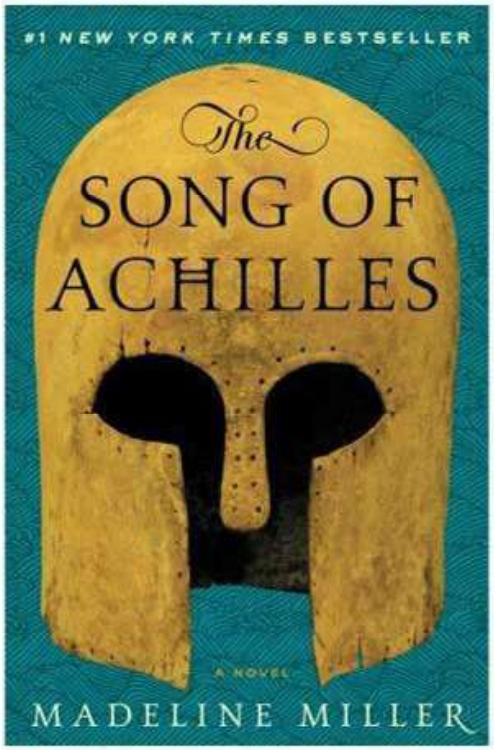
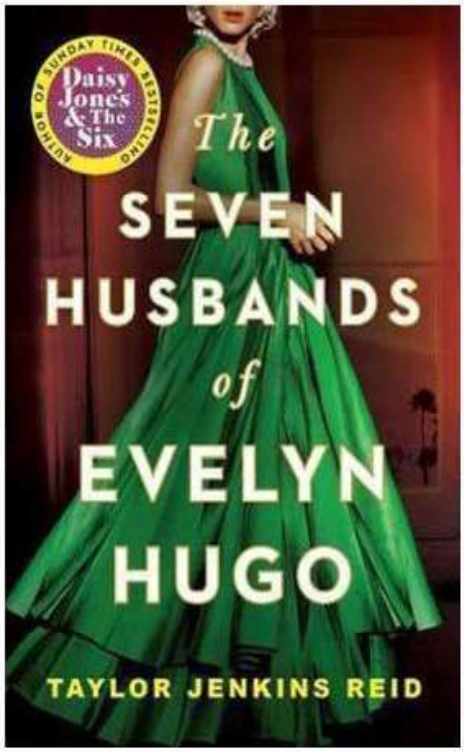
Book Analysis

Feminist analysis of Queer relationships in “The song of Achilles” by Madeline Miller and “The seven husbands of Evelyn Hugo” by Taylor Jenkins Reid





Publisher: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011
Language: English
Pages: 416

Publisher: Atria Books, 2017
Language: English
Pages: 400

By: Samyuktha B

Introduction

"The Song of Achilles" by Madeline Miller and "The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo" by Taylor Jenkins Reid are two of the most compelling works of contemporary literature. These two novels were published in 2011 and 2017, respectively, and both became bestsellers of their times. The understanding of queerness has evolved over the years and has been incorporated into the queer movements of the decade (2010s). The novels were published during the legalisation of same-sex relationships in countries like the United States of America and Ireland. The texts that I have chosen, though at the outset, come across as young adult fiction, have more nuanced elements that can add value to the existing understanding of queer relationships. Madeline Miller harnesses the richness of Greek Mythology and uses mythological realism, unlike the authors such as Plato and Homer from the ancient era, who have interpreted it in different ways. In her "The Song of Achilles", she attempts to give the readers an image of the probable homosexual relationship between the two heroes of the Trojan War, Achilles and Patroclus. On the contrary, Taylor Reid employs a modern setting of the story and the acceptance of same-sex relationships before the Stonewall Riots in the United States of America, specifically focusing on show business and celebrity culture. Both works of fiction throw light on the adversity and dilemma of queer individuals in coming out for fear of loss of respect and dignity and the ostracisation of homosexuality by human society. Through this review, I seek to critically analyse the two texts taking notes from the existing queer theorists and the ability of these books to transcend the gender spectrum and add value to contemporary queer literature.

Summary

"The Song of Achilles" by **Madeline Miller** revolves around the two great heroes of the Greek mythology Achilles and Patroclus who had played an indispensable role during the Trojan War. Achilles, often touted as the brave and chivalrous son of the King of Pththia, Peleus and the "sea nymph" Thetis, has a seemingly arrogant attitude towards the people in the court. Patroclus is banished to Pththia after he murders the son of a noble in his father, King Menoetius's court. It is at this juncture that the meaningful relationship between the arrogant Achilles and smart Patroclus actualises. Thetis, the sea Goddess and Achilles's mother disapproves of the relationship and devises a shrewd plan to separate them by sending Achilles to train under Chiron. Three years pass by and the pangs of separation hit Patroclus causing him deep hurt, and he decides to find Achilles to overcome this gut-wrenching pain. He finds

Achilles and both develop their war skills under Chiron, and during this period of training, they also have the opportunity to engage and explore physical intimacy. As this relationship grows, Mycenaean King Agamemnon calls for war and seeks Achilles's help in rescuing Helen from Troy. It had been prophesied that Achilles would die after the death of the Trojan Prince Hector and therefore, Thetis who fears her son's safety hides him in Skyros and also forcefully marries him to Deidamia (Lycomedes's daughter) who would later bear his son, Neoptolemus. Patroclus finds Achilles in Skyros, and both of them are discovered and invited to fight by Odysseus and Diomedes. Achilles joins the fight by promising not to confront Hector in the war and is aided by Patroclus who becomes his close confidante in the war. While Achilles is fighting the Trojans, Patroclus becomes a medic tending to the soldier's wounds. A decade-long fight ensues filled with plague, revenge and deceit, and eventually, Patroclus gets killed by Hector who is avenged by Achilles, and in turn, gets killed by Paris the Prince of Troy. The prologue also mentions Achilles and Patroclus finding joy in the realm of heaven after Thetis seems to accept the love that the two shared.

About the author



Madeline Miller is an American novelist who spent ten years of her life writing "The Song of Achilles". She won the Orange Prize for Fiction and was also critically acclaimed for the same. In 2019, she also received the Alex Awards. She is known for her works on mythological realism. Some of her works include Circe and Galatea.

"The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo" by **Taylor Jenkins Reid** is classified as a work of historical fiction and narrates the story of Evelyn Hugo, a 79-year-old Hollywood Star who decides to give to the world a testimony of truth through her biography and assigns the work to a journalist Monique Grant. The book has seven parts each giving an account of her life with each of her husbands. The novel begins with Evelyn looking for an interviewer to review her auction of the gowns she had worn to raise money for breast cancer awareness and requests for Monique, a journalist with no connection whatsoever to the great Evelyn Hugo. During their first meeting, Evelyn informs Monique that the actual reason for choosing her was to write a

book on Evelyn's life and that this book would become her final confession. Though sceptical, Monique agrees and recording sessions with Evelyn commences. Evelyn Hugo, born as Evelyn Herrera, a Cuban American woman opens up about the various challenges that the show business industry put her through. From having to undergo a major physical makeover to facing abuse at the hands of her first husband Don Adler, she discusses in length with Monique her struggles as a fourteen-year-old girl. It is during her abusive marriage with Don that Evelyn meets Celia St. James, her fellow co-star. Evelyn realises that Celia is a lesbian and both start developing feelings for each other. However, fearing the tabloid culture and the impact it could have on their respective careers, they fail to act upon their urges. Celia eventually marries Mick, and Evelyn remarries Rex North to heighten her fame. Post this publicity stint, she divorces Rex and marries her lifelong friend Harry who is Gay and in a relationship with Celia's husband. Thus begins a tale of secret love. Harry and Evelyn give birth to a daughter Connor, with Celia's consent and all of them live in close quarters like 'friends who are family'. After many years, Evelyn betrays Celia and marries Max Girard, but she divorces him and gets back with Celia and reminds her that she is her "one true love". She then moves to Celia and her brother Robert (whom she marries under Celia's request) to Europe, and they spend Celia's final days there as she suffers from cancer. Connor (Evelyn's daughter) also suffers from breast cancer and dies young, causing her grief which had prompted her to raise awareness on the same. Before they moved to Europe, Harry kills himself and his lover in a car accident and Evelyn who arrives at the accident scene, shifts Harry from the driver's seat and the lover is blamed for drunk driving. Later it is revealed that the lover was none other than Monique's father James Grant and Evelyn hands her a letter in which James had refrained from going to Europe with Harry stating 'his family' as the reason. Evelyn informs Monique that she is to publish this work only after Evelyn's death, though confused she consents to the odd request, only to realise later that Evelyn was planning to take her own life. The next day, tabloids scream the news Monique had expected. The novel ends with Monique publishing the work and giving Evelyn the rightful stardom she deserved.

THE PENINSULA FOUNDATION

About the author



Taylor Reid is an American author who began her career as an author at the age of 24. Some of her bestsellers include Daisy Jones & the six, Malibu Rising and The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo, which won her critical acclaim and commercial success. Most of her novels are based on the themes of pop culture and Hollywood-inspired.

Analysis

Literature has been a witness to queer desires since time immemorial with authors and philosophers from the archaic period including Plato and Homer. There has been an exploration of various kinds of sexuality, and as Sedgewick espouses, these works have transcended the duality of heterosexuality and homosexuality. The works that I have chosen, though not explicitly classified as queer literature, the presence of certain elements makes it possible to evaluate the same using queer theory and queer models. Cart and Jenkins (2006) gave a three-pronged approach to analyse queer young adult literature that have been published post the Stonewall riots. This includes: "i) homosexual visibility ii) gay assimilation and iii) queer consciousness/community. Mollie et al., (2015) in their paper quote Britzman (1997), where the definition of sexual identities encompasses social norms and is constantly shifting, variable and fluid. The essentialism or the developmental undertone that is often attributed to the identities are often misconstrued because they are neither essential nor developmental but post structural. Both "The Song of Achilles" and "The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo" can be analysed using a queer theorist lens, and for this, I seek to divide the two based on some common emergent themes.

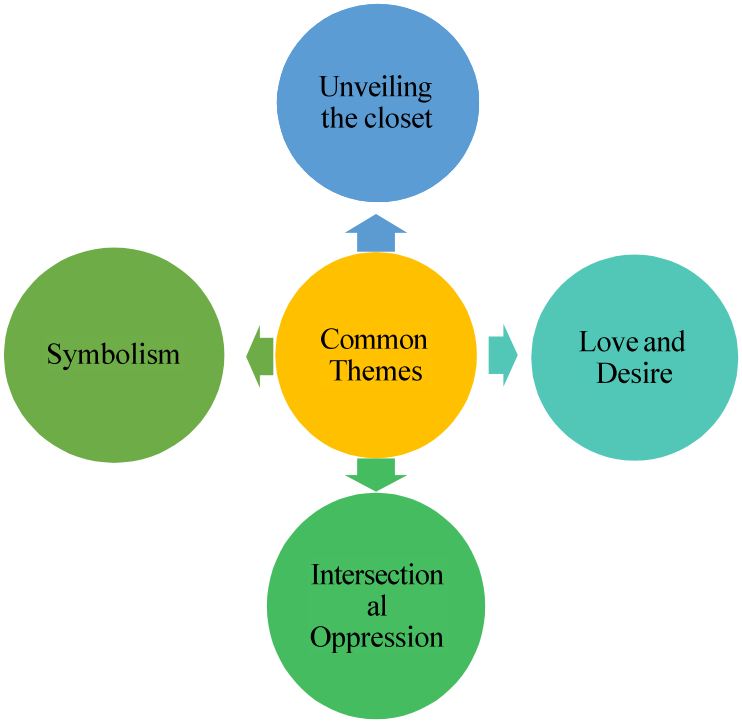


Fig 1. Common themes emerging from the novels

Significance of Closeted-ness

The concept of 'closet' emerged to capture the intricacies of the various "social patterns of secrecy and sexual self-management" that structure the lives of homosexual individuals in a society that is focused on pushing the agenda of heterosexuality (Seidman,2015). The idea that 'coming out' would undermine the heterosexist norms is purely political in nature and also creates a division among those who are 'in' and 'out' of the closet. The same-sex couples in both the novels, Achilles and Patroclus, and Evelyn and Celia, remained closeted till their subsequent deaths and thereby reinforcing that mere homosexual visibility will not lead to a cleansing of the cultural mindset of the society that believes in the binary. This is also evident when Achilles and Patroclus share and develop deeper bonding during their training period with Chiron. The lack of the need to explain themselves to the world opened up a space for them to understand each other better. The society also pushes individuals to come out only to ostracise and dehumanise them, however, there is a reversal of this when the band of soldiers in Troy fighting alongside Achilles start doubting the relationship between him and Patroclus

and also created situations for them to break the truth, but despite this, they were unable to do so directly owing the power that Achilles held. “The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo” also has similar instances of the paparazzi forcing Evelyn and Celia to come out, but Evelyn’s swift movement from one marriage to another constantly kept the world confused. As mentioned in the three-pronged approach of Cart and Jenkins, the homosexual visibility in both the novels is not very significant because of the fact that the protagonists are neither outed or choose to come out, but rather it is only the readers who get to understand the essence of the emotions and vulnerabilities of the characters.

Love and Desire

In “Towards a Multivalent Queer Love”, Anil Pradhan tries to delineate the hairline difference between passionate love and romantic love. Anthony Giddens also mentions that while passionate love is a much more universal phenomenon, romantic love is specific to cultures and can have varied interpretations of what constitutes romance. Madeline Miller makes a brilliant attempt throughout her text to show the evolution of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. During the initial days of Patroclus’s exile to Ptthia, he seeks to remain secluded, however, Achille’s chivalry draws him, and their conversations lead them to develop deeper emotional understanding. As Pradhan points out, it is not just mere lust or the need to explore sexuality that brings homosexual individuals together, and its authenticity can be evidenced through the devotion that the soul of Patroclus displays post Achille’s death. As Thetis inscribes Patroclus’s name into the tomb, Patroclus’s soul passes into the afterlife. Similarities can also be drawn to the Reid bestseller because Evelyn foregoes every sophisticated aspect of her life to give Celia the life wants in her last days. The way Reid has displayed the desire that Evelyn has for Celia and vice versa does not in any way come across as explicitly sexual. She describes their love for each other through her mastery of words. In addition to this, there should also be a mention of Stephen O. Murray’s taxonomy of homosexuality, since both Miller and Reid have put forth the notion of egalitarian homosexuality.

It is also to be noted that there is also a portrayal of the love of various kinds throughout both works. From the more obsessive motherly love, the bond between sister and brother and the compassion and respect among friends have been dealt with in detail in both books. The need for Thetis to protect her son (despite being a God herself) clearly shows the lion-cub attitude even among immortals. The relationship between Briseis and Patroclus and the grief she

encounters with his death shows that “the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb”. Reid portrays the purest of friendships with the relationship between Harry and Evelyn, and this relationship can be placed on the continuum because when they decide to procreate, one might assume that the boundaries of friendship will be broken, however, the love that they share for each other only grows with a progeny. The core of their relationship continued to be the platonic friendship that Evelyn and Harry had.

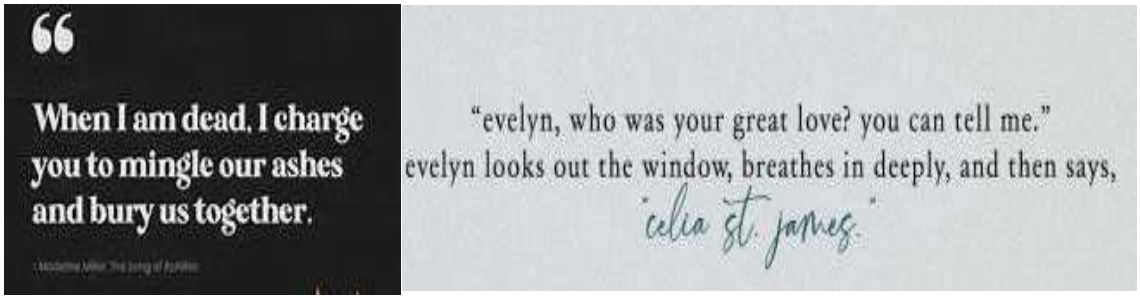


Fig 2 &3. Quotes from “The Song of Achilles” and “The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo”

Intersectionality of Oppression

Kimberly Crenshaw’s intersectionality (1989) has been used nowadays in the common parlance to analyse the “intricate patterns of difference and inequality” (Marlene, 2023). This can also be identified in both novels, with the difference in the portrayal of the masculinity of Achilles and Patroclus and in the discrimination that Evelyn faces owing to her ethnicity and the need to make her a sex symbol in the limelight culture. Miller makes a clear distinction between Achilles’s masculinity that transforms from a boy-like to that of a warrior king. In contrast, Patroclus is sidelined as the older boy who remains overshadowed by Achilles' greatness. This can also be because the story is being told from Patroclus’s perspective. However, this seems like an attempt by the author to enforce the binary of the dominant and the subservient. There is also a note of the chivalrous treatment of Briseis, a Trojan prostitute whom Achilles receives as a gift. Although he has no interest in her, he gets her owing to the belief that she may be mistreated elsewhere and also to redeem the guilt of killing her kin. However, his treatment of Deidamia the girl he marries under the compulsion of his mother Thetis, shows that women were merely pawns in the larger gamble of war and child-bearing machines.

The intersectionality of race, age, sexuality and gender play out in Reid's characterisation of Evelyn. Reid gives a more realistic account compared to Miller regarding the lived realities of an individual trying to create a space for herself in Hollywood. The marriage of a fourteen-year-old Evelyn to Don Adler and the marital abuse she faces, the constant need to prove her sexuality to the media, and the importance that is attributed to the looks of a woman and the "perfect curves", are all examples of the patriarchal norms that constrain any form of expression by a woman other than the heterosexual standards. The fear of othering both Evelyn and Celia go through has been described thoroughly making it a heart-touching read.

Symbolism

Miller and Reid effectively make use of symbolic representations in their respective novels to describe the journey of the characters. Miller uses a "Lyre" to portray innocence and the evolution of characters as well. Patroclus's lyre belonged to his mentally disabled mother who understood only the sounds of the lyre, and when Patroclus reaches Phthia this lyre draws Achilles to Patroclus and the boyish nature of Achilles allows him to take pleasure in playing it. The change of ownership of the lyre from the older Patroclus to the younger Achilles stands testimony to this innocence. Similarly, Reid uses the gowns to establish the achievements of Evelyn that she auctions before her death. These had been gowns that she had worn during the pivotal moments in her life which she foregoes for a more sensible deed, that is, raising funds for breast cancer and creating awareness on the same. Therefore, both the authors make a clever use of symbolism showing that the strong suit of literature lies in its details.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The Song of Achilles	**Strengths** The re-interpretation of a tale so well known and appreciated requires precision and Miller seems to have captured that in essence. The language used has been simple and easily understandable to a larger population thereby making it accessible to all sections of the society. The focus of her novel has been to highlight love and sacrifice and she does carry it effectively throughout the book.

	Weakness Despite the decent attempt at portraying the love of Achilles and Patroclus, the need to appeal to a heterosexual audience is evident with her need to distinguish between the masculinities of Achilles and Patroclus. The fate of certain characters like Deidamia also could have been highlighted. There has not been an outright description of the book as queer literature which can be misleading.
The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo	**Strengths** Taylor Jenkins Reid's portrayal of love, sexuality and career-driven women will speak volumes to the reader. There is no unnecessary flowery language to appease the elite readers. A simple book for simple readers open to a conversation about the patriarchal nature of society. Despite the fact that it is a critique of patriarchy, she also gives the readers a sense of the good men, the effeminate yet heterosexual men thereby refraining from antagonising the entire male community. This adds value to the realities she describes throughout the novel.
	Weakness The novel despite trying to show a woman who is willing to break the stereotypes, portrays her as a woman who needs a child and perpetuates her lineage. The notion of a family being complete only with the coming of a child is again conventional and kind of reiterates the norms she is trying to break.

THE PENINSULA FOUNDATION

Conclusion

Madeline Miller and Taylor Jenkins Reid have both made an honest attempt at exploring the intricacies of same-sex relationships. The focus has been primarily on the conception of identities and their perception among the larger society without the actual disruption of norms. Both novels cannot be classified as queer literature for the authors have not acknowledged it. However, the nuances of queer theorists like the performativity of Butler and the compulsory

heterosexuality of Adrienne Rich can be applied to the analysis of the protagonists which has made it a perfect material for understanding the contemporary understanding of queerness. Despite the novels being presented in a palatable form to the audience it has the potential to add value to the societal perception of queer relationships. “Cut the ending, revise the script, the man of her dreams is a girl” can be felt in the truest sense during the perusal of both the texts and both have an imminent potential to not just alter the psyche of the readers but also is evidence of the increase in the commercial success of books with queer characters.

THE PENINSULA FOUNDATION

References

- Miller, M. D. (2011). The Song of Achilles. https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB24229368
- Reid, T. J. (2017). The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo: A Novel. Simon and Schuster.
- Marcus, S. (2005). Queer Theory for Everyone: A review essay. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 31(1), 191–218. https://doi.org/10.1086/432743
- Blackburn, M. V., Clark, C. T., & Nemeth, E. A. (n.d.). Examining Queer Elements and Ideologies in LGBT-Themed Literature. Journal of Literacy Research, 47(1), 11–48. https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296x15568930
- Van den Bogaard, N. (2019). The Changing Perceptions of Gay Identities :Queer Representation in Call Me by Your Name and The Song of Achilles [Bachelor Thesis]. Radboud University.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. Signs, 5(4), 631–660. https://doi.org/10.1086/493756
- The queer renaissance: contemporary American literature and the reinvention of lesbian and gay identities. (1997). Choice Reviews Online, 35(04), 35–1992. https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.35-1992
- Pradhan, Anil. (2022). Towards A Multivalent Queer Love: A Model Spectrum Of Contemporary Indian Gay Romance In English. 67(4). https://doi.org/10.33675/amst/2022/4/1
- Queer representation in literature: The Song of Achilles. (2021). The Courier Online. https://www.thecourieronline.co.uk/queer-representation-in-literature-the-song-of-achilles/
- Blackwood, Nicole. "The Song of Achilles Symbols: The Lyre." LitCharts LLC, March 18, 2021. Retrieved February 5, 2024. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-song-of- achilles/symbols/the-lyre.
- The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo: Symbols | SparkNotes. (n.d.). SparkNotes. https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/evelyn-hugo/symbols/

THE PENINSULA FOUNDATION