

Achilles as a powerful protagonist in the Iliad

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Achilles, the swift, godlike warrior of Greek lore, is among the most complex of Homer's epic characters. Achilles and his ill-fated tendon figure prominently in the Western archetypal notion of a tragic hero; however, the application of the term "hero" to the Achaean fighter is disputable. Homer creates in Achilles a character that challenges the audience to grapple with both positive and negative aspects of his personality. From the very first to the very last books of *The Iliad*, Achilles says and does things that can be interpreted in different ways depending on one's overall view of his character. This ambiguity, while frustrating, seems to have been intentionally included by Homer in order to more forcefully engage the audience's thoughts on themes such as honor, righteousness, and mortality that are at the core of the poem. Achilles, because he is left open to so much interpretation, emerges as a character representative of a broad range of human experience.

The Iliad begins, in true Homeric fashion, in *medias res*: specifically, in the middle of Achilles' rage. Because of this rapid introduction, the reader or audiencemember forms an immediate opinion of Achilles. Such first reactions are crucial; the resulting attitude colors the reader's perceptions of Achilles' actions for the rest of the story. In the case of the opening scenes of *The Iliad*, the text contains bases for several different reader reactions. A favorable reaction might view Achilles as a challenger of tyrannical leaders, a voice for the little guy. After all, Achilles is objecting in part to Agamemnon's concern for his own glory and personal satisfaction over concern for the lives of his troops. Plus, if Achilles were to give up his own hard-won trophy, it would just be exacerbating the unjustness of the prize distribution. Achilles

rails against Agamemnon, “ Staggering drunk, with your dog’s eyes, your fawn’s heart! Never once did you arm with the troops and go to battle... Safer by far you find, to foray all through camp, commandeering the prize of any man who speaks against you. King who devours his people (85, 264-270)!” Achilles is fighting not just for himself, but for the whole Achaean army, all of the King’s people. Thus his rage and withdrawal from battle can be viewed as a sort of nonviolent resistance in the face of despotism.

Achilles’s initial clash with Agamemnon, if examined from a different point of view, can also yield a negative attitude in the mind of the reader. The case can be made that both Agamemnon and Achilles in this situation act incredibly selfishly. They are both unnecessarily risking others’ lives in defense of their own honor, and quibbling over female chattel. Furthermore, beyond simply sulking and refusing to fight, Achilles asks his mother Thetis to appeal to Zeus to help the Trojans. In his rage against Agamemnon, Achilles has now actively sought the death of his fellow Achaeans — a damnable act, hardly inspiring sympathy. Based on this evidence, one could assume him to be an egocentric rageaholic. Indeed, sufficient evidence for the negative view of Achilles is to be found just in the first few pages of The Iliad.

After the introduction of Achilles in book one, the warrior’s appearances in the plot action become sparse. Not until book nine does he reappear in any significant form, after much bloodshed has already been sustained on the battlefield. The stretch of battles scenes leaves the reader ample time to stew over his or her initial attitude towards Achilles. Similarly, it leaves

Achilles to stew in his rage towards Agamemnon. When Achilles reenters the action in book nine, the tables have turned slightly; he is now being plied with gifts in exchange for his return. By changing the circumstances in this way, Homer shows Achilles's personality from a different perspective.

People's actions are often judged differently based on whether they have the upper hand or not, and this situation indicates how Achilles acts when he, for the most part, has the upper hand. Again, Achilles's response to the embassy from Agamemnon can be viewed as supporting both positive and negative attitudes towards Achilles.

On the favorable side, the idea of asserting the rights of the common man once again appears. This time, on a fundamental level, Achilles questions why the troops are even fighting for Agamemnon. Their lives and homes had not been threatened by the Trojans. They are simply fighting to settle the personal scores of rulers. Achilles asks " Why must we battle Trojans, men of Argos?... Are they the only men alive who love their wives, those sons of Atreus (262, 409-414)?" It can be seen that Achilles feels that an injustice is being perpetrated, an injustice that he will no longer take part in. His familial sentiments can be considered touching; he views Briseis with spousal tenderness, even though she is his prize. Achilles's moral stance is one that has been taken by soldiers throughout the ages, and it thus can inspire sympathy among the audience.

To take the negative view, one can return to the fact that Achilles now has the advantage, and as such, his actions should be judged against a higher standard. Agamemnon is now acquiescing to Achilles's original wish and

more. Achilles could accept the embassy with grace and honor, but instead he remains obstinate in his refusal. Not only is this obstinacy childish, it is also detrimental to the ranks of Achaean soldiers, who cannot face the Trojans without Achilles. Achilles's rage at Agamemnon, which once was fairly specific in nature, has now become a thoughtless and all-encompassing emotion. His selfish pride is costing the lives of thousands of fellow warriors.

These attitudes of sympathy or disgust seem fairly straightforward. Yet both the argument in favor of the positive view of Achilles and that in favor of the negative view cannot be considered complete without taking into account some themes of ancient Greek culture. One such theme is that of honor. Honor is mentioned constantly throughout *The Iliad*; it was obviously of paramount importance to the men of ancient Greece. The original row between Agamemnon and Achilles had honor at its core: whoever lost his trophy would also lose a part of his honor and manliness. In this light, Achilles's initial refusal to cooperate with Agamemnon seems somewhat more understandable. Achilles's subsequent refusal to fight also seems more daring when it is considered that he is losing honor by not fighting.

Honor is linked with another Homeric theme, mortality, in Achilles's speech explaining why he refuses the embassy. In most cases, and particularly for Achilles, honor and death go hand in hand. Achilles specifically knows that if he fights he will die, and that if he sails home he will live a long life. Choosing to sail seems the cowardly route, yet considering the historical context, the action would have been a bravely revolutionary one to take. Thus these

social ideas of honor and mortality can be used to further blur the line between the positive and negative views of Achilles.

The circumstances under which Achilles finally reenters combat result in interesting perspectives on his character. His directions to Patroclus about not entering the city seem to show affectionate and genuine concern. Similarly, his severely anguished reaction upon hearing of his friend's death reveals a deep personal attachment. These occurrences tend to endear Achilles to the reader by portraying him as a caring and sensitive human being. Even Achilles's bloodlust towards Hector is understandable, given the magnitude of his grief over Patroclus's death. The sympathetic view of Achilles sees him here as a reluctant warrior, compelled to avenge his dear friend's murder.

In characteristic ambiguous fashion, the above events can all easily be interpreted negatively instead of positively. For example, when Achilles exhorts Patroclus to turn back before seizing the city, he focuses on the good of his own glory: " Even if Zeus the thundering lord of Hera lets you seize your glory, you must not burn for war against these Trojans, madmen lusting for battle — not without me — you will only make my glory that much less... (415, 102-106)" These wishes are a tad presumptuous, given that Achilles refuses to go into battle himself. Achilles's extreme expression of grief and rage at Patroclus's death can also inspire skepticism among readers; after all, he had to have realized earlier that there was a good chance of Patroclus being wounded or killed. His violence toward Hector's body can be viewed as

unreasonable and downright psychotic. Thus Achilles's reentrance into war is conducive to a distinctly negative interpretation, as well as a positive one.

The reader reaches the last scenes of *The Iliad* with a deep but confused sense of Achilles's character. From the very opening lines and on throughout the work, the actions and words of *The Iliad*'s tragic hero are left wide open to interpretation. Because Achilles can be perceived in so many different ways depending on the reader's perspective and understanding of the story, his character emerges as representation of all human tragedy. When Achilles and Priam gaze into each other's eyes at the end of the poem, the reader wonders if Priam is also trying to divine the true motives behind the swift warrior's behavior. In the end, by remaining an enigma, Achilles inspires the reader to ponder the very depths of human experience that *The Iliad* explores.