

The Iliad by Homer

Book Information

Homer, The Iliad

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This story, filled with heroism and treachery, tells of the terrible and long-drawn-out siege of Troy. This version is translated by Michael Reck and contains his introduction.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Poetry/Rhymes, Poetry/Rhymes; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Wars, Misc./Other

Main Characters

Achilles the principal character of the story and greatest Greek warrior; he refuses to fight because of a public insult, but joins the battle later to avenge the death of his friend, Patroclus

Aeneas the son of Aphrodite, fated to rule the Trojans after Priam's death

Agamemnon a king and commander of the Greek army, brother of Menelaus; his decisions are sometimes unwise and he insults Achilles by taking his war prize, a woman

Ajax (Aias) a huge Greek warrior

Andromache Hector's loving wife

Aphrodite the goddess of love; the daughter of Zeus who favors the Trojans; she promised Paris he would wed the most beautiful woman in the world

Apollo the god of light and prophecy; the son of Zeus who favors the Trojans

Ares the god of war; the son of Zeus and Hera who is partial to the Trojans

Artemis Apollo's twin sister, who supports the Trojans

Athena the goddess of wisdom and defensive war; the daughter of Zeus who actively supports the Greek cause

Automedon the main charioteer of Achilles

Chryses a priest of Apollo whose daughter is taken as a war prize by Agamemnon but later returned

Diomedes a courteous, wise, and brave Greek warrior; he is skillful in battle

Dolon a Trojan spy who is caught; he tells Diomedes and Odysseus about the Trojan camp and is subsequently slain

Eurypylus a Greek warrior wounded by Paris

Glaucus an ally of the Trojans; a prince and warrior

Hades the god of the realm of the dead

Hector a prince of Troy and the greatest Trojan warrior; he is devoted to his family and conscious of his civic responsibilities; he faces Achilles and is slain

Hecuba (Hecabe) Priam's wife; the mother of Hector and Paris

Helen the most beautiful mortal woman and wife of Menelaus; she was taken by Paris of Troy; the Greeks fight the Trojans to reclaim her

Hera the sister and wife of Zeus; she is a staunch defender of the Greeks and uses devious means to see that Troy is destroyed

Hermes the god who gives safe passage to Priam when he visits Achilles to claim Hector's body

Iris a messenger of the gods

Menelaus the husband of Helen and brother of Agamemnon; he is an able warrior and fights to defend his honor

Nestor the oldest Greek, who is valued for his wisdom; he counsels Agamemnon and Patroclus

Odysseus a cunning and brave Greek leader

Paris (Alexander) a handsome son of Priam who lured Helen from Menelaus and took her to Troy; though Aphrodite favors him, he is seen as weak by the Trojan people

Patroclus Achilles' trusted friend who is killed by Hector while wearing Achilles' armor

Poseidon the god of the sea and brother of Zeus; he favors the Greeks and aids them in their cause

Priam the king of Troy, a retired warrior who watches the battles from the city walls; he is father to many children, including Hector and Paris

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Thetis Achilles' mother, who pleads his case before both Zeus and Hephaestus

Xanthus the river god who nearly overcomes Achilles

Zeus the king of the gods and husband to Hera; he shows sympathy to warriors on both sides of battle, but honors Thetis' request to favor the Trojans when Achilles was disgraced

Greeks as punishment for his public disgrace. Thetis carries the message, and Zeus agrees.

The opposing armies now prepare for battle. Paris comes out alone and challenges anyone to face him in a duel. Menelaus agrees to meet his challenge. The two armies swear that the duel will end the war, with the winner taking Helen and the armies dispersing peaceably. Menelaus has the upper hand and is about to kill Paris when Aphrodite, the goddess of love, whisks Paris away to his bedroom in the palace. Menelaus claims victory, but the goddesses Hera and Athena wish for the destruction of Troy, so they urge a Trojan warrior to break the truce by aiming an arrow at Menelaus. He does, but Athena intervenes so Menelaus is merely wounded. A fierce battle follows in which Diomedes, a brave Greek warrior slays many Trojans and wounds Aphrodite.

Vocabulary

ambrosia a food of gods thought to bring immortality to those who consume it

bulwark wall or structure used for defense

imprecation a curse

progeny offspring or children

pyre a mound of combustible material for burning a corpse

scabbard a case for the blade of a knife or a sword

Seeing his army in dire straits, Hector, the Trojans' most honored warrior, son of Priam and brother to Paris, goes to Troy to ask his mother, Hecuba (Hecabe) to make sacrifices to Athena. While there, he confronts Paris for his cowardice and shames him into returning to battle. Hector sees his wife, Andromache, and baby and expresses his devotion to them but knows his duty lies with the Trojan armies. Upon his return to the fighting, the tide of the battle turns to the Trojans' favor. Fearing a Greek slaughter, Athena makes a deal with Apollo to fill Hector with rage until he challenges a Greek warrior to a duel that would again end the war. Lots are drawn and Ajax (Aias) is chosen. The duel ends in a draw, and a truce is agreed to so that the armies can bury their dead. During this lull in the fighting, the Greeks build a strong wall and a moat to help protect their ships from Trojan attack.

Synopsis

It is the tenth year of war between the Trojan and Greek armies on the plain outside the walls of Troy. The Greeks (Achaeans) are led by King Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus. Helen, Menelaus' wife, was seduced and kidnapped by Paris, a son of Priam, the King of Troy. Nine years of war have failed to bring Helen home, and now a plague has hit the Greek troops and many funeral pyres burn nightly. Achilles, the most able Greek warrior, calls an assembly to determine the reason for the plague. They learn from a soothsayer that Agamemnon offended Apollo by not returning the daughter of Apollo's priest to him that Agamemnon had won as a war prize. Furious, Agamemnon agrees to return the priest's daughter, but only if he can have some compensation. Agamemnon insists Achilles give him Briseis, the girl Achilles was awarded when the spoils of a battle were split. Reluctantly, Achilles gives up Briseis but refuses to fight anymore for the Greek cause. He and his warriors stay camped around their ship.

Achilles now asks his mother, Thetis, a goddess, to appeal to Zeus to help the Trojans defeat the

When the battle resumes again, the Trojans take the upper hand. They camp on the battlefield that night to get an early start to battle the next day. Meanwhile, at the ships, Agamemnon considers sailing for home but is persuaded to stay and fight. Nestor, a venerable, wise Greek, suggests that Agamemnon make amends with Achilles so that Achilles will rejoin the fighting. Agamemnon agrees,

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and messengers are sent. However, Achilles refuses the apology and remains bitter. In the middle of the night, Diomedes and Odysseus are sent out to spy on the Trojans, learn more about their location, and return with fresh horses.

The battle resumes at dawn, and soon Agamemnon, Diomedes, and Odysseus are wounded. Seeing his fellow Greeks suffering, Achilles sends his friend Patroclus to find out from Nestor who has been wounded. During their discussion, Nestor suggests Patroclus ask to borrow Achilles' armor to go into battle himself. Nestor speculates that the mere sight of the armor would bring fear to the Trojans and turn the tide of the war. Patroclus agrees to ask Achilles if he can go into battle disguised.

In the meantime, the Trojans continue to advance and, in a great show of strength, smash the wall the Greeks have erected, causing the Greeks to flee to their ships. The Trojan attack is so devastating that Hera wishes to help the Greeks. She persuades Zeus to lie with her so he will be distracted enough for Poseidon to help the Greeks. The Greeks rally, and Hector is stunned. But Zeus awakens, and the Trojans surge again, threatening to set the Greek ships afire. Ajax holds them off. When Patroclus returns, he pleads with Achilles to let him wear his armor into battle. Seeing a ship afire, Achilles agrees. Patroclus dons Achilles' armor, while Achilles insists that Patroclus return to him after turning the Trojans away from the ships. Achilles' armor sparks the Greeks to battle; Patroclus drives the Trojans away from the ships. However, Patroclus does not return to Achilles; instead, he drives the Trojans back to the walls of Troy. Apollo intervenes and stops Patroclus, giving Hector the chance to thrust a spear and kill him. The Greeks rally to defend and claim the body of Patroclus. Fierce fighting occurs on both sides. Finally Patroclus' corpse is brought to Achilles, while Hector claims Achilles' armor.

Achilles is overcome with grief at the sight of his friend. His mother comforts him, but tells him he will die if he avenges Patroclus' death. He is still determined to fight, so Thetis goes to Hephaestus

and asks him to fashion new armor for Achilles. When she returns, Achilles, now reconciled with Agamemnon, enters the battle. The Greeks attack, and the Trojans are again driven back to their walls and inside their gates, except for Hector, who remains to face Achilles. Achilles slays Hector and, in a rage, ties Hector's feet to his chariot and drags his body to the Greek ships and around Patroclus' funeral pyre for nine days.

Priam, with safe passage from Hermes, goes to Achilles and pleads for Hector's corpse. Achilles agrees to give Priam his son's body. A truce is arranged so that Hector may have a proper burial. Andromache, Helen, and all Trojans mourn his death.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

How do the Trojan people feel about Helen and Paris?

In general, the Trojan people resent Helen and Paris. They see Paris' act of taking Helen and her treasures as folly. They fight an interminable war and lose their valiant warriors because of it. The Trojans curse Helen. Only Hector and Priam are kind to her and see her predicament as a matter of fate and hold her blameless. On the other hand, Hector often admonishes his brother Paris for sitting idle and letting others fight the war he caused.

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Literary Analysis

Some translations of *The Iliad* are written in metered verse. A Harvard professor, Milman Parry, speculates that Homer used epithets, or descriptive substitutes, in order for a line to always have the correct meter. If this is true, the adjectives chosen to describe a character would have to vary in the number of syllables. Use a translation written in metered verse to evaluate the character of Achilles. What adjectives are used by Homer to describe him? Do they vary in number of syllables? Are they consistent in characterization?

Various adjectives can be attributed to Achilles. Some examples are brave, swiftfooted, nimble, swift, agile, quickfoot, glorious, etc. The adjectives are descriptive of Achilles' agility as a warrior. Several proper nouns help define his character as well. For example, the terms Prince and Peleus' son are used quite often. The number of syllables varies, but the characterization is relatively consistent.

Inferential Comprehension

In what ways does Achilles grow and mature during the course of the narrative?

Achilles matures in a number of ways. He moves from stubbornly holding a grudge against Agamemnon to reconciliation. He eventually shows a sense of responsibility to the community after selfishly sulking and avoiding the battle. While sulking, he allows Patroclus and others to fight for the Greek cause, but he rejoins the battle after Patroclus' death. Upon returning, he shows a manic rage in battle and is motivated by vengeance, but in the end he is able to sympathize with Priam and return Hector's corpse. Thus, he recognizes the need for compassion regardless of his own pain.

Constructing Meaning

How is it shown the gods have vital roles in the daily lives of the people?

The gods are given credit or blame for every aspect of life and death. The rhythms of the day are the gods -- Dawn is personified and is seen rising from her bed each morning; and Sleep, Death's brother, gives restful slumber to those he visits. When hearts are stirred for battle, it is attributed to a lesser god, such as Strife. Love comes through the goddess Aphrodite, who bestows the charms of Desire and Flirtation. People believe the gods can take physical shape and are sensual like humans. The lesser gods appear to an individual in the form of familiar people, often with a message of strategy. Gods and humans share feelings and emotions such as discord, love, anger, happiness, and compassion. They are able to interact with humans to the extent of fathering or bearing children with mortals. Before any significant action, or in thanksgiving or supplication, libations are poured out to the gods. The people believe the gods can be influenced, angered, or appeased by human worship.

Teachable Skills

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning *The Iliad* is rich in descriptive language. Oftentimes, an author uses analogies and similes to compare a subject to something more familiar so the readers can get a fuller sense of what the author is trying to convey. Have the students choose a book chapter of *The Iliad* and list the analogies and similes that it contains. They can then explain the figurative language and state how the comparison holds true.

Extending Meaning Much of the fighting that occurs in *The Iliad* takes place over a corpse and the effort to save it from becoming the prey of a battle's victor. Truces are called in order to give warriors a proper burial. After Patroclus' death, Achilles holds funeral games. Have the students research the ancient Greeks' view of death and the traditions of their funeral rites. From what they learn, the students can comment on the meanings of the traditions and what they served

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to accomplish in the Greek community.

Recognizing Details Using the references in the text, have the students construct a family tree for the major characters that appear in *The Iliad*, both gods and mortals. Note any physical characteristics, special abilities, or idiosyncrasies each character possesses and see if there appears to be familial traits.

Understanding Literary Features The Homeric scholarship of Milman Parry shows that the Homeric tradition was an oral one. Homer's poetry was a kind made and passed down by word of mouth. Homer used the term "aoidos" for the poet, meaning "singer." Encourage the students to become rhapsodes, or reciters of poetry. They may choose their favorite passage in *The Iliad* and recite it in front of the class. They can "dress the part," by wearing a long white robe and a wreath on their head and by using props or gestures to highlight particular passages.