

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Homer

## **FAMILY**

**ILIAD** Language patterns and chunks of narrative myth prove to be major constructive elements in the make up of the tale of the *Iliad*. Family relations are of equally shapely architectural power.

The *Iliad* moves across patches of brute combat, in which hand to hand fighting seems the only relation possible among human beings. Yet even in the midst of the hottest brawls of the war, it can occur this way: a fighter on one side is struck by the recognition that his opponent is a member of a related family, or perhaps of his own family. Once this recognition sinks in, the fight is off, diluted into conversation. Or take the example of the most tender scenes in the wasteland of the *Iliad*: the separation of baby Astyanax, mama Andromache, and father Hector, as the man of the family decides he must leap into war and face the violence of Achilles. Or, even more crucially for the outcome of the *Iliad*, the decision of Priam to supplicate Achilles, begging to have the body of his son returned. The bond of family is intimate and strong in the *Iliad*.

**ODYSSEY** Family bonding is a dominant structural framework for the *Odyssey*. While Odysseus is fighting outside the walls of Troy, Penelope is carefully weaving (then unweaving) the tapestry by which she is buying time to hold off her suitors, and Telemachus, as ripening time approaches, is getting ready to set off looking for his dad. The audience of this epic thus triangulates the three- member family, making its movements into a series of landmarks by which to track the progress of the epic. Less concerned with combat than the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* gives us a few more glimpses than the *Iliad* into the way families work. We see Helen and Menelaus at home together in Sparta, as though nothing had ever happened; we see Odysseus' old father and the maker of the family that drives the epic, working in his family vineyard; we see, in Nausikaa and her girlfriends at the river in Phaeacia, the pastoral playfulness that binds this girl to her loving parents who await her at the palace.