

A comparison  
between homer's iliad  
and w.h. auden's  
"achilles' shield"



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The Greek minstrel Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*, is one of the most popular works of literature in history, and for good reason. In it, and its companion poem, *The Odyssey*, the happenings of the legendary Trojan War as well as certain events following it are chronicled in the truly fantastic and romanticized manner we now consider typical of Greek mythology. A pivotal and important scene in *The Iliad* centers upon the death of Patroclus, a warrior who Achilles, a warrior himself who is said to be the greatest among mortals, considers to be his closest friend. Achilles, profoundly angered and saddened, vows ultimate revenge and is ready to fight to a brutal death. However, Achilles' mother, Thetis, commissions the smithing god Hephaestus to create a magnificent shield for him, and after receiving this shield Achilles goes on to continue warring.

The shield, however, in addition to being a pivotal object in the plot, is also described in great detail as a veritable artistic masterpiece, as any creation by the gods would likely be. It is adorned with beautiful and intricate images of what might be considered the entire sphere of human life as Homer saw it, and, if nothing else, it is described in the text as a "world of gorgeous immortal work", (Homer, 18. 564) and indeed any shield fashioned as Achilles' is described would be deserving of this title.

The story of Achilles' shield is a fascinating one in and of itself, and poet W. H. Auden wrote a poem in 1954 which he named "Achilles' Shield". One of the most popular poets of his time, Auden was known to hold strong opinions as to the current condition of the modern world, and the direction he felt it was heading in, and this is evident in his poem, which is directly inspired by Book 18 of *The Iliad* and its description of the shield which was bestowed

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upon Achilles. However, Auden uses this template of the world on Achilles' shield and takes a vastly different approach in depicting another world, which cannot be mistaken for any other than our own present one. To put it simply, the differences in the two conceptions of Achilles' shield can be ascribed to the different sensibilities held by the poets, and the vast changes that took place on Earth between the classical Greek age and the mid-20th century.

As W. H. Auden's poem was written retrospectively, inspired as it was by Homer's work, it would be prudent to compare the two poems from the standpoint of Auden's. Auden's poem has a clearly somber, reflective, and melancholy tone. While Homer may have been acutely aware of the scope of the world in which he lived, the Greek classical worldview still seems slightly myopic, fully conscious of itself but unable or unwilling to ponder the future or past. Perhaps this is due to the massive scope of the Iliad itself, which has no reason to concern itself with what is not relevant to the literally epic events of the Trojan War. " She looked over his shoulder . . .", begins Auden's poem, which immediately places the reader in a position of looking backwards, and of looking past the apparent splendor of what is (Auden, 1).

Auden is pining for something, a paradise perhaps, that he seems to feel has been lost. When he in fact so overtly refers to Book 18 of the Iliad by using it as the title of his poem, he is positioning it as a counterpart to Homer's own idea for those who care to understand his work. It is likely that even without the title or knowledge of its origins an astute reader would be able to discern that Auden's poem is one of regret and remorse. However, with the title,

readers are provided a context with which to truly discern the meaning of <https://assignbuster.com/a-comparison-between-homers-iliad-and-wh-audens-achilles-shield/>

the work, and in this way he can be said to dare us to compare how he has depicted the world by way of Achilles' shield to the way Homer has done.

In Homer's world, we see what might be considered typical of Greek mythology: fields, vineyards, beautiful cities, all enveloped in nature's bountiful presence. In Auden's world, we are first presented with these similar images of pastoral splendor in the opening stanzas: ". . . vines and olive trees, / Marble well governed cities, / And ships upon untamed seas". (Auden, 2-4) The next line, however, begins with " but", a word that negates all which has come before it and suggests something contradictory or unexpected in the news to come. " But there on the shining metal / His hands had put instead / An artificial wilderness / And a sky like lead." (Auden, 5-8) Indeed, in the following passages, and for the rest of the poem, we are denied the beauty and majesty with which we might in our present time idealize Grecian life.

While wars, murder, and even brutal slaughter among beasts is depicted on Homer's shield, this violence and conflict is shown in a style the reader might be tempted to consider beautiful. As is evident through The Iliad, including Book 18, there is seldom a hint that war is unnecessary, or that perhaps the death of Patroclus is a sign that the battle could perhaps be solved in other ways.

There is surely no better example of this philosophy regarding war and battle than Achilles himself, who is depicted as the ultimate warrior, who, though mortal, has no weakness save for his famous heel. For the Greeks and for Homer, Achilles is said to be one of the most honorable and handsome men

alive, and there is no reason given to consider his wrathful desires for revenge as that of a violent fool.

Of course, no mention would be made of the praise heaped upon the deeds of Achilles by Homer if Auden did not seem to treat this way of living differently. If the mood running throughout the entire piece is not enough to suggest that the author does not completely approve of or agree with the idea of Achilles' feats being truly noble, the last lines,

" Thetis of the shining breasts

Cried out in dismay

At what the god had wrought

To please her son, the strong

Iron-hearted-man slaying Achilles

Who would not live long",

are enough to bring this point home (Auden, 54-59). This passage carries with it also the implication that many pursuits, even that of great Hephaestus, can easily be for naught, and that a shield wrought by an immortal and great being to protect a mortal being who is rather godlike himself will still leave room for harm. There is no glory to be found here.

In conclusion, it is clear that Homer and Auden had different goals in mind when designing and describing Achilles' shield, and it is important to recognize in Auden's case that his idea for the shield was lifted from and

should be examined in the context of Homer's original idea. While the classical Greek idea of war being a noble enterprise runs throughout The Iliad and even throughout modern times, Auden felt differently about what war can bring. This disparity also extends to the way both authors felt about the state of humanity and the planet at the time, but it is important to recognize that The Iliad and Auden's poem were written for different purposes. However, it is also important that when such a connection between works of art is noticed, we attempt to understand the connection between the authors and their intent, for by better understanding a related work, the meaning of the other reveals itself even further.

## **Works Cited**

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