

Sarpedon as a symbol of a strong character in the iliad

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



If the Iliad were a simple war narrative with a clear bias towards the protagonist's side, Sarpedon would be portrayed as a two-dimensional enemy soldier who dies during the action. However, the Iliad is no such story. Complex and intensely human ideals, morals and emotions are woven into the very fabric of the poem, and these themes are by no means limited to the Greek side. Sarpedon is a character who is deeply linked with the themes of heroism, family, death and loss throughout the narrative. This serves to distinguish him from other named Trojan leaders, and arguably affords him a similar status within the poem to more prominent characters such as Hector and Paris. While Achilles' rage and consequent moral dilemma forms the crux of the narrative, Sarpedon's character arc forms a foil that contextualises Achilles' paradox. Achilles rejects the heroic code; Sarpedon not only assumes but outlines and defends it in his famous speech to Glaukos. Achilles fears that the kleos given to a hero is not worth the price of death; Sarpedon comes closer to death than any other character in Book 5, yet still rises to fight a war that is not his. Perhaps more striking however, is his father Zeus' unwillingness to consign his son to death, despite the fact that Sarpedon's end fits within the dios boule as a whole. This episode brings up questions about Zeus' true power, and the purpose of the epic. All of this combines to create a single, complicated character of many, fighting a war of many motives.

The Iliad is full of heroes on both sides of the war. In concentrating on the major players, it is easy to minimise the role the lesser heroes play within the narrative. Upon first glance, Sarpedon does appear to be a lesser hero. He appears sporadically throughout the poem, always within the context of

war and never for any elongated period of time. His prowess in war is never dwelt on as is Hector's, or Patroclus', and he is even almost removed from the action in Book 5 when he is gravely wounded. However, it is arguably this very episode that initially cements his status as an important character within the narrative. The formulaic nature of the oral composition has resulted in the association of specific language with specific outcomes; for example, the idea of a hero's spirit leaving him while a "mist" descends has almost always been used to signify death. When Sarpedon is wounded by the spear of Tleptolemus, the poet explicitly uses these very phrases to describe Sarpedon's state. "...his spirit left him-a mist poured down his eyes..." (Il, 5. 799) translates Fagles, and others have made this idea even more explicit. Lattimore's 1951 translation states: "he lost his life". And yet, Sarpedon here does not die. "A gust of the North Wind... carried back the life breath/he had gasped away in pain." (Il 5. 800-1). There is more than one way to interpret this use of language: either the poet accidentally 'killed' off Sarpedon too early and had to invent some way to bring him back (which seems unlikely), or the poet is deliberately using language to single out and distinguish the son of Zeus from other heroes. As stated by Barker, the use of this specific phrasing is used to describe dying heroes in almost every case but two; here, with Sarpedon, and in book 22 when Andromache learns of her husband's death. "...she fainted, falling backwards/gasping away her life breath..." (Il, 22. 548-49), yet as Sarpedon does, she recovers her "life breath" and returns to the living. This serves to highlight the importance of Hector to Andromache, and distinguishes them from all other lovers within the narrative; their intensely bittersweet interaction in book 6 during his brief

return to Troy is perhaps the most human moment in the poem. If this is the case, then the same idea can be applied in book 5 to Sarpedon. The poet's innovative use of language, the break from the norm, all point to the idea that Sarpedon is both unique and significant. This, in turn, sets up his importance in later events.

Sarpedon's brush with death and subsequent distinction puts him in a unique position with regards to Achilles' rage. By almost experiencing death, yet rising to fight once more, Sarpedon has somewhat experienced Achilles' final fear and still chooses to fight for kleos. In Book 9, Achilles informs the embassy of his new stance on the heroic life: death is too high a price for the poor compensation he receives whilst living, especially when compounded with Agamemnon's slights. In contrast, Sarpedon in Book 12 delivers his famous speech to Glaukos in the heat of battle supporting the hero's trade. After steeling himself to charge the Greek wall, he outlines their duty to charge in the front lines because of the time they receive at home: "... they hold us both in honor, first by far/with pride of place, choice meats and brimming cups" (Il 12. 360-61). The life Achilles is rejecting is here being wholeheartedly embraced. Classicists have often pointed to this passage as a clear outlining of the heroic ideal, the motivation behind heroism throughout the Iliad: trading effort for timê, gera and kleos. However, there is ambiguity present in the second part of Sarpedon's speech. After outlining the prizes of a heroic life, Sarpedon then contrasts it with the idea of being immortal: if he and Glaukos could only "live forever", he would "never fight on the front lines again". However, since they are not, they must fight, to "

give our enemy glory or win it for ourselves!". Read in context, it appears that Sarpedon means to insist that the life of a king is so wonderful, it is second only to the unobtainable immortal life. However, there is a second interpretation possible: the life of a king is good, but nothing near the joys of eternal existence. This second interpretation is the thought process behind Achilles' rebuttal of book 9's embassy; and yet, it is important to note that these two interpretations do not contradict one another. There is a tendency to claim that Achilles denounces the heroic life entire, when in truth he simply rejects it. The promise of kleos is deemed simply not worth an early death, and so Achilles begins to turn from war. Sarpedon's delineation of the heroic life furthers the understanding of Achilles' plight by providing a contrast - a man who rejects the idea and a man who embraces it. This in turn serves the essential humanity of the poem when Achilles eventually returns to war: in contrast to Sarpedon who is very forthcoming about his aspirations for kleos, Achilles is motivated not by personal gain, but by loss and revenge.

Despite all this, it would be incorrect to assert that kleos and timê were the sole reasons for men like Sarpedon going to war. Other than the initial conflict between Menelaus and Paris and the question of the honour lost between them, the poem states again and again that heroes fought to protect their families. Hector's goodbye to his son and wife, as well as his conviction that he is " the one man strong enough/to fight off your day of slavery" (Il 6. 552-53) is a clear example of the motivation of family in war. Sarpedon too discusses his wife and son on several occasions, most

prominently when taunting Hector to fight in book 5 (“... command the rest/to brace and defend their wives.”, Il 5. 558-59) and upon his almost death (“... not my fate... to bring some joy to my dear wife, my baby son”, Il 5. 787-89). These many references to a domestic world in the heat of battle draw the poem away from the glory of war and into the themes of life and loss. Yet for Sarpedon and Hector, these considerations do not outweigh the glory of war. Sarpedon seems reconciled to the idea that he will not “ journey home again to the fatherland I love” (Il 5. 788), and continues to fight. Hector rejects Andromache’s suggestion that he “ take [his] stand on the rampart here” (Il 6. 511), as in doing so he would “ die of shame” (Il 6. 523) for not fighting in the front-lines. Both men fight to protect their wives from the marauding Greeks as Sarpedon emphasises in book 5, but their zeal for the heroic life does seem to somewhat outweigh these considerations. In contrast, when faced with Book 9’s embassy. Achilles dwells upon the life he could have when he returns home, and places a higher value on domestic felicity and longevity than heroism. Thus, both Hector and Sarpedon act as a foil to Achilles. Achilles’ longing for life at home becomes more understandable, especially to modern audiences, when contrasted with the Trojan men’s almost lack of care.

Death, then, is understood as only temporarily avoidable; this theme drives the action for the latter part of the poem. The death of Patroclus outweighs all Achilles’ considerations for life and sends him back into battle. In contrast, Sarpedon’s death expands upon this theme of loss and fate in a unique way. He is lamented not just by his mortal companions, but by his immortal father

Zeus. Despite Zeus' creation of the *dioboule* and his control over the war, Zeus is almost powerless to intervene in his son's death. An interesting paradox is presented - Zeus, who set the *dioboule* as an extension of his will cannot willfully act against it. This begs the question; is the supposed 'will of Zeus' then truly the will of Zeus? The heroes constantly kowtow to the will of the Gods, yet the gods prove that even they cannot protect their favourites. Zeus' singular pain in sacrificing his son is evident in the image the poet presents of the god, showering "tears of blood that drenched the earth" (Il 16. 546), so it is clearly not a simple matter of lack of care.

Sarpedon's death is the one that produces the most consternation. Why then must Sarpedon die?

A possible answer to this lies perhaps not in the will of the gods, or the will of fate, but rather the tradition of the poem. The successful attempts of gods to protect heroes in previous books have all served some purpose: for example, Aphrodite's abduction of Paris in Book 4 stops the premature ending of the poem, while Poseidon and Aphrodite's respective rescues of Aeneas ensure that he survives to be the protagonist of the *Aeneid*. If the poet were to intervene, poetic tradition would be disrupted and this would in turn give license to other poets to change the narrative, and the epic would be distorted. Sarpedon's fate, then, must submit to Achilles'. In this manner, the will of Zeus becomes one with the will of the poet; both working to the same end, despite the pain of losing favoured heroes. Achilles' fate is unavoidable, and this defines the fate of all those around him.

Sarpedon's character helps expand upon prominent themes in the Iliad. His outlining and embodiment of the heroic trade juxtaposes Achilles' rejection of it. He is distinguished by both the poet and by his father Zeus in various ways, linking him to the inherent themes of the Iliad. More than this, Sarpedon is a Trojan fighter who is portrayed with a great deal of feeling and sympathy, as are Hector, Andromache, Paris, Helen and Priam. This negates the idea of the Iliad as a simple war poem; if this were the case, the Trojan Sarpedon would not have been the one to exemplify the heroic life in the way that he did, and his death would not have been dwelt on with so much pathos. Although he never directly interacts with Achilles, Sarpedon's character is linked with the themes the poem is concerned with, and forms a foil which sheds light upon Achilles' consternation. All this belies the idea that Sarpedon is a lesser hero or a dismissable character, but places him squarely amongst the greater heroes as he deserves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Fagles, Robert, trans. The Iliad. United States of America: Penguin Books, 1991.

Barker, Elton T. E. "The Iliad's Big Swoon: A Case of Innovation within the Epic Tradition?" Trends in Classics 3. 1 (2011), 1-7

Lattimore, Richmond, trans. The Iliad of Homer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

Claus, David B. "Aidôs in the Language of Achilles." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974), vol. 105, 1975, 13-28

Wolfe, Jessica. "The Razor's Edge: Homer, Milton, and the Problem of Deliberation." in *Homer and the Question of Strife from Erasmus to Hobbes*, University of Toronto Press, 2015, 305-374

Wilson, Joe. "Homer and the Will of Zeus." *College Literature*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2007, 150-173