

ILIAD

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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 13th 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 *Iliad* a 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 Patroclus.

The 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 *melées*, 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.

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 lover 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.

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.