

# The iliad by homer essay sample

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



## Introduction

The Iliad begins with the story of Achilles' wrath and ends with the consequences of Achilles' vengeance. In doing so, the Iliad tells of a hero and his struggle to attain everlasting glory; but its themes are not limited to heroic deeds and events. Additional themes include the relationship of gods and men, the workings of divine justice, and the relationship between passion and anger. Based in part on these themes, the Iliad can be divided in a number of ways. One useful schema divides the Iliad into three movements: withdrawal, devastation, and return. Books 1-9 cover Achilles' wrath and consequently the battle going unfavorably for the Achaians; books 10-18 are filled with fighting and end with the death of Patroklos; books 19-24 show Achilles' glorious return to the fighting and his killing of Hektor.

Alternately, the structure of ring composition also provides a useful schema for understanding the Iliad. As ring composition, the events of the early parts of the work have parallels in the last parts of the work. The Iliad moves from the hero of the Achaians to the hero of Troy. It also moves from the withdrawal of the greatest hero of the Achaians and the possibility of Achaian failure to the death of the greatest of the Trojans and the future destruction of Troy. The poet's narration moves from a retrospective mode at the beginning to a prospective mode at the end. The work encompasses 53 days in full, but most of the action occurs during five days. Within this short time frame, the Iliad reflects the larger scale of the Trojan War. For example, the action begins with Agamemnon's abduction of Achilles' girl Briseis; similarly the Trojan War itself began with the abduction of a woman.

So too, the themes of the Iliad reflect larger issues of heroism and mortality as much as they do the individual circumstances in the story.

Most notably, Achilles must choose whether to live without great glory or to die with glory. Of course, like a good hero, he chooses to fight and, although this event is not depicted within the Iliad, Achilles does later die in battle.

Likewise, Hector chooses to face Achilles knowing that it will bring at the same time mortal death and immortal fame. As can be seen in the role of the hero, the relationship between gods and men is central to the Iliad. The gods in the Iliad align themselves with the mortal sides and act in the interests of their favorites. In particular, Zeus constantly directs the actions of the Iliad. Within the general confines of fate, Zeus and the other gods contend over the exact course which events will follow to their fated outcomes. In effect, the role of the gods mirrors that of the poet himself. As the poet fills in the details of the Iliad on the basis of a general scheme of events, so too the actions of the gods determine the details of the story.

In addition, the gods loom always in the background as the stick against which mortal actions are measured. It is not simply that the gods squabble over the mortals; rather, they react to mortal actions and their reactions in turn determine subsequent mortal actions. This interplay between gods and men drives the plot from the first episode to the last.

### Discussion and Analysis

Related to the mortal/immortal interaction, making and breaking oaths condition much of the story. For example, in book 1 Achilles swears an oath that the Achaians will need his help. This oath is in fact carried out. In

contrast, book 3 ends with the apparent victory of Menelaos over the divinely rescued Paris; however, book 4 opens with Pandaros breaking the oath which had been made before the duel. Oaths are witnessed and approved by the gods, and thus, to a certain extent, actions involving oaths draw the gods into mortal affairs. In addition, keeping oaths shows a respect for the rules of justice, which is much admired. Thus heroic excellence can be found in the oaths made and respected during battle as much as in fighting itself. For example, Achilles risks the anger of the gods and the loss of his glory through his desire to defile Hektor's body. By returning Hektor's body to Priam, Achilles demonstrates a respect for divine authority and oaths which befits a hero.

The theme of anger has been mentioned already in discussing the arrangement of the Iliad. In addition, the theme of anger ties into the larger ideas about the role of the hero and the nature of the divine/mortal relationship. For example, Achilles' anger stems from Agamemnon's attempt to assert his higher status. Agamemnon's insult of Achilles is an insult to Achilles' heroic status. At the same time, Apollo's reaction to Agamemnon's insult of Chryses is divine anger provoked by a similar insult to status, this time an insult by a mortal to an immortal. Anger at such transgressions, violating either the appropriate relationship between heroes, or between gods and men, occur throughout the work. Likewise, the somewhat complementary theme of supplication recurs often. For example, the work both begins and ends with supplications: Thetis supplicates Zeus at the beginning on behalf of Achilles, while Priam supplicates Achilles on

behalf of the dead Hektor in the end. Likewise, supplication is part of the heroic world and an important measure of divine justice.

The Iliad works through theme and variation. A small number of themes present from the very beginning of the work change and recur until the end. Likewise, the narrative itself is constructed with numerous type-scenes combined in endless variation, expansion, and economy. For example, scenes of sacrifice, arming for battle, prayers to gods for help, insults to enemies, and exchanges of blows during battle are common type-scenes. Events follow these set patterns; the small variations each time emphasize differences in character, theme, or importance. For example, when spears hit a hero's shield but do not hurt the hero, the spear typically makes it to the inmost layer of the armor; but when the best of the Achaians, Achilles, gets hit with Hektor's spear, the spear bounces off. Thus, Achilles' divine armor and unbelievable strength are characterized by the contrast with previous battle scenes, all following a general type, but varying in the details.

Obviously the main theme of The Iliad is the rage endured by Achilles. It says so on the packet I received in class and also, my professor mentioned it a few times. This rage was probably the one factor that ties into every other event in the story as it does not just affect Achilles, but many other characters friend and foe alike. He is by far the greatest warrior involved in the Trojan War. On the battlefield, he is unstoppable, able to rout whole armies single-handedly, his character in the story is all but deified, a proverbial giant among men. When Agamenon insults him he refuses to fight against Troy. This is a huge blow to the Achaean forces as they are severely

hurt with out his valor and leadership. It is not until Hector slays Patroclus that Achilles finally decides to enter the war. In the end all his foolish rage does is damage the war effort of his side and needlessly cost him his dearest friend.

Another strong theme throughout the epic is the extreme importance of war in the life of Mycenaeans, even more important than one's own family in some cases. It seemed that the pursuit of glory through war was one of the highest goals of any Greek man. In the Iliad, this is clearly shown numerous times. Take for example Achilles, Patroclus, Glaucos, and Hector. These four characters have a multitude of violent interactions. Hector kills Patroclus, Achilles kills Hector, Patroclus kills Glaucos, and anyone who survived was either in battle or preparing for battle.

A Third important theme is the mortality of man and country, even those thought immortal. Troy is destined to fall; it was what was meant to be from the beginning. Zeus prophesizes that Hector will kill Patroclus and then is destined to die at the hands of Achilles. The poem tells of the destiny of Priam, how he and all his children are doomed for death. It even alludes to the fact that Achilles will someday be slain, especially toward the end of the epic, making clear that even the bravest of men cannot escape death. In fact it says that the greatest of men may find death sooner than others.

The Mycenaean society, if viewed historically, observed a very authoritarian hierarchical set up. It was ruled by an all powerful king who sent out his commands from his palatial estate. Some scholars believe that the king was considered divine and immortal. Beneath the king was a large group of

aristocrats who acted as officers to the administrative system. There were also many lower class officials who had fewer and less important responsibilities. Mycenae was sustained mainly on its agricultural economy, but they also were active in metallurgy and textiles. The Mycenaens were also exporters of goods. They traded all over the Mediterranean. Mycenaean pottery and other artifacts are found as far as Cyprus, Egypt, Southern Italy and Sicily.

It seems to me that some aspects of the Mycenaean world boggle my mind on so many levels, as they probably should, I being the 21st century minded person I am. It's kind of hard to contemplate that a fight to the death was your only option if your honor was "offended" by someone. The real twist to this is the fact that if it were to come to a death match you were to just accept it as it was a common thing and not at all out of the ordinary. I'm not sure if we as a society have just toned down our views on pride and honor or if we just value our life on earth more today. These days, even a man with an abnormal amount of machismo would think twice about arranging a duel to the death over, in some cases, certain words (arbitrary sounds coming from someone's vocal chords that, eventually, over time have been combined and changed and given meanings that somehow can offend a person enough to send some one into a psychopathic rage, if you will). Most people in today's society would consider this extremely chaotic, but the Mycenaens seemed to accept it very readily.

The Iliad is full of very animated and complex characters that, for the most part have an identity that somehow compliments some other character.

Achilles is a very interesting fellow; such a powerful warrior and so much rage over very little, his foolish pride costs him the death of his best friend. As the poem progresses his move from rage to grief to wrath is the centralized theme of the entire story. Patroclus is the very best friend of Achilles. He also is a very fierce warrior but a little more level headed than his counterpart. When Achilles abandons his army because he was offended, Patroclus tries in vain to save the Greeks. It is his death that brings the mighty Achilles back onto the battlefield in search of vengeance.

Agamenon is the king of Mycenae, the cause of Achilles' great anger. As he upset the honor of the often stubborn Achilles, he caused a great deal of harm to his countrymen by keeping Achilles out of the battle with his pig-headed refusal to give him a proper apology. Priam is the king of Troy. He has no desire whatsoever for a conflict, and never participates in the war. His son Paris, also has little appetite for the battle, even with his strong fighting skills.

A very big factor in the outcome of the war and the story are those who sit on Mount Olympus. Zeus, the king of the gods, is the strongest of all the Greek Deities. He governs the world and decides the destinies of men. Zeus aids Troy during the war. Hera, his wife jealously hates Troy and does everything in her power to undermine him and destroy Troy. Athena, the daughter of Zeus, tirelessly defends the Greeks as she too bears hatred toward Troy. Apollo, the son of Zeus, is the great champion of the Trojans. Several times he sabotages the plans of Achilles, and in the end helps with the unfair killing of Patroclus. Other gods involved in the story include



Artemis, Aphrodite, Ares and Leto who favor Troy and Poseidon, Hephaestus, and Hermes who aid the Achaeans.

Battles and death were found all around thousands of men every single day in the days of the Trojan War. The Iliad takes place during the ninth year of the Trojan War. The Iliad, is believed to have been written between 750 and 650 B. C., and took place in the city of Troy. The fighting begins with a quarrel over two women and who they belong to. The war is about Menelaos trying to retrieve his wife Helen from Paris' son Priam, the king of Troy. Men had to have control over what they do, in order to help their city-states survive. According to Homers' Iliad the world required man to display admirable characteristics and have good integrity to be accepted by their society and achieve in life.

Men, to survive in society, have to be brave and not yield to any force on the battlefield in order to achieve glory and fame in their world. Homer often described the men who were heroes as fierce animals in the wild. ' Now gripping this,

Hefting a pair of spears, he joined the battle, formidable as some hill-bred lion, ravenous for meat after long abstinence. His valor summons him to attempt homesteads and flocks- and though he finds herdsmen on hand with dogs and spears to guard the sheep, he will not turn without a fling at the stockade.' (Homer 12. 335-342)

Hektor, a very fierce warrior for the Trojans is compared to a Lion, because of his human power and strength. Homer's similes give the reader a true

visualization of what is happening in the epic poem. War is very scary and devastating to the warriors and their families.

' Now the earth grew stained with bright blood as men fell in death close to one another: Trojans, allies, and Danaans, too, for they, too bled, although far fewer died-each one remembering to shield his neighbor from the fatal stroke.' (Homer 17. 405-410)

This shows how every one will live with the memories of the horror of war. War is not a fun and adventurous event in life, but it is a catastrophic social problem in the world of The Iliad.

' Ah, cousin, could we but survive this war

To live forever deathless, without age,

I would not ever go again to battle,

Nor would I send you there for honor's sake!

But now a thousand shapes of death surround us,

And no man can escape them, or be safe... (Homer 12. 363-369)

This quotation from Sarpedon to Glaukos tells him that if he was eternal and could live forever, he would never go into war again because of how tragic war really is. For man to protect himself and his loved ones he must be very strong, emotionally and physically, and very brave to keep on fighting after horror every single day.

Admirable characteristics that man must have in the world of The Iliad are the value of friendship and respect of the dead. Friendship was a very big part of the Trojan War. Every single man had their best true friend, to help them through tough times in and out of battle. Akhilleus the most powerful and feared warrior in the whole war had a very strong friendship with Patroklos. When Patroklos is killed by Hektor, Akhilleus states that he will not stop killing until Hektor is dead. He goes on a rampage and kills twelve men.

' Akhilleus led

Them in their lamentation,

Laying those hands deadly to enemies

Upon the breast of his old friend, with groans

At every breath, bereft as a lioness

Whose whelps a hunter seized out of a thicket...(Homer 18. 368-373)

Akhilleus is going on a rampage because his dearest friend was killed in battle. Then Akhilleus finally gets his revenge upon Hektor, by killing him. Hektor's father Priam asks Akhilleus for his son's body back, so they can bury it properly. A proper burial is very essential in their society. ' If you would have me carry out the burial,

Akhilleus, here is the way to do me grace.

As we are penned in the town, but must bring wood

From the distant hills, the Trojans are afraid.

We should have mourning for nine days in hall,

Then on the tenth conduct his funeral... (Homer 24. 790-795)

Another characteristic men must show in the world of The Iliad is that they must respect their gods. Gods played a very large role in the battles of the Greek and Trojan War. The gods were the ultimate control of everything, if they wanted something done by man they would tell him to do it or else death. Also, if a man was in trouble and needed help, the supreme authority and power they would ask the gods for their help. ' O hear me, master of the silver bow,

Protector of Tenedos and the holy towns,

Apollo, Sminthian, if to your liking

Ever in any grove I roofed a shrine

Or burnt thighbones in fat upon your altar-

Bullock or goat flesh-let my wish come true... (Homer 1. 45-50)

This is asking the gods for help, when Agamemnon needs help. Men need to respect the dead, have friends and have a close relationship with the gods to achieve ultimate glory and fame. All men want respect in their lives, and will do anything to achieve this ultimate satisfaction from life. Some soldiers such as Akhilleus will kill hundreds of men for the glory of being the best warrior in the Trojan War. With all rage, Hektor becomes very barbaric in the

achievement of becoming a very glorious warrior. ' Ill not insult your corpse should Zeus allow me/ victory in the end, your life as prize' (22. 305-306)

On the other hand, Hektor has respect from his community, and has earned it. '...for his dear wife to see, and for his mother,/ his child, his father, Priam, and his men...'(24. 42). This quotation is telling how much Hektor's community. Men get respect for all the accomplishments and achievements they have done to benefit their community. Men are required by their world to have admiral characteristics and display morals for glory and fame to be in their lives. Men must value friendship, death and respect their gods. Men also must not have fear but act like vicious animals to kill their enemies. In the world of The Iliad men must display all of the admirable characteristics in order to achieve fame in their world.

### Conclusion

The opposing movement is characteristic of the Iliadic aesthetic, with its constant balance of antitheses, its consistent insistence on the circularity of experience— whether spatial or temporal—that never leaves us with a linear, periodic impression. And so the examination of certain passages in Book 8 suggest how intricately enmeshed in the texture of the Iliad is Homer's awareness of the continuity between the cosmic and the mundane, between the perpetual and the temporary, among the three dimensions of human time (past, present, future), between the collective nature of man and its heroic individual manifestations. From the inspiration of the Muse of Memory Homer derives the artistic vision by which logos and mythos, history and philosophy, things as they were and things as they should be, are

synthesized to reveal the cyclic continuum of human experience. In the human circle, Homer presents the focus and the circumference as somehow beautifully and mysteriously interchangeable.

In the world of the Iliad, a hero is not simply someone who fights well; rather, a hero is larger than life, and to the audience listening to the Iliad, a character of the distant past. A hero's job is to excel. In battle, this involves killing the most men and winning the most fame for killing the most men. In the Iliad, many of the warriors on each side pursue honor through fighting. To a lesser extent, the nobles can gain glory in speaking by suggesting good advice or by insulting another person when appropriate.

In Homeric epic, heroic words are themselves indications of heroic deeds. Thus, when a hero challenges an enemy or vaunts over a slain foe, this is not "bad sportsmanship" or the like; this is a hero announcing and seeking glory. Heroic glory lived on after death. Or, to put it another way, mortals could gain immortality by getting glory. The heroes fight with the knowledge that valor in death confers greater glory than a life lived in peace.

#### Work Cited

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