

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Homer

## CONFLICT

**ILIAD** From the outset of the *Iliad*, as Agamemnon and Achilles face off, the epic tone is sharply confrontational. Agamemnon is the chief of the Greek forces, which are refractory at best, and fuels the volatile hostility of Achilles, who rivals him not only for power but for possession of Briseis, the slave he has won through conquest. Undying jealousy separates the two men, and after their opposing forces split at the highest level, the battle scene action, furor and armed combat, takes center stage. Hand to hand fighting, say between Glaukus and Diomedes becomes a visual metaphor for the furor of assault. Nonstop conflict overwhelms the audience until the inevitable action break, which turns Achilles' pouting sulk, his adolescent hunkering down in his tent into the kind of transcendent turn into which the death of the loved one is transformed into the blazing power of the gods. Hector is the victim of this semi-final conflict, in which the death of the lovable mortal, the middle class family man Hector, is changed into a sacrifice. Priam's love for his son is released from this conflict, and from that love is released Achilles' version of love, his willing return of the body of Hector.

**ODYSSEY** The core conflict in the *Odyssey* brings Odysseus face to face with the suitors, who have been besieging his wife, Penelope, in her home on the island of Ithaca. The ongoing tussle, between Penelope's determined 'resistance,' the suitors' malingering scrounge, and the long enduring—but slow resolving—will of Odysseus to clean up the mess in his house: all these ingredients lead up to a stalemate of long duration, which is brought to an end, ultimately, by chance—Odysseus can see the smoke rising from the roof of his home on Ithaca, as he lingers on Calypso's island. The brutal conflict comes to a head in Odysseus' home, as the hero proves his durable strength, mowing down the suitors with his massive bow.

Conflict however assumes many forms in the *Odyssey*, traps set along the hero's way as he makes his way from one obstacle (or seduction) to another. These way stop conflicts can take the form of folk lore—Laestrygonians, Circe, Cyclops, Scylla and Charybis--or of substantive enrichment, plunging the tale into its philosophical dimensions, as in the journey into the underworld. Odysseus can even 'fall in love,' if that is what we want to call his 'years long tarrying' on Calypso's island, which concludes with the mortal's fatigue, too much ambrosia. There are times when the ocean seems so vast and full of challenges, that we almost forget that there is a final challenge lying at the end of the road.