

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Homer
REVENGE

ILIAD The *Iliad* is a seething epic, and we know from the beginning, in the explosions of anger between Agamemnon and Achilles, that there will be no rapid resolution to their dispute. Achilles is fiery and of divine origin, and has already, in losing his mistress to the commander in chief, giving into almost more visible wounding than he can endure. He must seek revenge, for a situation which barely tolerates resolution. Hunkering down in his tent with his lover and their top allies, he forsakes any simple loyalty to the Greek camp, and plainly remains an angry thorn in Agamemnon's side. When Patroklos is killed, all the fury in Achilles is released; he becomes a killing machine on a savage battlefield, until at last, having avenged his honor to full, he can find enough peace in himself to perform an act of grace, the returning of the body of Hector to Priam.

ODYSSEY Odysseus has long been needled by the presence of the suitors in his house, and by the morally precarious situation in which his wife has been left. One can understand the depth of built-up need for revenge which has been requiring a response, and as he gets closer to home, hears of the quest of Telemachus to find his dad, and feels the pressure of his own generational aging. Odysseus gets readier at this point to take a large revenge for the twenty year intrusion onto his home in Ithaca. In order to carry through a fitting response, to this prolonged intrusion, Odysseus needs to undertake what are (for him) careful preparations for revenge. This involves several conversations with his disguised Athena ally, who tests him out on the shores of Ithaca, as she arrives there, picking his brains, and strategizing with him over the best way to invade and disperse the suitors' hangout in Odysseus' home. By this time the final invasion of the home property is at hand. The dreadful slaughter of the suitors, the rapprochement with Penelope, and the mandate to continue inward, to where an oar is mistaken for a winnowing rod: all these developments are at hand, crowning Odysseus' wandering with a powerful new freedom.