

# ILIAD

Homer

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**Overview** The *Iliad* is an ancient Greek poem (15,693 lines) written (or first sung) in dactylic hexameters, and attributed to the poet Homer. The poem is set during the Trojan War—general opinion places the war in the 12th or 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.—that siege of the coastal city of Troy by assembled Greek forces. The poem tracks those events, which occurred over a period of several weeks, during which the Greeks scored significant steps toward victory. Although the heart of the poem concerns the painful winning of this victory, the collateral narrative covers a variety of issues—the tales of Greek history which preceded the launching of the expedition to Troy, the narratives of the lives and emotions of major players among the besieged Trojans. The tracking of the steps to Greek victory involves deep and continual attention to the details of warfare itself, and to the bitter personal conflicts which lead the way into the heart of the poem.

Personal struggle, jealousy and hatred, and an eventual act of compromise, by the greatest Greek hero, Achilles—all these stages of experience build the narrative's sense of the singleness of intensity, which makes the *Illiada* brilliant unified whole. 'strife' rages between the two leaders. The sulking, withdrawal, then gradual semi-mellowing of Achilles will constitute the deepest development of the narrative. We move into the final stage of the epic, which will display the ultimate victory of the Greeks, generated by the widespread fury of Achilles caused by the death of Achilles' friend Patrocleus.

**Story** The *Iliad* is set during the Trojan War, as the Greeks face the threat of a disastrous plague. The leader of the Greek forces, Agamemnon, resists returning, to the priest Chryseis, his precious daughter Chryseis. So long as Agamemnon holds this concubine, so long a plague will continue to destroy the Greeks. Finally Agamemnon agrees to return the girl, on condition that Achilles, the great rival of Agamemnon, will turn over *his* #1 concubine to Agamemnon. The plague is broken; Achilles sulks.

These events introduce the fighting in the *Iliad*. From Books 4-8 the battle rages. Individual combats interweave with group mêlées, and even the gods—Ares, Apollo, Aphrodite, Zeus above all—throw themselves or their influence into battle. Heroes like Diomedes (Greek) and Glaukos (Trojan) fight each other like gentlemen, identifying themselves by lineage before striking the first blow. So maniacal are the destructive pressures, that circulate through these books, that the reader has to feel the storm is about to break, the violence is about to surpass itself. It is Patroklos, the childhood friend and now the lover of Achilles, who finally punctures the cloudbank. It is he who brings Achilles out of his dudgeon.

The story moves at this point into a new register. Until Book 16, when Patroklos is killed in battle, and the wrath, pity, and pain of Achilles drive him back into the war, there is a constant see-saw between the two sides. Zeus sends Apollo to help the Trojans. Hera seduces Zeus and arranges to support the Greeks, her favorites. The Trojan leader Hector ignores many warnings, to the effect that he should stay out of battle, and avoid the wrath of Achilles. By Book 16 Patroklos can no longer bear to see the Trojans advance toward the Greek ships, which are aligned along the sea shore, and he begs Achilles's permission to enter the war. Achilles, who has gradually been feeling himself drawn back into the fight, reluctantly yields to his friend and lover, and watches Patroklos as he first turns the Trojans away from the ships and then falls into fatal combat with Apollo. This turning point, Apollo's annihilation of Patroklos, brings forth a flood of bitter emotions from Achilles, whose commitment to the fight is now guaranteed. We move into the final stage of the epic, which will display the ultimate victory of the Greeks, generated by the widespread fury of Achilles.

The listener shivers with the terror of Achilles' anger, but Hector refuses to close himself off from battle, and speaks movingly to his wife and small child, about the impending fatal combat, which destiny is driving him to. The Trojans are given free passage back into their city walls, but Hector refuses this escape, and goes down into the plain to fight with Achilles. Achilles pursues his mortal foe around the

walls, and finally kills him, having sufficiently humiliated him. Then the great finale moves in on us. Priam, the father of Hector, imposes on himself the ultimate humiliation, of going to Achilles and begging for the return of the body of his son. Achilles, thinking of his own father, concedes, and returns the body of his bitterest enemy.

## Themes

**Conflict** From jealousy and rivalry, through bloody battleground killing, to the personal fury of Achilles toward Hector; the characters of the *Iliad* are on the whole ready to fight one another.

**Raw battle courage** Many books of the *Iliad* are devoted to fighting—with ample details of weaponry, vaunting speech, and pride in lineage. Fighting is largely hand to hand, and macho courage is the name of victory in this game.

**Compassion** Lust and pride tend to muscle out compassion, in the *Iliad*, but in the final scenes of the epic Priam begs Achilles for the compassion to return the violated body of Hector. From somewhere inside himself, Achilles finds the necessary degree of compassion.

## Characters

**Achilles**, a brilliant young warrior, son of the sea goddess, Thetis, is the dominant figure in the fighting and moral actions that make up the *Iliad*.

**Agamemnon**, the administrative leader of the whole Greek expedition against Troy. His quarrel with Achilles drives Achilles into withdrawal, and eventually into re-engagement with the war.

**Patroklos**, the friend of Achilles. Patroklos' determination to plunge into battle, against the will of Achilles, leads to his own death and Achilles' determination to join the fray.

**Hector**, the leader of the Trojan forces at Troy, is both a family man and an heroic fighter. Ultimately killed by Achilles, Hector's body draws Priam to Achilles's tent, to beg for his son's body.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### ACHILLES (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

**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.

**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.

**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 which sustains the gods, and Achilles bursts forth against the Trojans, intent on destroying his way through to Hector, the supreme prize.

**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?

### AGAMEMNUN (agreeable)

**Overview** Agamemnon brings heavy baggage with him to Troy, in the Greek battle against which he has been chosen Commander in Chief. In order to move the Greek fleet from the port at Aulis, where it is stalled for lack of wind, he is called upon to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia—various accounts tell either of her tragic death or mythical salvation—as the price of movement. (Agreeable he is, as we have said, meaning agreeable to the dictates of fate.) Taking charge of the Greek forces on the shore before Troy he immediately steps into a major brouhaha with the most powerful and charismatic of the Greeks, Achilles,

and is once more confronted with the demands of fate. Greatly preferring to reject and punish Achilles, he is to learn agreeableness the hard way, by discovering that the success of the Greek mission will in the end depend on reconciliation with Achilles.

**Character** Agamemnon is a deliberate and professional military man—Americans might think of Douglas MacArthur or Dwight D. Eisenhower. The collateral ancient literature, which surrounds the tale of sacrifice at Aulis, suggests a man with insufficient human savvy—a natural victim of his wife, who will kill him and his girlfriend, a dad fumbling at Aulis with the dictates of a cruel fate—yet one who, in the end, makes it through, and when absolutely obliged gives in to the demands of fate, and prevails. All that is ‘deliberate and military’ about Agamemnon is most clearly exposed by contrast with the mercurial brilliance of Achilles, who by preference lives by his own laws.

**Parallels** Classical literatures abound in hero figures, and in fact provided the key concept of the hero. Homer himself provides a number of heroic instances, to parallel the rather stiff military prowess of Agamemnon. Hector, Achilles, Diomedes—a military figure, and then of course the Aeneas and Turnus of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. We have dubbed Agamemnon good natured, and tried to give the term a special tweak. Agamemnon, like many ancient heroes, wants success and wants to follow, toward success, the path the gods have given. The lone hero, doing it on his own without divine coverage, is left for later ages. yet even figures like Roland, Joan of Arc, or Charles de Gaulle fight best when they believe they have the gods on their side.

### Illustrative moments

**Brusque** Agamemnon can be harsh—usually the trigger to his discovery of how he must ‘agree’ with the gods. As the Greek fleet settles into battle position around Troy, Agamemnon is addressed by an elderly wise man, Calchas, whose daughter is Agamemnon’s prisoner, and for whose release the old man begs. Agamemnon virtually drives him away: ‘her will I not set free; nay, ere that shall old age come upon her in our house, in Argos, far from her native land, where she shall ply the loom and serve my couch.’ As we are to learn, the hostility to Achilles, which underlies this ‘brusque’ behavior, is ultimately self-destructive to Agamemnon and his fellows. The professional military man yields in the end.

**Dreamer** Lodged in the sea shore encampment, Agamemnon has a powerful dream which claims to be ‘a messenger from Zeus.’ ‘He biddeth thee call to arms the flowing-haired Achaeans with all speed for that now thou mayest take the wide-wayed city of the Trojans.’ But the dream was deceptive. The text continues: ‘So spake the Dream, and departed and left him there, deeming in his mind things that were not to be fulfilled. ‘ A good listener to fate, in general, Agamemnon mistakenly interprets this dream to be reliable, and he hurries to the ‘great hearted elders,’ assembled before Nestor’s tent, to inform the leaders of the nature of his dream, and the steps to be taken.

**Confident** On top of things, at his best, the Agamemnon of Book VIII singles out heroes who are excelling among the Greeks. On one occasion he stands by a special favorite, Teukros, who is causing havoc in the Trojan ranks. ‘Shoot on in this wise,’ exhorts Agamemnon, ‘if perchance thou mayest be found the salvation of the Danaans (Greeks) and glory of thy father, Telamon...’ Agamemnon goes on to outline the ‘meed of honor’ he foresees bestowing on Teukros: ‘a tripod of two steeds with their chariot, or a woman that shall go up into thy bed.’

**Stricken** At the beginning of Book IX the spirits of the Greeks are close to broken, for division in their ranks—Achilles is still sulking, with dreadful consequences—has weakened them as a fighting force. ‘They sat sorrowful in assembly, and Agamemnon stood up weeping, like unto a fountain of dark water that from a beetling cliff poureth down its black stream...’ With heavy heart, seeing no way to win Achilles back, Agamemnon foresees a shameful return from battle to his home in Greece. He goes on to the fateful words: ‘so come, even as I shall bid let us all obey; let us flee with our ships...’ So close the whole expedition is to total disaster.

### Discussion questions

How do you explain the misleading dream sent to Agamemnon, assuring him of impending victory? What does Homer mean by this narrative move?

Is Agamemnon an effective leader of men? How does his weeping, before the troops, impact their spirit and courage?

Agamemnon is quite brutal to the old seer Calchas, who requests the return of his daughter. Yet we have called Agamemnon 'agreeable.' Can you see that Agamemnon's desire to comply with fate makes him 'agreeable'?

**DIOMEDES** (introvert)

**Overview** The *Iliad* of Homer concerns the Greek victory over the Trojan forces in the anciently famous, if possibly fictional, Battle over the Citadel of Troy. (13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) The Greek forces assembled from all over the Eastern Mediterranean, led by their greatest regional heroes: Agamemnon, Achilles, Diomedes, Patroclus, Nestor. In the heat of battle heroes from all regions of the Greek world were intermixed, now one now another prominent in the front lines. Diomedes excels in hand to hand combat, and leads many of the decisive Greek sallies into Trojan lines.

**Character** Introvert? Diomedes is driven from within into one brutal attack after another. He seems almost more a force of nature than an individual, though his lineage marks him out as of distinguished background. Diomedes was the king of the people of Argos, and was customarily compared with Ajax as the most powerful Greek warrior, usually worshipped as divine. His military prowess, like that of Odysseus, relied heavily on ambush and guerilla tactics, guile followed by brutal assault. It is hardly to be wondered that this ruler, and military man's man, should have been one of the many suitors of Helen in the 'old days.' Diomedes is not open out into the world, except perhaps as a fighting machine; he is not a psychology, not a philosopher, and least of all a born leader, but is closer to Rambo than to any of those types

**Parallels** By nature the powerful warrior does not lend himself to fine tuned literary characterization. To give your all to the battle, to slug it out, is to shut out many of your social awarenesses and skills. There are however warriors, like Achilles and Beowulf, who have depth and subtlety even as fighters. Achilles is a sulky fighter, whose honor has to be deeply touched—as in the killing of Patroclus—before he will storm into battle, but when he starts to kill he is as ruthless and clean cut as Diomedes. The 8<sup>th</sup> century epic of *Beowulf* depicts a noble hero, dragon slayer and slayer of the evil, who morphs, in his old age, into sagacity and effective leadership. By contrast, a warrior type like Rambo, memorably depicted on screen by Sylvester Stallone, is a PTSD driven comet of fury, who is unpredictable and violent in mortal combat.

### Illustrative moments

**Power** Diomedes brings brute strength to his every action in combat. 'He spake and leapt in his armour from the chariot to earth, and terribly rang the bronze upon the chieftain's breast as he moved; thereat might fear have come even upon one stout-hearted.' The force of the Greek army gathers around the hero and surges like the waves of the ocean, in rhythmic access of power, against the Trojans—compared in this instance in Book IV to a mass of sheep speaking different languages, and scattered by the Greek power. As often happens, in these hand to hand combats, Diomedes is the quiet powerful force around whom the assembled Greek might coagulates.

**Divine** The power of Diomedes, like that of the greatest Greek heroes Achilles and Odysseus, is fed by the divine. Pallas Athene is the special patron of Diomedes, as she is of Odysseus. 'But now to Tydeus' son Diomedes Pallas Athene gave might and courage, for him to be pre-eminent amid all the Argives and win glorious renown.' Her intervention is sharp and intense: 'she kindled flame unwearied from his helmet and shield, like to the star of summer that above all others glittereth bright after he hath bathed in the ocean stream. In such wise kindled she flame from his head and shoulders and sent him into the midst, where men thronged the thickest.' In the midst is usually where we encounter Diomedes, thrashing this way and that, hewing a path of corpses wherever he turns.

**Brutal** Pandaros, one of the finest marksmen of the Trojans, takes aim against Diomedes. Having failed first with his arrow, he shifts to his spear, 'if I can hit thee.' Pandaros' spear crashes against Diomedes' shield, emboldening the thrower to claim: 'Thou art smitten on the belly right through.'

Diomedes, however, assures the thrower that he has missed his target. Diomedes takes his own spear and hurls, 'and Athene guided the dart upon his nose, beside the eye, and it pierced through his white teeth.' Thence the bronze cut through Pandaros' 'tongue at the root and the point issued forth by the base of the chin.'

**Brawler** Diomedes (Book V) and Aeneas engage in constant brawling, the strongest vs. the strongest. In the midst of a chatty conversation between Zeus and Aphrodite, Diomedes 'of the loud war-cry' jumped Aeneas, though fully aware that Apollo had spread an embrace of protection over his own favorite. Yet even this divine protection, shed over Aeneas, was not enough to discourage Diomedes. Only then did Apollo turn on his wrath full force. With that force to contend with, Diomedes at last withdrew, but only then, and only after Apollo had withdrawn his favorite to a safe shelter.

### Discussion questions

Diomedes as introvert? Make sense? This hero lives around his honor, his defence of himself and of his team, and pure outpouring military prowess. Can you see how that adds up to introversion?

What do you think of the hand to hand combat scenes, in the *Iliad*, as literary experience? Are they compelling? Subtle?

Do you see a distinctive connection between Pallas Athena and Diomedes? Do they share characteristics? How does divine lineage impact the actions of Diomedes?

**NESTOR** (rational)

**Overview** In the back and forth of battle, which consumes the narrative of Homer's *Iliad*, the old man Nestor regularly recurs to our attention. He is part of the fight, although he tends to remain on the margins of it, giving advice and proposing strategy, rather than actually competing—though he does some of that. Homer takes full advantage of this age rich character to open through him perspectives onto the past, for Nestor is constantly putting contemporary events in historical setting, and drawing (more or less) effective conclusions from them.

**Character** On the surface, Nestor is the classical garrulous old man, who has seen it all, loves to recount his past exploits, and is feeling a lot of arthritis in his knees. Sometimes he expatiates at length, on great battles in which he has turned the tide—he can still participate in a chariot clash-up—but sometimes he makes shrewd moral observations, and subsequently small scale practical suggestions that are useful to the commanders. While we retire our elderly generals, the Homeric Greeks kept what wisdom they could close to the battlefield, to make use of it.

**Parallels** The blend of (former) true warrior, with senior citizen militarily participant, is not easy to match, though literature batters on the old man. Lear comes first to mind, with a blend of power and rage, with an increasingly focus-less mind; the power to love and hate boiling inside him. Hemingway's Santiago (in *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952) shares with Nestor indomitability, long trained strength, lots of survival savvy; though where Nestor is chatty and reminiscent, Santiago is terse. Cortazar's *The Old Gringo* (1985) is an old dog ready to conclude his life around the turmoil of the Mexican Revolution, in which he believes, but he is open to new experience in a fashion different from Nestor's delight in the 'grand old times.'

### Illustrative moments

**Participant** Agamemnon approaches Nestor, to regret that his limbs no longer obey him as they used to; 'the common lot of age is heavy upon thee.' To which Nestor replies (Book IV) that 'I too would wish to be as on the day when I slew noble Ereuthalion. But the gods in no wise grant men all things at once.... Yet even so I will abide among the horsemen and urge them by counsel and words, for that is the right of elders.' By and large Nestor displays reason and good sense in his situation, and serves the Greeks as a useful reminder of their relative value and importance.

**Facilitator** Nestor often plays a role as trigger for 'administrative action,' his seniority and manner qualifying him as a priceless go-between. In Book IX his services are badly needed in the effort to get the sulking Achilles back into the battle—in which the Trojans are starting to get the upper hand. On the

occasion in question, Nestor evaluates and praises the many gifts Agamemnon has assembled, to send to Achilles. He then takes command of the delegation to Achilles. 'Come therefore, let us speed forth picked men to go with all haste to the hut of Peleus' son Achilles...whomsoever I appoint, let them consent.'

**Strategist** In Book X the need for Achilles has become urgent, and Nestor picks up the call for all the Greek heroes to throw themselves into the convincing of Achilles. He also casts a useful politically savvy light on the Greeks' position: he predicts that with Achilles back in the battle Hector will begin to lose ground quickly: 'assuredly not all his designs will wise-counselling Zeus fulfil for Hector...nay methinks he (Hector) will contend with even more troubles if but Achilles turn back his heart from grievous anger.' The prediction gives a fresh motivation to the beleaguered Greeks, and of course proves true in the end.

**Expatiates** In Book XI Nestor meets Patroklos, dear friend and aide to Achilles, who rebuts the visit with the reminder that Achilles is a fearful man, and likely enough to blame even the blameless. Nestor replies that he too was once a dreadful warrior—in other words he knows what it's all about—and from there he goes on to explain how, in the midst of a cattle raid between 'the Eleians and ourselves...I slew Ithymoneus, the brave son of Hyperochos, a dweller in Elis, when I was driving the spoil.' Out of a long drawn out tale, which at times seems lost in its own meshes, Nestor extracts the point that taking the opposite side to him can be highly dangerous.

### Discussion questions

Humor in Homer is a tricky issue, and scholars have fought over whether Homer has a sense of humor. Do you see anything about Nestor, the garrulous old warrior, that we might think funny?

Why is Nestor so useful as an intermediary in the war against Troy, and to win Achilles back to the battle? What relevant traits has Nestor, for doing this kind of work?

What is the attitude toward old age in Homer? Is it a universally lamented condition? Or does it contain silver linings?

### HELEN (Closed)

**Overview** The passion of Helen and Paris for one another is one of the causes of the Trojan War, as described in Homer's *Iliad*. Each of these figures represents beauty and birth at its finest, Helen the daughter of Leda and Zeus—who raped her in the guise of a swan, in one account—and from birth reputedly the most beautiful woman in the world, while Paris was from childhood known for his intelligence and irresistible good looks. Various accounts explain the initial meeting of these two paragons, but abduction, rather than seduction, prevails as the likely scenario by which Helen was snatched off to Troy; once there, it was incumbent on her earlier suitors, who had sworn to retrieve her in the case of abduction, to assail Troy until she could be brought back to her husband, Menelaus.

**Character** From the results it had, we assume that the relationship of Helen and Paris was from the outset hotly passionate. For Paris, Helen left a comfortable, even sumptuous home, which she shared with her husband, and a role, Queen of Laconia, which honored her fittingly. The Helen we see in Troy, however, is from the start a narcissist, oohing and aahing over the powerful Greek warriors she reviews from the Trojan battlements, and weaving a great ornamental web which depicts the struggles of the Trojans and the Greeks over her, Helen. Later we see her urging Paris to go out and fight, and learn from the scene that this paragon lover of Helen is a reluctant warrior, more nearly a pretty boy than a military man. While it is true that at the end of the epic Paris kills Achilles, by shooting him in the heel, we compile plenty of evidence that Paris prefers dallying in bed with Helen, to sweating on the battle front.

**Parallels** To the asymmetrical relation between Paris and Helen, it is not easy to find parallels; the world's most gorgeous woman married now to a supremely handsome abductor-warrior who, upon returning her to his own land finds himself disinclined to fight, and finds her bitterly critical of the role she has played in the war. Reading inside the mind of Homer, which is vast and multi-form, one senses a *fundamental hostility to war*: the cause of the Trojan war before us is simple lust; the fighting that consumes the war (the first half of the *Iliad*; armed combat in all its savageness) is ruthless and unrelieved; the one act of mercy on the battlefield—Achilles' return of Hector's body to Priam—does

nothing but illustrate how merciless the war itself is. All these dark commentaries on war fuse with the irony bathing the would be loving marital relationship of Helen and Paris, and make us call in, as our parallels to this Homeric insight into the hollowness of war, the perceptive views of any number of major war-critical texts from the modern canon: from Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) and Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), through the bitter poetry of Wilfrid Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, who suffered the trench warfare of WW I, through Heller's *Catch-22* (1953) to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter House 5* (1969), which sizzles with the horrors of the Dresden fire bombings.

### Illustrative moments

**Charmer** Prior to the Trojan War Helen is a distinguished seductress living with her husband, Menelaos, in the south of Greece. When Paris comes into her life she falls for him, and is raped, abducted, or seductively given up to Paris—according to the account you prefer. At stake in your choice of account is whether you suppose Helen was responsible for the War of Troy, or was an assaulted co-collaborator, without real responsibility. Later interior snapshots of Helen, as from within the walls of Troy she reflects on her role in the war, suggest that she is far more complex, in the interpretation of her 'guilt,' than myth suggests. When Helen will call herself a mere bitch, she complexifies the 'see me' side of her, which is always glad to be viewed as a leading candidate for Miss World.

**Fascinated** When he sees the cuckolded enemy Paris panics and flees back to his lines, only to be snatched away by Aphrodite, and to be deposited in his bedroom with Helen, where a good screw replaces the obligations of armed combat. We may wish to say that Helen likes it this way, but in fact she will soon be the one to urge Paris back into the fray—into the field where his manliness (in her opinion) requires him. Helen is always fascinated by the strength and handsomeness of her lover, but, unlike him, she is both self-confident and humiliated among the Trojans, on whom her own wanton desires have brought down a disastrous war. Thus she is motivated to keep Paris part of the war machine, though to encourage this lover is to encourage the killing of her own countrypeople.

**Domestic** Helen is both a passive victim of adultery—there is dispute in the legends about whether she was abducted or seduced by Paris—and of course the active cause of a vast war, 'the face that launched a thousand ships, and burnt the topless towers of Ilium' as Marlowe puts it. When we see Helen the adulteress 'at home,' in domestic scenes either with Paris, in the *Iliad*, or later with her husband Menelaos, in the *Odyssey*, she is always a still portrait of womanly gentleness, weaving delicate threads by candlelight. We are reminded that Homer is an archaic epic poet, and that the union of lovers in marriage expresses itself in ritual procedures, far from the concrete 'details of marital life' which we might expect in a modern novel.

### Discussion questions

The Trojan elders, watching Helen from the battlements of Troy, whisper to each other that the Trojan War was worth it, if it was fought over a beauty as astonishing as Helen. Is that also Homer's viewpoint?

Does Paris seem to feel any guilt for his adultery?

Does Menelaos behave like a person conscious of having been cuckolded? Is he bent out of shape about this affront?

**HECTOR** (conscientious)

**Overview** Homer's *Iliad* is a tale of the Fall of a Great City, mercantile power, and trading center. To what extent this tale reflects historical reality—a setting in the 13th or 14th century Eastern Mediterranean—matters less than the splendid tale it generated, in which immemorial historical figures enshrined themes in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. One protagonist of the *Iliad*, which concerns the Greek conquest of Troy, is Hector, the son of the long time but now aged ruler of Troy, Priam. Hector and his wife Andromache offer us the closest glimpse of real life in the *Iliad*, the picture of a loving couple and their small child Astyanax.

**Character** Hector is a family man put in a dreadful situation, his city besieged, his own prowess—which is vast and displayed in constant heavy battles—on a headlong course toward the ferocious

strengths, moral and physical, of the Greek hero Achilles, who will eventually subdue and humiliate him. Hector appears at many points in the epic, now triumphing in individual hand combat, now appearing with his wife and son, now lying as a corpse in the tent of Achilles. One vignette shows us Hector standing during a momentary battle respite, on the Walls that surround and protect Troy. Andromache and Astyanax are also there. Hector leans over to talk to his wife, and the plume from his helmet tickles – touches, frightens—the small boy between them. Hector, profiled as family man, draws back into the humor of the situation.

**Parallels** Oddly enough, a parallel to Hector the family man is Menelaos the family man, the cuckold whose gorgeous wife and her playboy suitor initiated the Trojan War. In the *Odyssey*, when Telemachos has set out to search for his lost dad, he comes to the palace of Menelaos, who has returned and is now in post war mode, comfortably settled with his little old beauty queen wife, who had set fire to the world. Hector gets butchered, while Menelaos—or another family man, Charles Bovary—doesn't ever quite get the point. Mention might be made of another family man type, Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*, a born loser who can think no further than the status quo of the law of the moment.

### Illustrative moments

**Critical** In the heart of battle (Book 3) Paris—the pretty boy who abducted Helen from Greece, to initiate the war—is confronted by Menelaos, the man he cuckolded. The furious Menelaos attacks, and Paris 'melts back into the crowd,' anxious to save himself. At this point Hector comes up to berate Paris for being a coward: 'Ill Paris, most fair in semblance, thou deceiver woman-mad, would thou hadst been unborn and died unwed.' He goes on to explain that Paris' behavior has been shameful for all the Trojans, putting them essentially to blame for the war.

**Prayerful** Addressed by his mother with words of praise, for his fighting skill, and urged to drink some wine and relax, in order to recharge his batteries, Hector rejects the lady soundly, 'lest thou cripple me of my courage.' He begs his mother to depart immediately—with the elderly ladies of the city—to the Temple of Zeus, and there to beg Athena for mercy on Troy. 'So may she perhaps hold back Achilles from holy Ilium, the furious spearman, the mighty deviser of rout.' He himself, he says, will return to Paris, to beg him to pitch in and help at this crucial moment in the struggle.

**Laughter** In the overview we mentioned the charming vignette of Hector's plume, and his frightened young son. 'Then his dear father laughed aloud, and his lady mother...then kissed he his dear son, and dandled him his dear arms.' He prayed to Zeus that his son might equal his prowess and exceed him in fame. He adds that he wishes his son might return from battle, 'and bring with him blood stained spoils from the foeman he hath slain.' The domestic scene merges into a scene of tribal protectiveness, which is perhaps still the merge we might expect in a bloodthirsty modern society today.

**Forecast** As Hector enters the battlefield, for his final encounter with Achilles, he is met by his wife Andromache, with a nursemaid carrying their son, Astyanax. She begs her husband not to go forward into battle, where they both know he will be killed, and after which she will be carried away as war prey. Hector refuses this appeal, with heavy heart because he knows he has been fated, and especially because he knows the truth of her fear, and can fore sense the moment when, in some distant Greek village to which she has been taken, some stranger will see her hauling water, and say 'this is the wife of Hector.'

### Discussion questions

Does the scene in which Hector's plume tickles his son, and the boy's parents laugh, give us an insight into middle class archaic Greek life, as we might understand 'middle class' today?

Why is Hector fated to die at the hands of Achilles? Does this fatedness reduce the suspense of following the epic through to Achilles' brutal slaughter of the Trojan leader?

Is Hector in any noticeable way influenced by the attitudes or behavior of his wife? Is Hector sensitive to the plight of Helen, who is quite ready, by mid epic, to call herself a bitch, and to repent the war?