

# An Investigation into the Harmful Impacts of Toxic Masculinity Depicted in Madeline Miller's "The Song of Achilles"

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## Abstract

This qualitative study aims to investigate two aspects of toxic masculinity in the novel "The Song of Achilles" by Madeline Miller. These two aspects are the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity on the male and female characters of the novel. By using Transactional Reader-response theory and content analysis, the two detrimental effects found to be present in the novel are internalised homophobia and the sexual objectification of women. In the classic case of internalised homophobia, one takes all the judgement, hatred, stereotypes, and hostility towards LGBT community and directs it to themselves. Meanwhile, sexually objectifying women is common in Greek society as found in this novel, where women are reduced to only their looks. 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, Internalised Homophobia, Sexual Objectification.

## Introduction

The Song of Achilles, author Madeline Miller's best-selling novel, retells the events of Homer's Iliad. The 2012 book reinvents the relationship between the ancient Greek Trojan War heroes Achilles and Patroclus. Told in the first person by Patroclus, the story explores the central themes of ancient Greek mythology, particularly the constancy of fate and the quest for fame. The novel begins with Patroclus recounting his birth and childhood. The son of King Menoetius, the diminutive and bullied Patroclus dismays his father. Menoetius takes the 9-year-old Patroclus as a suitor to Tyndareus' court and obtains his daughter Helen. Patroclus' lawsuit is inevitably dismissed, but he must take a blood oath to protect Helen's marriage.

## 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 practise 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).

This research will focus on the effects toxic masculinity can have on gay men (internalised homophobia) and women (sexual objectification).

## **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 behaviours, 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 behaviours, 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.

### **Internalised Homophobia**

Internalised homophobia is the outcome of absorbing the biases, prejudices and hatred towards members of the LGBT community reinforced by society and redirecting these biases to ourselves (Easton, 2020; Meyer and Dean, 1998). The whole idea behind internalised homophobia consists of; negative attitudes toward homosexuality in general, finding it hard to come out of the closet, not feeling like one can relate to other LGBT individuals, as well as discomfort with same-sex sexual activity (Meyer & Dean, 1998). It is important to point out that it can rear its ugly head in those who have or have yet to come out of the closet in the form of self-hatred, shame, fear, anxiety, and depression; all results of heteronormativity instilled in them as children. This is supported by Dr. Kort (2018), who argued that the message that these children grow up with is crystal clear; "I'm bad, I'm wrong, the world is dangerous, I'm unsafe and must keep my true feelings secret."

The unachievable standards set by hegemonic masculinity results in frustration. When men try to conform to these ideals and find themselves falling short, they often engage in toxic masculine behaviours in an effort to compensate for what they lack, knowingly or unknowingly. In a Master's dissertation written by Thepsourinthone (2017), that investigates hegemonic masculinity and its relations to internalised homophobia among gay men, results showed that internalised homophobia is a direct result of hegemonic masculinity. The study argued that internalised homophobia stems from anti-effeminacy, or in other words, the fear of femininity (Thepsourinthone, 2017). Because society perceives all homosexual men as effeminate and therefore, not conforming to the ideals of heteronormativity (the belief that heterosexuality is the default setting of every man and woman), homosexual men are grouped into the same category 'real' men should never be lumped with: women (Provence et al., 2014). Thepsourinthone's paper argues that there are prejudices even among gay men, towards effeminate gay men; citing Clarkson's (2006), analysis of comments from an online discussion board. One comment said "if I can tell they're gay, then they aren't my type (even a hint of femininity in a guy will turn me off)" (p. 203). The paper also cited O'Neil, Helms, Gable, David, and Wrightsman (1986), revisiting of the definition of homophobia as the fear of homosexuals and the fear of being a homosexual because Thepsourinthone believed that this definition included the experiences of both heterosexual men and homophobic men (Thepsourintone, 2017). Ultimately, Thepsourinthone came up with an entirely new definition of homophobia to include his newfound ideas of the relations between homosexuality, femininity, and hegemonic masculinity as; "the fear of femininity and the fear of being effeminate" (p. 10).

### **Sexual Objectification of Women**

One of the most glaring traits of toxic masculinity is the devaluation of women (Salter, 2019). Everyday 'harmless' phrases such as "you throw like a girl," "don't cry like a little bitch", "man up", "be a man", "no homo", "that's gay", and "don't be a pussy" all share one thing in common; they serve as reminders to men that do not conform to toxic masculine ideals that it is of the utmost importance to distinguish themselves from women. The boys that grow up to become men that support this notion tend to end up seeing women as less than, inferior, and can even lead to objectification (Marcotte, 2017). Toxic masculinity helps create the idea that women are objects to be lusted after, to be dominated and controlled (Huhn, 2019). Therefore, women exist solely to sate the lusts of men, and are incapable of self-agency.

## Research Methodology

### *Research Question*

The following research question was addressed in this study.

Research Question: What are the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity on the male and female characters of the novel?

### 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 analysed 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 analyse a given text (Tyson, 2006). Lastly, social reader-response theory deals with an 'interpretive community', where readers are categorised 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 analyse textual evidence based on the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity, internalized homophobia, and sexual objectification of women. The researchers will employ content analysis to present the findings and

discussions to answer the research questions posed. Because the researchers has 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 any detrimental effects toxic masculinity can bring to male and female characters of the novel. The first chosen detrimental effect is internalized homophobia, and the characters the researchers will be looking at are Patroclus and Achilles. The second chosen detrimental effect is the sexual objectification of women, and the researchers will look at the way any of the female characters in the novel are treated by their male counterparts.

## **Results**

Research Question: What are the detrimental effects of toxic masculinity on the male and female characters of the novel?

### **Internalised Homophobia**

Patroclus' journey to discovering his own sexuality was met with many obstacles, most of it derived from his own inhibitions. On page 6 of the novel, his father had suggested a girl for him to marry but Patroclus thoughts on the matter were made clear, he was uninterested but did not have the power to turn down the offer. Every time the topic of suitors was brought up in the novel, Patroclus' discomfort shines through in his narration. The only woman he was shown to have had favourable contact with was his own mother, and he spends most of his time ogling boys and men even at such a young age (p. 5). This means that the only role models he had to look up to were all men, who were very comfortable settling in to society's hegemonic masculine ideals such as his father, and the boys he observed. The only other peer he had contact with during his childhood was a bully who revelled in the idea of controlling the weak Patroclus into doing his bidding, Clysonymous (p. 15).

Patroclus' internalised homophobia delayed the inevitable relationship he would soon have with Achilles by a year or so. When he first met Achilles, he compared Achilles' features to that of a girl, and immediately decided he disliked him (p. 20). By disliking Achilles based on his looks alone, Patroclus is anger articulating his own feminine features of being small and slight on to that of Achilles'. His dislike soon turned into anger, which bubbles up in him every time he observes Achilles (p. 26). His irrational hatred towards Achilles also stemmed from the fact that he refused to admit he was interested or infatuated with Achilles, something that is taboo and unfamiliar to him. He frequently mistook his feelings for Achilles as jealousy (p. 25) and uses the fact that Achilles lives up to his learned toxic masculinity as an excuse. Whenever he starts to realise he is staring at Achilles not out of anger but out of sheer curiosity, he jerks his gaze away from him and buries the thought (p. 26). It also does not help that Thetis, Achilles' mother, disproves of their budding romance (p. 61). When Patroclus kissed Achilles in the moment during one of their walks, he described the action in his thoughts as a mistake (p. 61) and that he was horrified at what he had done (p. 60). Achilles' immediate reaction to the kiss also hammered down the message because Patroclus perceived it as a rejection, "He stands and steps backwards. His face has closed over, impenetrable and distant, freezing the explanations in my mouth. He turns and races, the fastest boy in the world, up the beach and away" (p. 60). Although at this point in the novel Patroclus has fully realised his feelings for Achilles, his internalised homophobia once again stops him from pursuing Achilles.

Patroclus had a knack for overthinking and using his own self-hatred to articulate his learned homophobia. After every time Achilles tries to take their relationship to the next step, Patroclus would abruptly stop him and push him away (p. 88). Patroclus would turn away and start thinking of Thetis' judgment (p. 89). At this point, it becomes clear that Patroclus uses Thetis as an excuse to justify his own internalised homophobia, convincing himself that she did not want him around Achilles because he was a boy, and not because he was a mortal; the latter being the actual issue for Thetis. In the cave, where there was no hint or evidence that Thetis could see what they were up to, Patroclus narrates, "There was shame in this thing that I did, and a greater shame still in the thoughts that came with it. But it would be worse to think of them inside the rose-quartz cave, with him beside me" (p. 89). By regarding their relationship as shameful, he is repeating the toxic masculine ideals he grew up on, that dictates a man is not truly a man if he allows himself to be 'conquered' (p. 166).

When questioned by Odysseus about their ages, Patroclus blood boils with anger and he yells out that they are not together (p. 165). A few pages before, Thetis had warned Patroclus not to disgrace Achilles, who had chosen a mortal for a companion, but Patroclus again, managed to twist her words into a completely different meaning to confirm his own internalised homophobia (p. 166). Other interactions where it was not made clear whether the characters of the novel disapproved of Achilles' arrogant behaviour, young age, nor his relationship with Patroclus, Patroclus immediately jumps to the conclusion that they are disapproving their relationship (p. 184). Another instance was when Thetis crossed eyes with Patroclus, and he believed she was disgusted by him for being in a homosexual relationship with her son; despite the novel countlessly reminding the readers that Thetis hates mortals in general (p. 18, p. 229).

### **Sexual Objectification of Women**

Women were also used as bargaining chips to win the favour of other men and coax them to do something. When it was Helen's turn to get married, instead of allowing her to choose the man she would want to marry, Tyndareus decided to make full use of her beauty and turn it into a competition between suitors. By doing this, not only has he taken away Helen's right to a choice, but he also received bounties and treasures from all the suitors that were present for himself instead. Tyndareus also schemed with Odysseus to give away Penelope, Helen's cousin if he were to give a solution on how to protect the man who would become Helen's husband from harm (p. 11). Odysseus, who was in love with Penelope (though the feeling is not mutual) came up with a plan to make all the suitors present vow to protect Helen's chosen husband in exchange for Penelope's forced hand. Odysseus loudly declares Penelope as 'his prize', further objectifying her and reducing her to nothing but something he will possess. Tyndareus responds by referring to her as 'it', "Give me your solution and you shall have it" (p. 11). Before Odysseus manages to give the solution, a man from the audience did not so much as name Penelope, but still wondered if she were up for grabs, "What about the third girl? [...] Your niece. Can I have her?" (p. 14). Another example of men using women in the novel to achieve their goals is King Peleus, Achilles' father; who was promised by the gods that he will have a son stronger than all the mighty warriors they have seen. The catch was that Peleus will have to find a sea-nymph and rape her, for sea nymphs are notorious for hating mortals, and not wanting to breed with them (p. 18). This shows that the gods were willing to allow the rape of women if it would further their own goals. The men in the novel seem to learn from their gods in this case, as Patroclus once narrated, "They might permit a

king to burn their fields or rape their daughters, as long as payment was made. But you did not touch a man's sons" (p. 17). Besides that, women would be taken as hostages and leverage for the prisoners of war whom resisted their lands being taken over by soldiers (p. 207). This is to ensure loyalty. Toxic masculinity rears its head again here; men were valuable and human than women, who are tools for breeding and bargaining (p. 55).

In the novel, women were also seen as tools for profit (p. 214, 218,). After being exiled from his own kingdom, Patroclus goes to serve in King Peleus' palace as a soldier-in-training. Growing up an impressionable boy, he left his father who held toxic masculine ideals; only to meet a father figure who also practised toxic masculinity in life. Patroclus takes notice of the serving girls in the palace, "At night they belonged to soldiers or foster boys, to visiting kings or Peleus himself" (p. 56). He later narrated what he had learned that the pregnancies that come with the serving girls being used and raped by the men of the palace are 'profit: more slaves' (p. 56). It is also very telling that none of these encounters were told from the point of view of a woman, not even Thetis, who was raped by Peleus to conceive Achilles. The only way readers got to know of these encounters were through Patroclus, a man, and the thoughts of other men, as demonstrated by this narration; "These unions were not always rape; sometimes there was mutual satisfaction and even affection. At least that is what the men who spoke of them believed" (p. 56). Besides that, when Achilles was hidden away on a small island because Thetis had not wanted him to die in the war, Thetis had made him sleep with a princess, Deidameia (p. 125). They had slept together twice, leading Deidameia to believing that they will get married before she the baby is born, but both Achilles and Thetis deserted her and left her to bear the child on her own (p. 125). Although Thetis did not expect to get a new demigod for a 'son' after Achilles' death, Deidameia ends up giving birth to an even stronger warrior than Achilles and the baby was taken away from her for Thetis' own gains. Thus, Deidameia died child-less and without honour, only used as a pawn in Thetis' game. Another example happened during the war. When the gods were unhappy with the war that would lead to Greek deaths, the Greeks decided to curry favour with the gods by sacrificing a virgin girl. Iphigenia was the unfortunate victim, used by her own father (p. 190). He told her that she was to marry Achilles, and she immediately accepted, because she was blinded by his beauty. As she reaches the altar, one of the men grabbed her by the back of her head and killed her (p. 191). Even before her death, she was sexually objectified by the men present, "It had been long now, since many of them had seen a woman. They feasted on the curve of her neck, a flash of ankle, her hands prettily smoothing the skirt of her bridal gown" (p. 191).

The novel's narration and the male characters would frequently describe the women as things or animals, a dehumanising aspect of objectification. Firstly, Menelaus, who had won the hand of Helen, was said to have built around her "palace walls thick with double-layered rock; he had trained his soldiers for a decade to defend it" (p. 106). Despite this, she was still 'stolen', as told by Patroclus, stolen her being an interesting word to describe a woman being kidnapped. It alludes to the fact that women are nothing but things to be exchanged, taken away, or taken from; men. Another instance of language choice was when Agamemnon refused to give up a priest's beloved daughter as his bed slave, referring to her as his 'prize' (p. 259). After Agamemnon was forced to give up the girl by Achilles, he takes out his anger on losing his war prize by taking away one of Achilles' Briseis, as his bed slave (p. 267). After suffering major losses from Achilles stepping out of the war, Agamemnon tries to negotiate

his return, with “*things*, casual words that he drops into our laps, one at a time. A list really. Twelve swift horses, and seven bronze tripods, and seven pretty girls, ten bars of gold, twenty cauldrons, and more—bowls, and goblets, and armor, and at last, the final gem held before us: Briseis’ return” (p. 291). Again, women were a part of a list of ‘things’ that would persuade a man to join a cause. Even the most famed woman that caused the war received no special treatment in this regard, Helen was offered as a prize by Paris; “He offered a challenge: single combat, winner takes Helen” (p. 287). Later in the novel, Achilles’ son, Pyrrhus; demonstrated extremely toxic masculine ideals through his words and actions. He treated women as sexual objects, telling Briseis that he claims her as his inheritance and birthright (p. 341). When Briseis asks him what he would have her do, he commanded her as a slave, “Whatever I want” (p. 343). Readers find out by the end of the novel that Pyrrhus’ sexual objectification and entitlement of women were what brought him to his own demise. He was killed by the son of Agamemnon, for ‘stealing’ his bride, and raping her (p. 349).

### Implications and Recommendations

Toxic masculinity is a topic that is rarely addressed as a root cause of bad decisions and behaviour in novels. It is often overlooked as a possible cause of detrimental effects in society. In the novel discussed for this study, it not only causes detrimental effects in the characters, but it also furthers the narrative; some to the extreme. 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” contains many effects of toxic masculinity. This paper investigated only two of those effects. Thus, future research can analyse the other effects of toxic masculinity present in the novel such as violence. 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 analysing different novels.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, toxic masculinity leaves detrimental effects such as internalised homophobia and the sexual objectification of women on those who practise it. The researchers also found that women can definitely contribute to toxic masculinity, either by practising it themselves or teaching it to their sons; or both. The findings support the ideas of the sources in Chapter 2 such as; that toxic masculinity is a product of hegemonic masculinity and dictated by the patriarchy or the ruling class. In the novel’s case, the ‘organisation’ 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 in Chapter 2; 1) that all men benefited from hegemonic masculinity whether they conform to it or not, 2) that not all men practise toxic masculinity, 3) that men can harm themselves and those around them by practising 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.

This study sheds light on toxic masculinity, a research topic rarely addressed in a Malaysian context. It can help create awareness among Malaysians regarding toxic masculinity and the

harmful effects it can have on men, women and society. With the awareness of the detrimental effects, individuals and society can be motivated to challenge and transform harmful masculine ideals. Besides, the findings of this study can inform the development of policies, programs, and interventions aimed at addressing toxic masculinity in Malaysia.

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