

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

## ACHILLES

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(in Homer's *Iliad*)

emotional

**Overview** Child of Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis, Achilles is from the start blessed (or cursed) by his half immortal birth. A sense of being both immortal and fragile haunts him throughout his life, which is widely expected to be brief—and is. Handsome, unnaturally powerful, daring, Achilles remains the crucial secret weapon for the Greek armies in the Trojan War, and when he retires in high dudgeon, convinced he has been mistreated by his rival, Agamemnon, Achilles has the fate of the army in his hands. His decision to reenter the fray, to take revenge on the Trojan leader, Hector, and eventually to bring his men back into battle; all these moves are keys to the ultimate victory of the Greeks at Troy.

**Character** Achilles, half immortal, is the spoiled darling of the Greek forces; a musician, a fiery temper, a lover—of his favorite, Patroclus, a furious counter attacker, and in the end perhaps a mortal touched by divine grace. (Counterpoised against his rival leader, Agamemnon, Achilles is fascinating and free spirited.) In vengeance Achilles is formidable; when Patroclus—disguised in the armor of Achilles-- is killed by Hector, Achilles sets out in furious pursuit of this Trojan murderer. He chases his victim three times around the Walls of Troy, then finally catches and slaughters him. Achilles' revenge, however, is more complex than that kind of heroics, for in the end, when Hector's dad comes to beg for the return of his son's corpse, Achilles concedes to return the body, a mark of graciousness which confers an unheard of compassion on this hero's vengeance.

**Parallels** It is not easy to find a god-born, charismatic, volatile, furious, and at the same time (to a degree) passionate hero of Achilles' stripe. Once the god-born qualification is removed, the choices, though narrow, come down to figures like Roland, in the *Chanson de Roland*, a mediaeval knight of high lineage, great courage, and high ethical standards, who inspired by religious faith (not quite right for Achilles) enforces the military power of King Charlemagne. While the knightly parallel touches aspects of Achilles' beautiful nobility, there is another tradition in western literature, that of the swashbuckler, which touches Achilles at the point where he is dauntingly risk-taking, proud, and fierce, and where he strikes out from a point of no compromise. This Achilles bears some kinship to a figure like Robin Hood, prominent in early British legend, to the manly volatility of Sir Percy Blakeney in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), or even to Indiana Jones, in the *Raiders of the Lost Arc* (1981).

### Illustrative moments

**1 Sadness** In the beginning of *Iliad* Book 18, Achilles deduces, from the buzz around the battlefield, that Patroclus must have been killed. At first Achilles is outraged, that his lover had disobeyed Achilles' demand that he not match his strength with that of Hector, but this anger in Achilles rapidly gives way to a tragic despair. His mother Thetis, and a bevy of sea nymphs, joins in the wailing for the pain of the hero and his lover. His first thought is that it is time for him to die, to close off his short life, since he was unable to prevail in saving his friend.

**2 Preparing** As always, Achilles turns to his mother, Thetis, for consolation in crisis, and she agrees that his anger is well placed, and that he is right to give up his grudge against the Greek forces, and to go into battle against the Trojans, and to win back the body of Patroclus. She assures her son that Hephaistos will create for her a new set of armor, which will enable him to disperse the Trojans and recover Patroclus' body. Achilles, awaiting the new armor, grows aware that some immediate action is required, to save Patroclus from being torn apart by Hector and the Trojans, and accordingly allows Athena to rig him out in the 'tasseled aegis' and with a ring of cloud around his head, to terrify the enemy, and make them release Patroclus' body.

**3 Revenge** Achilles advances fiercely on his plan of revenge, vowing that he will neither eat nor drink until he has turned Hector into a corpse. He takes the extraordinary step of reconciling with his rival,

Agamemnon, to guarantee unity in wiping out the Trojans. As the Greek army advances from the shoreline back against the city of Troy, Athena feeds the non-eating and non-drinking Achilles with tastes of that ambrosia while sustains the gods, and Achilles bursts forth against the Trojans, intent on destroying his way through to Hector, the supreme prize.

**4 Assault** Achilles finally catches up Hector, whom he targets for destruction. ‘Come close,’ he cries, ‘that you may the sooner enter destruction’s bounds.’ Hector steps up to fight, remarking that though he is the weaker of the two men, the gods will decide the outcome as they wish. Just as Achilles is ready to kill Hector, Apollo snatches Hector up, and sequesters him, so that Achilles has to divert his direct attack against the Trojan army as a whole. He commits terrible wreckage against the enemy, but he is saving the worst fury for last, his assault on Hector who flees him three times around the walls of Troy, before being left dead in the dust outside the Citadel of Troy.

### **Discussion questions**

Does Achilles show true compassion for Priam at the end of the *Iliad*, when the old man comes to beg for the return of his son’s body?

What role does Achilles’ birth from a goddess (Thetis) play in his sense of self and sense of his destiny?

Had Achilles himself to blame, for sending Patroclus forth to fight in his, Achilles’ armor? Why did Achilles do this? Was it his way of gradually letting himself be drawn back into the fray?