

## A Study on How Women Contribute to Toxic Masculinity in “The Song of Achilles” by Madeline Miller

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### Abstract

This qualitative study aims to investigate how women contribute to toxic masculinity in the novel “The Song of Achilles” by Madeline Miller. Thetis, Achilles’ mother, who interestingly, is also the most powerful female character in the novel in terms of strength and uses other women as pawns in her scheme to make Achilles immortal. Achilles’s son Pyrrhus under the influence of Thetis, also made slaves of the free, raped women and died because of this. By using Transactional Reader-response theory and content analysis, based on Achilles and Pyrrhus’ behaviors and actions, the researchers’ idea is confirmed that women can contribute to toxic masculinity just as much as men can. The results of this study also showed that women in the novel can contribute to toxic masculinity, by both practicing it and teaching it to their sons.

**Keywords:** Toxic Masculinity

### Introduction

Toxic masculinity, a chronic social phenomenon rooted in old gender standards, has received increased attention in recent debate. This research focuses on the portrayal of toxic masculinity in Madeline Miller's novel "The Song of Achilles."

The importance of this study stems from the critical necessity to deconstruct and appreciate the various ways in which toxic masculinity shows itself, particularly via the perspective of literature. Understanding how society’s expectations are mirrored and reinforced in fictional narratives becomes increasingly important as societal expectations shift.

It not only shed light on the complexity of toxic masculinity through a literary lens, but also contributes to a more comprehensive knowledge of gender relations.

The importance of studying toxic masculinity in literature becomes clear as it provides a unique prism through which societal norms and expectations may be both reflected and challenged. We hope to uncover layers of behavior and ideas profoundly ingrained in our cultural fabric by diving into how characters, particularly women like Thetis, contribute to

toxic masculinity. The importance of studying toxic masculinity in literature becomes clear as it provides a unique prism through which societal norms and expectations may be both reflected and challenged. We hope to uncover layers of behavior and ideas profoundly ingrained in our cultural fabric by diving into how characters, particularly women like Thetis, contribute to toxic masculinity.

### **Purpose of the Study**

When toxic masculinity is constantly being reproduced, it puts men trying to achieve this ideal at risk and can also cause them to harm others. To be considered "masculine", a man must be heterosexual, violent, dominant, belligerent, insensitive, competitive, and successful (Morettini, 2016). Any man who does not fit these traits is automatically marginalized and subject to the submission of his more "masculine" peers. Of course, women never race, which leads to them being seen as inferior.

Too often, articles that are discriminatory against women appear in the Malaysian media. Most of these articles focus on men talking about women's behavior or dress, disregarding women's right to behave and dress as they please. An article in Anwar (2019) criticized a People's Justice Party senator for his remarks about the need for sexual harassment laws to protect men from women, "whose actions, words and manner of dress can incite men to commit incest, rape, sexual harassment", or watch pornography. Comments like these reinforce the idea that women are nothing more than coveted objects and are inherently evil creatures designed to deceive men.

The denial of women, gay men, and bisexual men as human beings is one of the most prevalent manifestations of toxic masculinity. Men who practice toxic masculinity frequently deny the existence of people who disagree with their values. Datuk Mohamaddin Ketapi, the tourism minister of Malaysia, came under fire at a Berlin travel fair for saying there are no homosexuals in Malaysia. He said, "I don't think we have anything like that in our country," in response to a German broadcaster's question about whether Malaysia is a safe destination for Jews and homosexuals. Gays? No such beings exist in our nation, according to the Malaysian Minister of Tourism," (2019).

The purpose of this study is to explore how women can contribute to toxic masculinity that can further the notion that there can only be a single version of manhood.

### **Significance of Study**

The text investigates how harmful masculinity, which is deeply embedded in the traditional language use of gendered nouns, necessitates an inclusive analysis to reveal its various manifestations. It focuses on the portrayal of harmful masculinity in Madeline Miller's novel "The Song of Achilles." The importance of this study is highlighted by the urgent need to investigate the complex layers of harmful masculinity, particularly in the field of literature. Understanding and contextualizing these changes through the lens of literature becomes increasingly important for facilitating nuanced discussions about social norms as social expectations continue to evolve. This study adds to the larger debate on harmful masculinity by providing a unique perspective from the realm of drama. We hope to provide valuable insights into the complex interaction between historical narratives and social beliefs by investigating how character actions, particularly those involving women like Thetis, actively influence the perpetuation of harmful masculinity. The importance of studying harmful masculinity through literary frameworks goes beyond academia; it is a powerful tool for social reflection and transformation. Understanding how harmful norms are mirrored and

challenged in fictional stories allows educators, researchers, and the public to engage in mindful conversations about masculine behavior. Furthermore, this study strategically fills a critical gap in the existing literature by emphasizing the critical role of women in the spread of harmful masculinity. This novel viewpoint contributes to a more complete understanding of how linguistic structures related to gendered nouns are negotiated, accepted, or resisted in academic settings, thus contributing to a more comprehensive discourse on gender equality. In essence, our research not only provides a critical examination of a literary work, but it also serves as a catalyst for social change. By peeling back, the layers of harmful masculinity, this study hopes to spark conversations that challenge dominant norms and advocate for a more inclusive and equitable social narrative.

## **Literature Review**

### **Toxic Masculinity**

The term 'toxic masculinity' was coined by psychologist Shepherd Bliss during the Mythopoetic Men's Movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Wright, 2018) to distinguish between positive and negative masculinity traits. Toxic masculinity, according to Bliss, is the root cause of all evil in the world (Kimmel, 1995). These toxic behaviors, according to Bliss, include avoiding emotional expression, aspiring for complete dominance in all things physical, sexual, and intellectual, and devaluing women's opinions, bodies, and sense of self (Barr, 2019; Jaffe, 2020). Douglass (2017), on the other hand, believes that toxic masculinity is based on sexual conquest and violence, and that men appear to prioritize these traits.

Raewynn Connell, a sociologist, rejected the idea that there is only one type of masculinity in her book "Masculinities," believing that masculinity is the result of "relationships and behaviors, rather than a fixed set of identities and attributes" (Connell, 2018; Salter, 2019). When society sets unattainable masculinity standards for all men to strive for, it causes a lot of frustration when those standards are not met. Toxic masculinity is an extension of traditional masculinity, which is defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as "stoicism, competitiveness, dominance, and aggression" (Pappas, 2019). These effects include violence, transphobic, misogynistic, homophobic, or racist bullying, sexual assault or harassment, excessive drinking, physical injuries from fighting, steroids, body dysmorphia, drug-taking, and the inability to express emotions.

However, the term "toxic masculinity" implies that men are not the problem (de Boise, 2019; Barr, 2019; Barnes-Smith, 2019). McIntosh (2016) of the YouTube channel Pop Culture Detective stated in a video titled "Toxic Masculinity" that toxic masculinity is not what men are, but what some men do. Emotional detachment, hyper-competitiveness, aggression, intimidation, violence, sexual objectification, and sexual predatory behavior are not inherent or biological traits of all men but have become normalized as a way for men to behave in most, if not all, societies (McIntosh, 2016).

Toxic masculinity does not always have to be obvious and extreme. An ABC article highlights behaviors of abusive men and challenges all men to ask themselves whether they are knowingly or unknowingly, behaving in an abusive manner. Some of the behaviors listed in the article that counted as abusive include 1) Criticizing her clothes or her body shape, 2) Checking up on her, 3) Using jealousy to justify your actions, 4) Putting her down, 5) Making her feel guilty, 6) Trying to make her feel guilty about not having sex, and 7) Making her feel like she's crazy. This article claims that if the men who do not see these behaviors as a problem are more likely to escalate into the extreme, as told by clinical and forensic psychologist Dr. Katie Seidler, who says that toxic masculine behaviors like domestic violence actually comes

from an innate desire to exert power and control over others (Om, 2018). Arguably, this sort of thinking is what causes men to believe they should be the best at everything they do, because society has pre-determined for men to be positioned at the top.

Toxic masculine behaviors paraded in the media as something that is seemingly normal further influences the masses. According to Wilson, Smith, Potter, Kunkel, Linz, Colvin, and Donnerstein (2006), two out of three television programmes in the United States contained traces of physical aggression. A study carried out on the appeal of violent content in entertainment media among Malaysian audiences seemed to believe that is the case. Rahim, Ping, Yin, and Phil (2015) found that one of the reason violence in media content continues to thrive is because it is attractive to audiences. In the article, it is stated that youths are not particularly influenced by violent content in movies, but it remains the most important part of their enjoyment; "The more violent the film, the more interesting it is. The disconcerting proof lies in the fact that the Malaysian box office hits tend to always revolve around the same topics and plots – toxic relationships, gangsters, illegal street racers, horror and slapstick comedy ("Why Malaysian Films Aren't Attracting Moviegoers", 2018).

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Question**

The following research question was addressed in this study.

Research Question: How do women in the novel contribute to toxic masculinity?

### **Research Design**

The research method most suitable for the study is qualitative research. This is because qualitative research relies on the subjective impressionism of the sole researchers and the texts being studied (Rudestam and Newton, 2015, p. 51). Due to the nature of the data, i.e., words, qualitative research fits best when it comes to this study (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 52). Reader-response theory is the literary theory chosen by the researchers to carry out this study, and transactional reader-response theory is the most suitable because interpretations of data come from the researchers alone.

The research design chosen is content analysis as the data comes in the form of text (Rudestam & Newton, 2015, p. 43). Content analysis is used to ascertain the presence of concepts from qualitative sources of data, and in this case, that data is text ("Content Analysis", n.d.) Content analysis is chosen because people are not required to be included in the sources of data. ("Content Analysis", n.d.) The primary source is the novel "The Song of Achilles" by Madeline Miller. The secondary sources include website articles, journal articles, online newspaper articles, and books that mention: the effects of toxic masculinity, and the role women can play in reinforcing the concept of toxic masculinity. Both sources will be read, understood, and analyzed by the researchers and the findings will be recorded in the next chapter.

### **Reader-Response Theory**

Reader-response theory is a literary theory that assumes a literary work has a transaction between a reader and the text being read. There are five approaches when it comes to reader-response criticism, the first being transactional reader-response theory, which involves a mutual relationship between the meaning of a text and the personal interpretation of a reader (Tyson, 2006). Second is affective stylistics, and critics that employ this theory believe a text does not exist as meaningful before it is read (Tyson, 2006). The third approach is called

subjective reader-response theory, which depends on multiple readers' meanings and interpretations (Tyson, 2006). The fourth is psychological reader-response theory, which states that a reader's motives affect the way they analyze a given text (Tyson, 2006). Lastly, social reader-response theory deals with an 'interpretive community', where readers are categorized based on whether they share similar interpretations (Tyson, 2006). The chosen type of reader-response theory for this study is transactional reader-response theory because it involves the researchers creating meaning out of the text (Tyson, 2006).

### **Data Analysis**

Firstly, the researchers will read "The Song of Achilles" by Madeline Miller in its entirety whilst gathering data in the form of quotations to serve as textual evidence that relates to the research questions. Then, the researchers will group this textual evidence based on the research questions they belong to which are either; the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity (internalized homophobia and the sexual objectification of women), or how women can contribute to toxic masculinity. Next, the researchers will employ content analysis to present their findings and discussions to answer the research questions posed. Because the researchers have chosen transactional reader-response theory, the discussions presented stem from their own interpretations of "The Song of Achilles". Textual evidence will be used to support the discussions of toxic masculinity with reference to the male and female characters of the novel. To answer the research question, the researchers will investigate how women can contribute to toxic masculinity and will focus on the character Thetis.

### **Results**

#### **Research Question: How do women in the novel contribute to toxic masculinity?**

##### **Thetis' Influence on her son, Achilles**

It is interesting to note that majority of the research and sources cited in this paper's literature review discussed men and their responsibilities for maintaining and promoting toxic masculinity. But the researchers discovered that throughout this novel, women can also support toxic masculinity and promote it as an ideal, either for themselves or for their sons. In this instance, the researchers will focus on Achilles' mother Thetis. She tried to control her own son by holding him to impossible standards because she was a goddess as well as an immortal. All of this contributed to Achilles' suffering and, ultimately, death at the novel's conclusion.

##### **Thetis' Superior Complex**

Reader discovers that nymphs do not view human men favorably and that Thetis now has a greater hatred for mortal men because of being raped and removed from her home (p. 18). It should come as no surprise that she grew to absolutely hate having Patroclus around her only child, Achilles, as she saw Patroclus' frailty as beneath the god Achilles (p. 52, p. 75, p. 160). It's interesting that Thetis, who exhibits toxic masculinity, is one of only two physically strong female characters in the novel. Readers can observe toxic masculinity in the two sons she raised, Achilles and Pyrrhus, who is the son of Achilles. The first thing Achilles revealed to Patroclus was Thetis's desire for him to excel as a warrior (p. 36). Achilles talked about what she expected of him rather than how much he loved his mother or the memories they shared as mother and son. Thetis upholds values that toxic masculinists revere, such as physical prowess, honor, and fame. She sows seeds about the value of upholding these ideals in

Achilles' mind by reminding him that doing so will earn him fame and respect from all men (p. 49); she even goes so far as to say that she wants Achilles to become a god (p. 51). Achilles begins to think that toxic masculine ideals and notions are significant, and he constantly talks about being the greatest warrior of his era: "My mother says I am even better than Heracles was" (p. 54).

### **Achilles' Learned Arrogance**

Thetis' influence on Achilles was stronger than he would like to admit. Achilles grew to become more prideful and arrogant over the course of the novel, to Patroclus' surprise. It was inevitable, especially when both his parents as well as the people around him placed him on a pedestal for his god-like strength and not for whom he is as a person. The first instance where Achilles started distancing himself from other, lesser men, was when he told Patroclus that he was not like the previous demigods and warriors, "They never let you be famous and happy [...] I'm going to be the first" (p. 98). Despite being hesitant about joining the war, Achilles eventually changed his mind when reminded of the honor and glory he will attain as '*Aristos Achaion*', the best of the Greeks. Patroclus tried to stop Achilles from joining the war but knew that there was nothing he could do to stop Thetis' influence, "*She knew this was coming, I realized. She wants him to go*" (p. 107). Although he is only a teenager at this point in the novel, and one of the youngest men to join the war, Achilles expected special treatment and did not wish to do anything that showed he was of lower rank than the other princes, "He did not kneel. He did not call out a greeting to the great king or incline his head or offer a gift. He did nothing but stand straight, chin proudly lifted, before them all" (p. 183). The way he introduces himself also sounds like Thetis put words in his mouth, something readers never see him do during his earlier years with Patroclus, "I am Achilles, son of Peleus, god-born, best of the Greeks," he said. "I have come to bring you victory" (p. 183).

Achilles also admitted to being uncaring about the existence of others, but expected them to know who he was, "It's simpler if they just remember me" (p. 248). Another example of his hubris was when Agamemnon took Briseis, Achilles' war prize away from him as penance for his arrogance. Achilles refused to help Briseis, partly because he was too proud to give in to Agamemnon's demands, and partly because he was jealous of the relationship Patroclus had with Briseis. When confronted by Patroclus, Achilles shows no remorse despite knowing that Briseis has been given away to be raped by Agamemnon. Patroclus described Achilles as being someone he has never met before (p. 274). Before he pulled out of the war, Achilles arrogantly told Agamemnon that the future of the war will be in shambles because of his absence, "Your words today have caused your own death, and the death of your men. I will fight for you no longer. Without me, your army will fall. Hector will grind you to bones and bloody dust, and I will watch it and laugh. You will come, crying for mercy, but I will give none. They will all die, Agamemnon, for what you have done here" (p. 268). Allowing thousands of men to die for his own ego and pride is toxic masculinity at its worst.

### **A Life of Fame and Godhood or Life as a Nobody**

Aside from that, Thetis had played a role in convincing Achilles that he would be immortal. It was too late when Thetis changed her mind about allowing him to join the war and gain fame and immortality. Nothing mattered more to Achilles than becoming somebody, not even his love for Patroclus (p. 158). When Odysseus told Achilles that if he did not join the war, he would live happily with Patroclus and grow old together, Achilles reacted negatively (p. 155).

Odysseus recognized that this was the only way to persuade Achilles to join the war and narrated,

*“That if you do not come to Troy, your godhead will wither in you, unused. Your strength will diminish. At best, you will be like Lycomedes here, moldering on a forgotten island with only daughters to succeed him. Scyros will be conquered soon by a nearby state; you know this as well as I. They will not kill him; why should they? He can live out his years in some corner eating the bread they soften for him, senile and alone. When he dies, people will say, who?” The words filled the room, thinning the air until we could not breathe. Such a life was a horror.” (p. 156)*

Life with Achilles was enough for Patroclus, but not for Achilles. Patroclus described Odysseus' words as a "nightmare" for Achilles, who would rather die young and famous than old and happy (p. 158). Perhaps therefore Thetis took Achilles aside every day without fail to talk to him privately, and the meetings have only increased since Patroclus' arrival. Achilles started to confide in Thetis more than he did Patroclus at this point in the novel. At this point in the novel, Achilles began to confide in Thetis more than he did in Patroclus. All he wanted to say was how angry he was at Agamemnon for tarnishing his immortal reputation and supposed fame (p. 282). Instead of listening to reason, he also blamed Patroclus for being on Agamemnon's side, when all Patroclus wanted was to save Briseis from a cruel fate. Yet, all Achilles could think of was how he would look like in other men's eyes if he were to take Briseis back and rejoin the war (p. 280). Patroclus confirmed that Thetis was behind the plan to withdraw from the war and let men die, saying, "This is the moment that Achilles and his mother have summoned: the death of men."

### **Overwhelming Desire for Control**

Another toxic masculinity characteristic was Thetis' need to be always in charge. She has a greater tendency to go overboard. Men who engage in toxic masculinity attempt to dominate and control those around them only because they feel their own lives are out of control, as discussed in literature review of this article (Om, 2018). Thetis attempted to keep Patroclus and Achilles apart whenever she thought he was having a little too much of an impact (p. 85). She repeatedly did this; initially by telling Chiron to forbid Patroclus from pursuing Achilles into the mountains (p. 74); and later once they had left the mountains (p. 114). Thetis explicitly acknowledged to Patroclus that she was indeed doing that, saying, "I should have sent him long ago. Try not to follow (p. 61). Thetis, who was the only character to consistently disobey her orders, intimidates and uses force against the weaker Patroclus when she doesn't get her way. Having once believed that she had the ability to kill him (p. 97), Patroclus has refrained from doing certain things around her out of fear of upsetting her (p. 104). She deceived Achilles twice to force him to have sex with Deidameia because Thetis disapproved of their relationship (p. 130). Achilles followed instructions because he believed his mother would genuinely tell Patroclus where he was hidden (p. 126). This demonstrates that Thetis was not above using other women as bargaining chips and chess pieces. What's worse, after Deidameia gave birth to a son, Thetis snatched Pyrrhus away to raise as her own as a replacement for the now dead Achilles (p. 162).

### Achilles' Confidence in Thetis' Parenting Skills

Achilles genuinely thought his mother was a good mother. This demonstrates how fully he conforms to the toxic masculine ideals she instilled in him. He advised Patroclus that giving Pyrrhus to Thetis to raise is a wise decision because "He will be better with her" (p. 255). Achilles may not have meant that his son would be happier living near nymphs, as implied by the ambiguous narration and wording in this passage, but rather that he would be a better warrior than Achilles. Earlier, Patroclus made a comment about what might have happened if Thetis had been successful in stealing Achilles from him.

*"She would take him to the caves of the sea and teach him contempt for mortals. She would feed him with the food of the gods and burn his human blood from his veins. She would shape him into a figure meant to be painted on vases, to be sung of in songs, to fight against Troy. I imagined him in black armor, a dark helmet that left him nothing but eyes, bronze greaves that covered his feet. He stands with a spear in each hand and does not know me"* (p. 115).

Patroclus was correct in his suspicions, because Pyrrhus turned out to be an even worse version of Achilles, the son Thetis preferred to the bereaved Achilles (p. 330). Pyrrhus only appeared in a few pages by the end of the novel, but he managed to exhibit extremely toxic masculine traits in his short life. He enslaved his late father's companions, raped women, kidnapped married women from their husbands, and killed without remorse; one of whom was a baby (p. 344). All that Thetis found lacking in Achilles was Pyrrhus' violence, aggression, objectification of women, and arrogance. Following Patroclus and Achilles' deaths, Pyrrhus refused to believe a word of their love story, denying the burial of "a slave" in "his master's tomb" (p. 341). He also repeats the intriguingly familiar words, "And why should this man be buried beside Aristos Achaion?" (p. 340). Because she had always believed that Patroclus was a commoner whose presence would degrade Achilles, Thetis' influence and toxic masculine teachings dominated both sons she had raised (p. 347). "You said that Chiron ruined him [...] You are the one who ruined him," Patroclus said as a ghost, bound to Earth because Thetis and Pyrrhus refused to let him join Achilles in the afterlife, consider how he will behave.

### Implications And Recommendations

Toxic masculinity is a topic that is rarely addressed as a root cause of bad decisions and behavior in novels. The new perspective of toxic masculinity and the role it plays in this study will hopefully propel other researchers to consider it as a topic that can trigger social discussions in other novels. This study has provided a new possible 'root cause' of the evils that some men (and women) do and could be investigated in more details in future studies. In "The Song of Achilles" this study researched on what happens after one practice toxic masculinity and did not shed much light on how toxic masculinity can emerge. Future studies can even investigate this same novel in terms of how toxic masculinity began sprouting its seeds in the characters that practice it. Lastly, since this research also found that women can contribute to toxic masculinity, this can be researched more in depth in future studies when analyzing different novels.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the researchers found that women can contribute to toxic masculinity, either by practicing it themselves or teaching it to their sons; or both. The findings support the ideas that toxic masculinity is a product of hegemonic masculinity and dictated by the patriarchy or



the ruling class. In the novel's case, the 'organization' that determined toxic masculine ideals were the Greek gods. The teachings were eventually adopted by Greek society, and have prevailed amongst fathers, mothers, and sons. Another interesting aspect of the findings was that it agreed with the sources as in the literature review; 1) that all men benefited from hegemonic masculinity whether they conform to it or not, 2) that not all men practice toxic masculinity, 3) that men can harm themselves and those around them by practicing toxic masculinity. This study also triggered an important discussion not found in the aforementioned sources; that women are very much a part of the toxic masculinity cycle.

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