

War: a quest for glory?

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



War is often referred to as being despicable, atrocious, and appalling, but the opposite appears to be true throughout Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*.

Though Homer does not attempt to portray war as magnificent, he does challenge his readers to carefully consider whether or not it is possible for glory to be present in the midst of battle. Physical combat brings out the best in many of the warriors in this particular poem. The characters discover unknown strengths, immense courage, and a great deal of loyalty. On the other hand, the battles fought in *The Iliad* leave many dead men, countless broken families, and infuriated gods and goddesses. Homer does an excellent job of exposing both the glory and horror of war. What, exactly, is glory? The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines glory as "praise, honor, or distinction extended by common consent." The goal of the majority of the warriors in the epic poem *The Iliad* is to gain glory for themselves. The central conflict of *The Iliad* is presented in the first book of the epic poem and deals with nothing more than the pursuit for glory of two mortal men. The actions and words of Agamemnon prove that he is an extremely proud man who wants nothing more than to see himself put on a pedestal for all to view and admire. Agamemnon's refusal to return Chryseis to her father (1: 28-32) proves his stubbornness and his demand that Achilles give Briseis to him as a gift (1: 130-133) proves just how arrogant of a character he really is. It is Agamemnon's thirst for glory and power that causes the war to progress as it does. Another prime example of the war being nothing more than a quest for glory occurs when Paris challenges any member of the Achaean army to single combat (3: 81-87). Paris feels sure he can take on any soldier who may step forth, and he feels that he must prove his power to

everyone surrounding him. When Menelaus steps forth, volunteering to engage in battle with Paris, Paris retreats (3: 197-200). In this case, Paris' pursuit of glory proved to hundreds, possibly thousands, of men that he is nothing more than a power-hungry coward. Diomedes is another character in The Iliad who can be viewed as fighting the war to earn glory for himself. This character is aided by the goddess Athena, but completely ignores the warning he is given by the immortal to avoid all gods and goddesses with the exception of Aphrodite (Book 5). By making the decision to disobey Athena, Diomedes makes it possible for Hector and Ares to become partners in battle. The pride of Diomedes completely changes the course of the war. Later, in Book Ten, Diomedes volunteers himself to serve as a spy against the Trojan army. Diomedes was completely successful in gaining himself a great deal of glory in the eyes of the Achaean army by slaughtering twelve men and their leader because they have "the best horses I ever saw, the biggest, whiter than snow, and speed to match the wind" (10: 504-505). There are also examples of mortals wanting to earn glory and honor that do not end on a negative note. The first of these comes with the battle between Hector and Ajax. The men do engage in physical contact for quite some time, but Zeus eventually calls off the battle due to nightfall (7: 525-540). Both men entered the battle with the intention of killing their opponent and earning glory for themselves. Neither man wins, but both earn glory and honor for themselves by exchanging gifts and ending their ferocious duel with a pact of friendship (7: 540-549). Battle is not involved in all of the examples of glory being given to characters. For instance, in Book Nine, Agamemnon is determined to withdraw from battle and return to Greece (9:

25-32). Diomedes rebukes Agamemnon and states that he will stay and fight the war no matter what the consequences (9: 36-49). Nestor also encourages Agamemnon to stay and suggests reconciliation with Achilles (9: 145-152). Both Diomedes and Nestor prove themselves worthy of glory by refusing to retreat. It is obvious that there are many situations throughout the epic poem in which characters were simply on a quest for glory. But, there are just as many, if not more, examples which prove the countless horrors of war. The separation of families was probably one of the most difficult parts of participating in the war. In Book Six, the reader becomes aware of Hector's home life. The brave warrior has a wife and young child. Andromache, Hector's wife, has the ability to watch everything going on on the plain below her through a window. She is extremely concerned for the safety of her husband and does not want him to continue on in the war effort (6: 442-250). Little did she know she was never going to have the opportunity to see her beloved husband again, as he becomes one of the many casualties of the war. There are several references to mass killings throughout this particular epic poem. One of these many massacres is actually caused by Zeus who chooses to rain blood amongst the Achaean troops, killing thousands (11: 62-64). The Achaeans do not let this event in any way hinder their efforts in battle. That same afternoon, the reader is informed, Agamemnon kills any man who makes the deadly mistake of coming within arm's reach of him. Death was not unusual during the time the war was being fought. The reader is made aware of the deaths of many minor characters, but the death that seems to hit closest to home for the reader is that of Patroclus. Achilles is also greatly affected by the death of

this warrior and makes the decision to re-enter the fighting, even though it is for the sole purpose of avenging the death of his best friend (18: 1-27). After returning to the front lines, Achilles is held accountable for the death of Hector. One of the most horrendous scenes in the poem deals with the death of Hector. There is quite a bit of graphic detail given concerning the treatment of Hector's corpse. Achilles allows members of the Achaean army to approach the body and continuously stab it for absolutely no reason (22: 442). Achilles is responsible for tying the corpse to a chariot and dragging it through the dirt (22: 477-480). Can it be determined if war is simply a quest for glory or just absolutely horrendous? It seems as though The Iliad could effectively support either argument. It is certainly obvious throughout The Iliad that a mortal's quest for glory often caused him to do things he would later regret. Though this epic poem was written thousands of years ago, the current world population can learn a great deal through the triumphs and tragedies of the Trojan and Achaean armies.