroclus. Instead, she arranges for this couple's immediate separation. "She will do the same when she hides Achilles at Lycomedes' court among his daughters and tricks Achilles into marrying Deidameia in secret and getting her pregnant, promising her son that she will disclose his whereabouts to Patroclus, a promise she does not intend to keep" (Struzziero, 2022). Perhaps Thetis' most striking lack of empathy for her son occurs after he defeats Hector in response to Patroclus' death and drags Hector's body around the walls of Troy over the course of several days. Upon beholding this incident, Thetis does not seem to possess any empathy for her son's loss, but merely demands that he returns Hector's body. Faced with his mother's lack of empathy, Achilles defiantly refuses to oblige her wishes. He also seizes the opportunity to remind her about her disdain for his relationship with Patroclus and even accuses her of contributing to his demise. Her sheer lack of empathy for Achilles' plight culminates when she tells him, "I am done. There is no more I can do to save you" (Miller 331). These were the last words that Achilles' mother spoke to him while he was still alive.

Thetis' lack of empathy for Achilles even persists after his death. "The next time she is anywhere close to her son is after his death, near the pyre on which Achilles has been cremated, no evident emotion or feeling emanating from her" (Struzziero, 2022). Rather than draw upon empathy for her son's plight, Thetis continues to prioritize her own agenda over his needs. Throughout the novel, her lack of empathy for Achilles fuels her suspicion of "...anyone who might distract her son from pursuing eternal glory or compete with her affection for him" (Struzziero, 2022) – including Achilles himself.

After cataloging the relationship between Thetis and Achilles to its breaking point, Miller proceeds to underscore the critical importance of empathy to human flourishing through Thetis' transformation. An inkling of Thetis' empathy for Achilles begins to surface when she visits her son's tomb on a daily basis. Indeed, Patroclus facilitates her fledgling empathy by engaging in a wordless conversation with her from the underworld towards the novel's conclusion. "He shares with Thetis his past tender memories and images, not of the semi-god warrior who killed so many men and women, destroyed so many families, but of the beautiful young man he loved, the one who could play the lyre and sing beautifully, who returned Hector's body to Priam because the old king reminded him of his own father suffering for the loss of his only child" (Struzziero, 2022). By promulgating this image of Achilles, Patroclus endeavors to teach Thetis about the importance of empathy. In fact, Thetis eventually yields to an overwhelming wave of empathy in the last section of the text. In an emotionally moving climax, she finally

acknowledges her prior lack of empathy and begins to atone for it. "It is out of an act that is both of love and (self)forgiveness that, at last, Thetis marks Patroclus' name on the tomb near Achilles,' thus allowing them to be finally reunited in the underworld" (Struzziero, 2022).

This was not merely Thetis' ultimate gesture of empathy toward her son, but Miller's message to her readers that it is never too late to undertake empathetic acts.

Conclusion

In *The Song of Achilles*, Miller endeavors to cultivate a sense of empathy in her audience. She achieves this by privileging Patroclus' empathetic narrative lens. From this perspective, Miller advocates against enslavement through Patroclus' interactions with Briseis. In addition, she challenges homophobia by humanizing his relationship with Achilles. Their romance promotes an empathetic form of love that "...transcends gender and time..." and "...model[s] the kind of relationship we all aspire to" (MadelineMiller.com). Miller also champions empathetic parenting through the disturbing counter-examples of Menoitius and Thetis. In so doing, Miller strives to expand the capacity of her readers to relate to the plight of others on a deeply personal level. This can forge a passion for promoting empathy-driven acts and ultimately craft a more compassionate world.

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