

# Humanity in homer's world

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



“ Poor things, why did I give you to King Pêleus,  
a mortal, you who never age nor die,

to let you ache with men in their hard lot?

Of all creatures that breathe and move on the earth

none is more to be pitied than a man.”

—Homer Iliad Bk17: 497-501

Of mortal creatures, all that breathe and move,

earth bears none frailer than mankind. What man

believes in woe to come, so long as valor

and tough knees are supplied by the gods?

But when the gods in bliss bring miseries on,

then willy-nilly, blindly, he endures.

—Homer Odyssey Bk18: 164-169

The events in Homer's epic poems occur in two parallel worlds, the mortal and the immortal. The Iliad and The Odyssey portray dramatic relationships between humans and gods. Gods have a tremendous amount of power over humans. For example, the gods can whisk Paris away from Menelâos' lance as easily as they can place Patrôklos among destruction. Nevertheless, when Odysseus is offered immortality, he chooses to be mortal, and to embrace all

the pain that Kalypso foretells. Seeing this unusual case, we cannot help but compare humanity and immortality and explore the significance of being human.

The intrinsic difference between humans and gods is the fact that humans "possess the ability" to die. Death, making life impermanent, gives unique value to the life of a human being. The sad fact that Penélopê will die makes her more valuable to Odysseus than Kalypso.

Moreover, characters even welcome glorified death. Hektor is clearly aware that "a day will come when ancient Ilion falls." (6: 521) When Andrómakhê earnestly pleads with Hektor not to abandon his family and go to the battlefield, he does not give up his position on the battlefield, since he wants people to remember him as the one "who fought best| of Trojan horsemen." (6: 535/6) For him, to contend for honor is much more important than his family, despite the risk of his wife becoming a captive and his own life being lost. In the same way, Akhilleus also faces a choice to live in peace or to reenter the battle with the threat of death as glory walks hand in hand with his doom. However, his response is determined: "I should confront the dark| drear spirit of death.... Now, though, may I win my perfect glory." (18: 132/3, 140) He pursues honor of war and revenge for Patróklos instead of living a peaceful life. By dying as a hero, his name will be remembered for centuries and he can achieve what gods can never attain—immortality in the people's mind who will forever remember him as a hero. Death with glory, then, is not the end of life, but the beginning of immortality. In addition, as Hektor states before he leaves Andrómakhê forever, "Let me be hidden dark down in my

grave| before I hear your cry or know you captive!" (6: 539-40) While Akhilleus also consoles Thetis that "[he] shall rest when [he has] fallen!" (18: 139) They both welcome death as a final resting place, where one is not bound to suffer from bereavement or warfare.

The theme of immortal humans recurs throughout *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. If we define immortality as merely an eternal presence of spirit, mind or a mental world after death, the existence of the Underworld best exemplifies the possibility for humans to obtain immortality. This explains why both Patroklos and Elpenor beseech for a proper burial, since in ancient Greek belief, only souls whose bodies had been properly disposed of could enter the Underworld.

In Book 18 of *The Iliad*, Homer stands back from the brutal war and personal revenge to ponder the immense beauty of the larger universe which stages the war, picturing different scenes on the immortal shield right after Akhilleus has found his meaning of life and decides to reenter the battle. How inconsiderable our Earth—the theatre upon which all our mighty designs, our deaths and all our wars are transacted— is compared with the universe [Christiaan Huygens 1690]. To a larger extent, an individual dies, but his descendents carry his blood and lineage, so that the story of mankind lasts forever. The wheel of history will keep spinning forward through the death of the old and the birth of the new life over and over again. The Homeric heroes' death and rebirth also exemplify such kind of everlasting life. Meanwhile, this idea echoes with Perséphonê's eating the "honey-sweet pomegranate seed" (2: 372) offered by Hades in *Hymn to Demeter*. While in

many cultures pomegranate seeds are associated with fertility, birth and sex, it demonstrates that death is somewhat related to sex, from which new birth comes. Sex and death, creation and destruction, the most powerful forces, form the cycle of nature, and it is the endless desire of mankind that perpetuates this cycle.

As the quotes at the beginning of this paper state, the gods know the mortals' agony, as they have played the largest role in causing it. But human suffering outreaches that of any other creature. Before Akhilleus rejoins the battle, he has already been told by his mother, Thetis, that " Both he and [Patróklos] were destined| to stain the same earth dark red here at Troy." (18: 384/5) But while he is aware of divine interventions, he is unable to prevent his fate. Human awareness of the absurdity and arbitrariness of their treatment by the gods cannot help them make better decisions with foresight; it only emphasizes the pain and agony. Hektor foresees the fall of Ilium, and Cassandra predicts her death with Agamémnon, but neither can simply walk away and avoid the gloomy death awaiting them. Human tragedy lies in the excess knowledge and inability to manipulate this knowledge to change the human fate.

However, it is from this suffering and pain that the true human virtues and spirits spring up. In Book V of The Odyssey, when Poseidon punishes Odysseus by heaving a huge wave on his way to Skhería, " Odysseus would have perished,| battered inhumanly, but he had the gift| of self-possession from grey-eyed Athena" (455-7) and survives. Despite some help from Ino and Athena, it is Odysseus who made his way to Skhería. Odysseus has the

determination and perseverance to realize his dream of returning home, in spite of the numerous mishaps brought upon by the angry Earthshaker. There lies the human spirit, which is a strong response to the fragile nature of human beings. Although they know the fact that without divine help, they cannot achieve their goal, they still courageously embrace the challenges in their way.

This unchangeable misfortune extends the human virtues, often featured with the development of their personality. When Akhilleus steps out of tasting his own rage and decides to face the death, he suddenly realizes many things he has never thought about. When Priam implores Akhilleus to return Hektor's body, Akhilleus shows sympathy and respect by returning it and giving an eleven-day truce for a proper funeral. He orders Hektor's body to be placed apart, "where Priam| could not see his son— for seeing Hektor| he might in his great pain give away to rage,| and fury then might rise up in Akhilleus" (24: 698-701). This is the first time Akhilleus has thought about others' emotions in *The Iliad*. Akhilleus knows, while Priam does not, that he is destined to die soon and Pêleus can never see his son again. Though initially a temperamental and impulsive man, Akhilleus now understands the pain of bereavement parents must endure, and becomes sympathetic. Telémakhos has also gone through such a maturation of character. Originally a boy headstrong to kill all the suitors with his spears, Telémakhos learns how to endure and use scheme to circumvent the suitors through his responsibility to keep the house. The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one [Mr. Antolini, *Catcher in the Rye* (Mark Holden)].

In contrast, the immortals do not engage in self-improvement. Arês' whining after being wounded by Diomêdês perfectly exemplifies the Homeric attitude toward gods. Arês' appearance as a spoiled child who keeps complaining after being hunted down provides proof of Homer's view of gods as capricious, fickle, and petty. On the other hand, the immortals also live in a mortal-like world, given the fact that they often burst out squabbles and fight for their own interests; thus, not even they can always fulfill their will. Even Zeus has to consider other gods' feelings. Such sentences as "All wanderers| and beggars come from Zeus" (14: 69-70) spread expansively in *The Odyssey*. Hospitality is enforced and protected by Zeus, but ambivalently, it is Zeus who sanctions the Phaiákians who hospitably receive Odysseus and help him return to Ithaka. For Zeus, preserving a stable relation with Poseidon is more important than protecting the ones he favors by his own will.

In conclusion, Homer illustrates in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, that mortality is the blessing of human beings, making life impermanent, and thus precious. Homer also displays human virtues and spirits in the process of self-improvement, which is another defining characteristic of true humanity and its splendor. The Homeric hero has to make his life meaningful in the limited amount of time he has. Once dead, he is free from suffering and his feat and story can never be changed any more. It is then carved in stone and forever written in history.