

What Does It Mean to Be a Man?

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When I ask what a man is supposed to be, I often turn to the books and stories I have read. What strikes me is that Western literature has never settled the question once and for all. Some writers celebrate strength and glory; others ask whether courage might mean something quieter and more humane. To me, this long-running argument shows how our idea of manhood keeps changing and how each generation reconsiders the virtues it inherited.

In Homer's *The Iliad*, I see manhood built around glory won in battle. Yet the ending complicates that ideal. Priam begs Achilles for his son's body, and Achilles, the man who killed him, weeps with Priam and returns it. I find that ending deeply moving. The epic closes not with another victory, but with grief and shared humanity, something glory alone cannot provide.

Shakespeare makes the argument more direct. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth says, "I dare do all that may become a man," while Lady Macbeth counters, "When you durst do it, then you were a man." To him, manhood has limits; to her, it is a dare. Later, when Macduff is told to "Dispute it like a man," he replies, "I must also feel it as a man." I hear a different kind of strength in that answer: grief is not a failure of manhood but part of it.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* offers another warning. Victor is so absorbed in the glory of discovery that he abandons the life he has created and the responsibilities that follow. A century later, First World War poet Wilfred Owen challenged the romance of patriotic sacrifice, calling the claim that it is fitting to die for one's country "the old Lie," told "to children ardent for some desperate glory." I read both works as warnings about putting greatness ahead of responsibility for others.

One of the clearest statements of courage I know comes from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Atticus Finch wants his son Jem to understand "what real courage is," rather than picture "a man with a gun in his hand." Real courage, Atticus says, is knowing you are likely to lose and going ahead anyway. His example is Mrs. Dubose, who struggles to break

an addiction before she dies. A virtue associated with masculine toughness is demonstrated through a woman's persistence.

The old ideal of glory returns in Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, his account of test pilots and the first astronauts during the Cold War. Wolfe asks what makes a man willing to sit atop an enormous rocket and wait for it to launch. He respects the pilots' code of bravery but also shows its limits. Chuck Yeager, a model of that fearless spirit, knows survival depends on understanding his airplane and on luck. To me, this is a reminder that courage is not invulnerability; confidence needs to be tempered by judgment.

I see the argument continuing in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, which retells *The Iliad* through Patroclus. Miller's Achilles remains a warrior, but love and grief take center stage. These emotions are not foreign to Homer: they are already present in the final encounter between Priam and Achilles.

The question extends beyond literature. When Russian forces advanced on Kyiv in February 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stayed in the capital. In a video responding to rumors that he had fled, he said, "We are all here." Whatever one thinks of the war or its politics, I see a form of courage familiar from Atticus Finch: not theatrical bravado, but facing a difficult situation and staying present.

Taken together, these examples show me that definitions of manhood change, even as the argument continues. The ideal of glory keeps returning, and writers keep testing it against other values. Courage may mean fighting, but it can also mean grieving, accepting responsibility for what we create, speaking honestly about war, or persisting when success is uncertain. I see moral progress in widening our understanding of who can embody virtue. Priam's grief, Macduff's feelings, Owen's honesty, Mrs. Dubose's persistence, Patroclus's love, and Zelensky's resolve all challenge a narrow definition of masculinity.

So where does that leave me? I still believe strength and courage matter, along with responsibility, keeping one's word, caring for family, and standing up for others. But I also value compassion, patience, cooperation, and the willingness to admit when I need help. Perhaps age gives me perspective: being a man or simply a decent human being should not be a performance we must prove every day. The better question, I believe, is not how closely a man fits an inherited ideal of masculinity, but what kind of person he becomes.