



# *The Iliad* of Homer

Questions for Socratic Discussion  
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*Edited by Emily Andrews*



# INTRODUCTION



This teacher guide is intended to assist the teacher or parent in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, the Center for Literary Education's DVD literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

First: All works of fiction share the same basic elements — Context, Structure, and Style. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares him for meaningful discussion of the story's themes.

**Context** encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author's world.

**Structure** includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters and Theme.

**Style** refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc) enables a reader not only to understand the author's themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

Second: Because it is approachable and engaging, Children's Literature is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children's books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher — allowing him to present Context, Structure and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children's story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

Third: The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the Socratic Method. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essay and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

In the teacher guide series, we have suggested answers to selected Socratic questions, taken from the seminar, in order to help the busy **teacher** begin developing their own thoughts and ideas on a particular work. We do not suggest giving students access to these guides, as the student of literature must learn to search for their answers and engage the authors themselves.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at [www.centerforlit.com](http://www.centerforlit.com).

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# QUICK CARD



<i>Reference</i>	<p><i>The Iliad</i> by Homer. Suggested translation by Robert Fagles. ISBN-10: 0140275363 ISBN-13: 978-0140275360</p>
<i>Plot</i>	<p>Greek warrior and demi-god Achilles responds wrathfully when King Agamemnon greedily repossesses the war trophy he first gifted, the woman Briseis; withdrawing from the heat of battle with the Trojans, Achilles sulks by his own black ships, mourning for Briseis and subjecting his people to the painful effects of his bitterness.</p>
<i>Setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The final year of the Trojan War, a 10 year conflict dating c. 1250 BC</li><li>• The North Western point of Asia Minor on the Aegean Sea at the inlet to the Sea of Marmara.</li><li>• Among the Achaeans and Trojans, who worshipped the gods of Greek mythology. These become central characters in the story.</li><li>• A culture for whom fame and glory are the only hope for immortality.</li><li>• A system of independent city-states before Greek nationality as an ideal developed. This war was singular in that it involved so many city-states in a unified fight against the city-state of Troy.</li><li>• Between the walls of Troy and Achaean ships.</li></ul>
<i>Characters</i>	<p>The Achaeans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Menelaos</li><li>• Agamemnon</li><li>• Achilles (protagonist)</li><li>• Patroklos</li><li>• Diomedes</li><li>• Aias Brothers</li><li>• Odysseus</li></ul> <p>The Trojans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Hektor</li><li>• Priam</li><li>• Paris/Alexandros</li></ul>

	<p>The gods and goddesses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zeus (who favored the Achaeans)</li> <li>• Hera (who favored the Achaeans)</li> <li>• Apollo (favors the Trojans)</li> <li>• Poseidon (favors the Achaeans)</li> <li>• Thetis (favors the Achaeans)</li> <li>• Athena (favors the Achaeans)</li> <li>• Haephestos (aids Thetis on behalf of Achilles)</li> <li>• Ares (favors the Trojans)</li> <li>• Aphrodite (favors the Trojans)</li> <li>• Artemis (favors the Trojans)</li> </ul>
<i>Conflict</i>	<p>Man vs. Man  Man vs. Society  Man vs. Self  Man vs. God/Fate</p>
<i>Theme</i>	<p>The effects of wrath and bitterness on the individual and on society  The softening agency of shared humanity  The nature of civilization  The value of human life (with and without fame)  The savagery of man</p>
<i>Literary Devices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Epic Similes</li> <li>• In Medias Res</li> <li>• Stock Epithets</li> <li>• Personification</li> <li>• Anthropomorphism of the gods/goddesses</li> <li>• Allusions</li> <li>• Epic Catalogues</li> <li>• Invocation to the Muse</li> </ul>

# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



## Where does this story happen? (1)

The relative simplicity of the *Iliad*'s location stands in stark contrast to the emotional and relational range of the plotline. Unlike the *Odyssey*, which traces an epic journey home rife with countless vivid settings, the *Iliad*'s far simpler setting provides a more minimalistic backdrop against which the human complexities of the plot stand in sharper relief.

The *Iliad* focuses almost entirely on the city of Ilion, the Achaean ships on the Mediterranean coast, and the land between where the fateful battles of the story occur. One could almost imagine the walls of Troy and the ships of the Achaeans forming the two sides of a grand theater whose stage is the battlefield, within which the drama of the *Iliad* unfolds.

Readers are also given brief glimpses into the heights of Mount Olympus where the more concentrated but equally complex inter-relationships between the gods play out, and into the depths of the sea where Poseidon, the Earth Shaker, broods over his brother Zeus's actions. Though in some ways simpler in setting than the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* retains this same supernatural immensity. These more extraordinary locations situate small vignettes tucked into the larger story, which disclose the primary narrative's universal dimensions, but they never overshadow the monolithic centrality of the walls of Troy.

Within this one location, however, Homer provides many perspectives for the reader. The bare and brutal bulwarks of Troy are not univocal in their signification. In one book, the story unfolds from *within* the walls of Ilion, and there we are given an insight into Hektor's domestic life as he tenderly bids farewell to his wife and small child. Inside the walls there is a home, and this should not be forgotten as the war rages around them. Other times we enter the tents of Agamemnon and Achilles, or step behind the Trojan battle lines.

The *Iliad* is a work of consummate artistic balance, and this is perfectly reflected in the setting of the tale. The immense gravity of warships and walls is balanced by the more vulnerable interiors of home and tent and all that takes place therein. Moreover, no preference is given for figuring the setting of the Achaeans over the Trojans (or vice versa). Once again, though the larger setting is static in comparison to the *Odyssey*, this stability allows Homer to balance the whole narrative and allows its inner depths to attain to an even richer vibrancy. At risk of being too reductive in the comparison, one could

say that the development of the narrative in the *Odyssey* takes place in a hyper-extended lateral movement across time and space as the single central character of Odysseus makes his way home through an immense variety of locations. The *Iliad* is the direct converse; in the *Iliad*, the setting is single and central, while an immense variety of characters develop the narrative in a hyper-condensed time period and location, allowing for a more vertical development in the narrative's treatment of its characters.

One of the primary sub-locations in the *Iliad* is the beach where the Achaean ships rest. Characters often refer to the space "beside the ships" and Achilles uses it as a measure to determine when Achaean defeat is imminent. He decides that he will only join the Achaeans in the fighting when the Trojans push the Achaeans back to the ships, when the Greeks have reached their breaking point.

For the Achaeans, the ships are rife with meaning. They have not been home in nine years and a sea journey is the only means they have of returning as victors or fleeing certain death at the hands of the Trojans. The ships embody the hope of going home, a journey that will play out in the *Odyssey*. In a sense, as the promise and means of return, the ships *are* their home. They are an image of both the presence and absence of home for the Achaeans, since they are both a reminder of the domestic happiness that still lies beyond the sea, as well as the fact that this happiness remains out of their reach. For the Trojans, however, reaching the Achaean ships represents victory. If they can burn the fleet, they will trap and utterly defeat the Achaeans, and so preserve the tranquility of their own home. Any time the ships or the place beside them is mentioned, we as readers need to remember that this location holds hope for both sides.

As a side note, students may be confused by the various names used for the different Greek tribes and locations. Some basic items should be remembered: "Ilion" and "Troy" are two names for the same city; "Achaeans" and "Danaans" refers to the Greeks in general, all hailing from a region within contemporary Greece; and the "Trojans" can also be referred to as "Dardanians" (Troy is in modern Turkey). However, the student shouldn't be too worried about keeping all the many tribe names and where they hail from straight. Homer's work would have been recited among many peoples who would have traced their histories back to these mythical tribes and locales, such that when the poem would have been recited out loud, one can imagine the people cheering when their hometown and its heroes were mentioned – kind of like what happens at concerts to this day. It was simply a way of binding the various communities together within the poem.

Still, the sheer number of names and epithets (many of them referring to the same subject or groups of people) is one of the biggest barriers to first-time readers trying to make sense of the narrative. Homer isn't just trying to be confusing! This is simply a symptom of a work that developed over hundreds of years by the hands of several authors. It might be helpful as you read to keep a running log of which recurring names you find most difficult to keep straight with which place, tribe, or character in the story they refer to. If the reader invests just a little into this, soon the narrative will become much clearer, and



one may even begin to notice how the various names and epithets are a function of Homer's artistry.

### **When does this story happen? (2)**

The *Iliad* takes place at the beginning of the tenth year of the Trojan War, around the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC, and covers the course of a couple of weeks. The narrator launches the story *in media res* (in the middle of things), but does allude to the events that preceded the current storyline. The myths and stories of the Trojan war were not limited to Homer's writings, and many would have been well-known to Homer's audience. Thus, in order to make a careful reading of the rest of the text, the reader should have a basic knowledge of the background of the Trojan War, just as the first listeners of the tale would have.

By most accounts, the Trojan War begins with the marriage of Helen to the Greek king Menelaos. Due to Helen's great beauty, she had many suitors, and a competition was held for her hand. Menelaos was the victor, but the rest of the suitors pledged an oath to provide military assistance if Helen were ever abducted. When Alexandros was a guest of Menelaos and absconded with Helen, the suitors were called upon to fulfill their vows and thus the Trojan War began.

The first thing that must be noted from this is the seriousness with which the Achaeans viewed oaths. They were willing to engage in a decade-long war simply because of a promise they made over a single woman. As readers, we need to be on the lookout then for the role of oaths and their relation to honor in the way that Homer chooses to tell the story in the *Iliad*.

Culturally this was also a time when a man had no hope for immortality beyond his own fame and glory. To mar one's reputation by breaking a vow or to allow another to disgrace one's honor would be to discredit his very existence. Hence Menelaos's zeal to regain his wife, and Achilleus's jealous regard for respect.

Related to the larger question of oath-keeping and the background of the story, it is especially interesting to note that the story of Helen's elopement had been told in a variety of ways in antiquity, not all of which are consistent with each other. Some authors in antiquity painted her as the unwitting victim of a kidnapping, even going so far as to sing praises of her perfect virtue and faithfulness in the face of capture and imprisonment in Illion; others treat her as totally complicit in the betrayal, such that Helen becomes the icon of unfaithfulness and the destruction that arises therefrom; still others saw her as a mere pawn of fate, emphasizing how Aphrodite cursed her father, and so destined all of his daughters to be adulteresses. Homer himself seems to suggest that she was seduced by Alexandros and eloped with him.

Why is this important? Why does it matter whether Helen was abducted or eloped? Though it would seem that the difference has little to no bearing on the specific events of

the *Iliad*, it is in fact very important to the larger narrative that Homer chooses to portray a regretful, sorrowful Helen, who now hates the goddess Aphrodite for deceiving her. It is important that Homer allows the reader to see her horror at the destruction her actions have caused. The *Iliad* would have been a complete story without featuring Helen or without painting her as a sorrowful figure, but the fact that Homer chooses to highlight Helen's regret calls attention to the underlying theme of man's passion, weakness, and need. If Helen was seduced by Alexandros and eloped with him, her actions arose out of lust and desire, and she mourns the deadly consequences of being driven by them. This sets the stage for the eventual regret of Achilles, who himself makes decisions based on his unwavering rage. Homer paints Helen's story in this light to foreshadow, nuance, and establish important themes for the reader that will become central to the whole story. The parallels become strikingly clear when Achilles responds to Patroklos's death, which is the first time he truly understands the destruction his prideful rage has caused. He wishes his parents had never married; like Helen, he wishes he had not existed to cause such pain.

The backdrop of the Trojan War further emphasizes themes of betrayal, sorrow, regret, and destruction. Though the Trojan War is perhaps most famous for specific elements of Achilles's story highlighted by Homer, the *Iliad* is simply a chapter within the larger history of the Trojan War. (Many first-time readers are surprised that not even the Trojan horse narrative is found in Homer!) Yes, the story centers around the rage and destruction of Achilles, but this poem rests in a much larger context – a contest that has dragged on and on with no end in sight. The *Iliad* covers only a number of days in a war that has lasted years. Therefore, it is important to remember that the *Iliad* is not a history. The fact that it treats only this short span of time should jump out to the reader. With almost a decade of violence prior to the start of the *Iliad*, it is Achilles's rage in particular that Homer chooses to highlight. Of all the possible threads to follow in a struggle of this magnitude, the reader should wonder why it is that Homer chooses to focus so sharply on this relatively short span of time and sequence of events. What will be different about the violence in the poem compared to the destruction that has come before it? Why does this one particular instance of devastation stand out among the rest?

Another important element to remember when approaching Homer's epics is that they feature a generation of men who were seen as a race of demigods, far above any generation after them. Another epic poet by the name of Hesiod who wrote only a little after Homer speaks of this time as the "Age of Heroes," whose nobility and might far exceeded any following generations. Throughout the narrative, the characters accomplish feats that would be impossible for any modern man—they throw spears through multi-layered shields and throw boulders like stones. In this way, Homer blurs the line between history and myth, creating a legend with feet in both worlds, so to speak. The story is both beyond our time yet not totally divided from it, just as the heroes have abilities beyond our own, but still like our own. The powers of mind, speech, and strength of these demigods in the *Iliad* are far beyond the realm of possibility for men of our own age, yet they are still presented in such a way that all the themes that determine the lives of these heroic figures are not wholly distant from the issues present in our own lives. If anything,



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



## Who is the story about? (3)

The very first line of the *Iliad* establishes the protagonist of the story: Achilles. Homer invokes the muse to “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilles / and its devastation...” When approaching Homer’s work (and this holds true for almost all great literature), the whole story and its main themes can be found in the opening lines, and, in the case of the *Iliad*, even in the very first word. Though not reflected in all translations, the first word of the *Iliad* in Greek renders as “rage,” “anger,” or “wrath.” This is a story about Achilles, yes, but one could also say that the protagonist is “rage.” Moreover, it is not simply about Achilles’s rage, but specifically his “anger... *and its devastation.*” Anger and destruction are inseparable here. From the very beginning, the reader’s eyes are trained to look for the destructive effects of wrathful, inflamed anger, as well as to trace the origins of ever-escalating devastation to the rage of a soul. Such themes are concentrated primarily in the figure of Achilles.

Achilles is the son of Peleus, a mortal, and Thetis, goddess of the sea. The marriage of his parents was the result of a prophecy, predicting that Thetis would bear a son greater than his father. To prevent this, Zeus forced the sea-goddess to marry a mortal. Their union resulted in the birth of Achilles, who was fated to die: “underneath the battlements of the armoured Trojan I should be destroyed by the flying shafts of Apollon” (XXI.275). Throughout the *Iliad*, Achilles wrestles with this destiny, conflicted as to whether he ought to fight beside the Achaeans and die young in the glory of battle, or return home in shame, but live a long life.

He is renowned among the Achaeans and Trojans for his skill in battle; the Trojans take courage in the fact that he will not fight. When he fights with the Achaeans, they are confident they will find victory.

At the outset, Achilles is shown to be pious, and is zealous after honor and justice. Homer thematizes Achilles’s piety early in the narrative, pitting him against Agamemnon, the Achaean king. After Agamemnon breaks a vow, incurring the wrath of the god Apollo, Achilles uses his power and reputation to rebuke the king, recommending that he sacrifice to reclaim the god’s favor. Yet the dark side of these virtues becomes readily apparent. Using Agamemnon as a foil allows Homer to highlight Achilles’s self-crafted moral identity, lending gravitas to his eventual fall toward hubris.

Achilles clearly has a strong influence over the Achaeans, having been honored by them due to his own particular strengths and virtues. It is easy to see that Agamemnon and

Achilleus have the potential to be at odds with one another. Two kinds of power become figured in the two heroes: one is a wide-ruling king and the other is a mighty warrior. Agamemnon wields the political power among the Achaeans, and Achilleus is virtually invincible on the battlefield. They both desire glory and honor and are critical of the way the other seeks that goal. Agamemnon strikes out at Achilleus and insults him by saying his power has been given to him by the gods and was not earned through merit alone, and Achilleus accuses Agamemnon of risking nothing by sending other men to fight his battles for him. Achilleus angrily reminds Agamemnon that he has only fought the Trojans because of a sense of duty. He has never been personally affronted by the Trojans, but still fought bravely and sacrificed the lives of some of his men to uphold his oath. It is critical to Achilleus that he be perceived as a respectable man of his word.

So, when Agamemnon decides to take Briseis from him, Achilleus is primed for wrath. He becomes twisted and blackened by rage, unable to bear an attack on his honor. He will not be slighted. As Achilleus draws his sword, Minerva, goddess of Wisdom, appears to him and beseeches him to calm his anger for the moment and spare Agamemnon. Achilleus, then makes another vow, one he will uphold to the destruction of his own beloved companion, Patroklos. He promises that he will never fight for Agamemnon again and that the Achaeans will be destroyed as a result. The remainder of the book explores just how long Achilleus will remain faithful to the angry vow he makes in the beginning. How deep does the rage of Achilleus run? Does the voice of Wisdom possess enough power to stay the devastation diffused by wrath?

Throughout the *Iliad*, the reader sees how the initially positive qualities Achilleus possesses become his handicaps. He upholds his vows to a fault; he maintains his vow to refuse aid to the Achaeans to the point that he allows his friend to enter battle in his own armor, to Patroklos's destruction. His dedication to honor strips him of the ability to see beyond his own self-pity. Anger arising out of his sense of justice reaches its destructive apex in pride, as he asks his divine mother to cause the Achaeans to be crushed to the point where Agamemnon will be humbled and remember how valuable Achilleus is in battle. He wants his honor and glory restored to him, even at the cost of the lives of his own countrymen. Qualities that could be strengths are spoiled by his own *hubris* (wanton violence arising from pride, or what is meant when we say a person is "outraged"), perhaps the one word most descriptive of the downfall of Achilleus. Where else does wrath come from, if not from a sense of self-injury? Achilleus's virtues are not turned to flaws so much as they are the flaws themselves.

One of Achilleus's most revealing moments comes in Book Nine after he refuses the return of Briseis and all of the other riches and honors Agamemnon offers. When he rejects these offerings and reaffirms his vow to withhold aid from the Achaeans, Phoinix, weeping for the destruction he foresees, entreats Achilleus to give up his bitterness by referencing the past:

“Thus it was in the old days also, the deeds that we hear of / from the great men,  
when the swelling anger descended upon them. / The heroes would take gifts;

they would listen, and be persuaded. / For I remember this action of old, it is not a new thing” (IX.524-527).

At this point, the reader should remember Achilles’s own words about Agamemnon in the beginning of the book, when the men come to take Briseis away: “The man is raving - with all the murderous fury in his heart. / He lacks the sense to see a day behind, a day ahead, / and safeguard the Achaeans battling by the ships.” These words prove to be prophetic of Achilles’s own plight. He is blinded by the rage he nurtures in his heart and does not follow the wisdom of the past – not even his own past words of warning – nor think of the future consequences. In pride, he refuses to accept Agamemnon’s reconciliatory gesture, and devastation follows.

Achilles’s rage is similar to that of plague-slinging Apollo at the opening of the *Iliad*, except that even divine Apollo could be plied with offerings and ransoms to turn his anger away from the Achaeans. Achilles advised the Greeks to try to calm the rage of the gods through gifts and sacrifices, but he himself refuses to be calmed. Achilles thereby assumes himself worthy of a higher honor than the gods.

In sum, Achilles is a problematic protagonist in the *Iliad*. He is both hero and anti-hero. He is shown to possess virtues, but these very virtues become the source of the poem’s devastation. He is the character that brings destruction, but he also suffers the consequences more severely than almost any other character, and undergoes a kind of conversion because of it. He is heroic in strength and skill in battle, but he is not a “hero” through and through; Achilles is not an inspirational or aspirational character. Rather, he is a character who inspires further meditation and self-reflection on how these themes, blown into such epic scale and proportion by his story, may play out on a smaller scale in the lives of his readers. The struggle that one has in determining Achilles’s character in all its complexity and ambiguity is precisely the struggle that one must undergo to determine one’s own character.

#### **Who else is the story about? (4)**

The Trojan champion, Hektor, is the character in apposition to Achilles. Though he can be viewed as the antagonist of the story, his qualities and actions match those we might traditionally associate with the protagonist. Readers may even find themselves cheering for Hektor instead of the Achaean men. Homer carefully portrays Hektor as an exceedingly sympathetic character by including brief snapshots of his domestic life. The most memorable of these glimpses is the scene in which Hektor says goodbye to his weeping wife and cowering child, a scene which has no parallel in the other characters. He holds the boy in his arms and he and his wife share tender words. Homer even goes so far as to reveal to us that Andromache, his wife, is an orphan and will be ruined if Hektor is killed. Since any Greek who was listening to this story would have known the ultimate fate of the city of Troy and the child Astyanax (he is thrown from the city walls to prevent him from avenging his father one day), these scenes are painful to read. Homer builds a compelling case for sympathy toward the Trojans.

It might be easy to expect the *Iliad* to contain a story of good Achaeans versus evil Trojans. After all, manipulative, hospitality-violating Alexandros is a Trojan and his people harbored him after he absconded with Helen. But Homer carefully crafts his characters to eliminate definitive lines between “good” and “bad” sides.

Hektor is Achilles’s rival, and the two eventually meet in combat. Like Achilles, he is mighty in battle and greatly feared by his enemies. Though he cannot trace his lineage back to the gods, he is the son of noble Priam, king of the Trojans. He is a strong and honorable character, and is not given to the same pitfalls as Achilles. His only sin is being on the side fated to lose the war. When Achilles finally slays Hektor to avenge Patroklos, the moment is not a satisfying triumph of good over evil. In the end, there is no unequivocal triumph for either side, only the emptiness of destruction and death. In some ways, the indeterminacy of good vs. evil in the story, so carefully wrought between the contrasting figures of Hektor and Achilles, functions as a revelation of violence as it is, rather than a glorification of it. The reader of the text *should* be put off by the unrelenting and enormous number of grisly and sickeningly detailed death scenes! Homer intends for us to react viscerally, showing the supposed glories of war in their naked devastation, the fruit of Achilles’s rage. Upon closer inspection, there is nothing particularly glorious about the death of anyone in the narrative, hero or foot-soldier. Their souls simply depart to the underworld with no trumpets of glory. When the reader comes to Hektor’s death and disgrace – the moment that should be the consummation of Achilles’s heroic ascent – it merely saddens the reader. Hektor’s sympathetic portrayal leaves Achilles without excuse. There is no refuge under the banner of honor; his actions merely ring hollow.

The *Iliad* also features King Agamemnon, the ruler of the Achaeans whose clashes with Achilles at the beginning of the book have already been discussed above. Though he is presented initially as haughty and unbending when he takes Briseis from Achilles, he is the first to overcome his grudge and try to make amends.

Furthermore, in contrast to other authors’ extremes, Homer crafts a Helen in the *Iliad* who is neither wholly responsible nor wholly irresponsible for what has taken place. Here the artistic balance and subtlety of the poet makes another appearance: Homer paints Helen as a sensitive character who is full of regret and longing for home. She may have not been innocent of the affair at its inception, but she also becomes a figure of penitence as time wears on. When Aphrodite explains that Menelaos and Alexandros will fight for her in a duel, Homer reveals that “speaking so the goddess left in her heart sweet longing / for her husband of time before, and her city and parents” (III.139-140). As she names the Achaean champions for Priam, her speech drips with self-loathing. In despair she cries, “and I wish bitter death had been what I wanted when I came hither / following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen, / my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age. / It did not happen that way: and now I am worn with weeping” (III.173-176). Helen soon lashes out at Aphrodite, blaming her for her sorrows: “Strange divinity! Why are you still so stubborn to beguile me? / Will you carry me yet further somewhere among cities / fairly settled? In Phrygia or in lovely Maonia? / Is there some mortal man there also who is dear to you?” (III.399-402). All of the various traditions are

caught up in Homer's single treatment of Helen. She is guilty for her part in the unfaithfulness, but her penitential remembrance of all that her actions wrought displays some significant degree of humanity. The verification code for this resource is 467804. Enter this code in the submission form at [www.centerforlitschools.com/dashboard](http://www.centerforlitschools.com/dashboard) to receive one professional development credit. It was not so fated by the gods that she had no free-will in the matter, but forces outside of her have "beguiled" her, namely Aphrodite, the goddess of Desire.

The work is filled out by a great host of other characters, human and divine; the principles ones are as follows:

- Alexandros (readers may also know him as "Paris"), the man (or pretty-boy?) who seduced Helen and stole her from Menelaos. Despite his deep character flaws, somehow he remains greatly favored by the gods. Aphrodite treats him as her special pet, manipulating Helen to fall in love with him and pulling him back from certain death as he duels with Menelaos.
- Patroklos, Achilles's beloved companion whose death pushes Achilles to fight in the battle.
- Menelaos, the husband of Helen and brother of Agamemnon ("the sons of Atreus"), who is a mighty warrior, and to defend whose honor all of the Achaeans gather before Troy.
- Pandaros, the Trojan soldier who shoots Menelaos at the prompting of Athene. He is an important pawn in the gods' schemes as he initiates the first blow that will begin the fierce battle.
- Diomedes, one of the mightiest of the Achaean warriors.
- Phoinix, the mentor and father-figure of Achilles.
- Zeus, the father of the gods, who is constantly weighing the opinions of the other divinities. His is the supreme authority on Olympos. He has dominion over land and air, and serves as an authority that the rest of the gods must submit to – or try to work around.
- Hera, his wife, who is manipulative and scheming. She wishes for the destruction of Troy.
- Thetis, Achilles's mother, whose request for the near-defeat of the Achaeans as vengeance for the slight to her son's honor is heard by Zeus. She is married to Peleus, a mortal.
- Aphrodite, Aeneas's mother, who convinced Helen to run away with Alexandros. She is on the Trojan side.
- Poseidon, the god of the sea, who fights for the Achaeans.





# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



## What does the protagonist want? (5)

On the surface, Achilles's desire seems to be straightforward: he wants the return of Briseis. After all, it was a quarrel over her that initially sparked his rage. But the tension in the *Iliad* is more intricate than that. Achilles does want the return of his prize, but that is not his ultimate and all-consuming desire. In fact, when she is offered to him along with other prizes as a peacemaking effort by Agamemnon, Achilles refuses her. At that point he shows his hand, revealing his greatest desire to be for respect and revenge on his honor, not for Briseis. He cannot see his revenge unfold if he reconciles with Agamemnon and joins in the fighting. Instead, he decides to nurse his anger and self-pity by continuing to hold his unwavering grudge. He chooses his pride over Briseis, demonstrating that she was never at the heart of his overwhelming rage. Achilles wants fame above all else. He is not angry with Agamemnon because he will lose Briseis; he is furious because of the slight to his honor.

Achilles's anger is held up against the context of other characters in the *Iliad*. Throughout the poem, we see men who fight fiercely and taunt one another in battle, desiring honor for their people. Strong men like Diomedes and Aias are lauded for their fighting, and these men kill ruthlessly, even wiping out groups of men while they sleep or killing a spy without pity. Their fury against the Trojans originates in their desire to uphold the oaths they made and to defend the reputation of their tribe. They look for the fame and glory that comes from their identity as oath-keepers and brave men of war, but already the bloodshed has stretched on for 10 years. When is the price of honor too costly?

## Why can't he have it? (6)

When Agamemnon demands Briseis of Achilles, it is an affront to his self-image as a man worthy of respect and reward. An honorable identity cannot be maintained unless others play along; one cannot honor oneself (Man vs. Man).

Achilles's wrathful response, however, also prevents him from achieving fame and glory. Abstaining from action, the hero makes no name for himself (Man vs. Himself). For the sake of pride, Achilles hinders himself from having anything to be proud about.

Later, when the tragic death of Patroklos pushes him over the edge, his wrath turns inward. He rages to avenge the death of his beloved friend, Patroklos, but this time it is over the unjust death of his friend, an injustice he caused himself. Though the Trojans

receive the brunt of his fury (Man vs. Man), Achilles is seething over his own blindness and pride. He rages against himself (Man vs. Himself). Ultimately it is Achilles's own fallible humanity that gets in the way of his honor. And when he sets out to correct the issue with his own hands in battle with Hektor, he arguably only makes matters worse. What honor is there in abusing the body of a respectable foe? Achilles burns at his inability to both protect his honor and his friend at the same time. Pridefully considering himself capable in the first place, he rages against himself, consequently disgracing himself on the battlefield.

Achilles is also destined to die fighting in the Trojan War (Man vs. Fate or Man vs. God). Glory is won through battle, as the poem frequently reminds us, and so Achilles is faced with a choice: to go home and die without honor but at an old age, or find the fame and renown he seeks and die an early death in battle. What is the value of life? Is life without fame worthwhile? Is this choice even one that Achilles makes for himself?

Achilles's fate is a major motivation behind his actions. He believes he is destined for glory, and views it as his one consolation in the face of a short life. As a result he clings to his honor and fame, and so he is quick to respond to Agamemnon in anger. Why should he die fighting for a man who will strip him of his one hope, his glory? Why should he fight, disgraced and forgotten? But if he is to gain glory, it is Agamemnon's battle that will lend him fame. Achilles is tormented and confused by this endless circle.

Consider also how Achilles's desire for glory bring "devastation" for all involved (Man vs. Society). His desire for renown and foreknowledge of his untimely death inspires a deep rage that forces him further into self-pity. In anger, he asks his mother to bring destruction to the Achaeans so they will remember how much they need him. This request sows discord among the gods on Mount Olympus, and sets events into motion which lead to a brutal battle instead of a duel between Menelaos and Alexandros. Because of Achilles's anger and Thetis's response, the gods all take sides and fight in the battle themselves. Zeus, in order to fulfill his promise to Thetis and Hera, allows the Achaeans to be beaten back almost to the point of defeat, and Patroklos is killed among many others. Achilles is a man with power among his people, and his quest for honor is destructive to far more than himself.

### **What other problems are there in the story? (7)**

The problems Achilles presents are set in a much larger conflict: the Trojan War. This decade-long siege is, as stated before, the result of one woman's passionate decision and her husband's resulting desire to reclaim his dignity.

This is also a story of violated hospitality. Alexandros was a guest of Menelaos and ran away with his wife. Hospitality, the act of one vulnerable human putting himself in the care of another, is especially important for ancient Greek culture and a betrayal is a serious offense. Alexandros's act is the ultimate betrayal, and the unraveling of the home is the first step in a long series of destructions (these themes are taken up at length in the

*Odyssey*). Achilles's own sense of hospitality and humanity will be tested by the supplicating Priam.

The legendary rivalry between Achilles and Hektor also creates another major conflict within the *Iliad*. The two men are the champions of their respective sides, and the death of Hektor represents a major defeat for the Trojans.

### **What happens in the story? (8)**

While the war rages on, Achilles sits smugly by the ships. The Achaeans are pressed far back toward the beach and appear to be on the brink of disaster. At Thetis's request, the gods foil all Achaeans attempts to regather themselves.

Eventually Nestor crafts a plan: Patroklos will don Achilles's armor and fight in his dear friend's place. Patroklos seems to make good progress until he is cut down by the Trojan champion, Hektor.

Achilles's pitiless rage is then directed toward himself. His beloved companion is struck down while fighting in his stead, and Achilles is horrified. When the messenger delivers the news that Patroklos has been killed, Achilles is distraught and wishes he had never been born.

He immediately decides to join the battle and avenge Patroklos. As Achilles fumes over his companion's death and vows to crush the Trojans, Thetis reminds him that this path will eventually lead to his own destruction. Achilles responds that he deserves to die since he did not fight alongside Patroklos and lend him his defense. In his failure, he considers himself unworthy of life. He considers this stain on his record as a disqualification from a valuable existence. The deep sorrow he feels for the death of his friend and the realization of the role he played in it overshadows his bitterness toward Agamemnon.

As a result, Achilles enters the battle, transferring his rage to Hektor and the Trojans. Thus begins the bloodiest portion of the battle, which will ultimately end in a river of Trojan corpses and the death of Hektor. Achilles is relentless in his quest for vengeance; he refuses to eat until the battle is over. Though he now fulfills his duty to help the Achaeans, he does so still out of prideful rage. His fury toward the Trojans, and Hektor particularly, is endless as he takes out on them the anger he feels for himself. Even after he slays Hektor, he abuses the body by tying it to his chariot and racing around the city walls again and again.

When Achilles's fury is spent, the ghost of Patroklos appears to chide his friend for neglecting his funeral rites. Achilles then throws lavish funeral games and hands out grand prizes to the winners. He honors the body of his friend, while the corpse of Hektor remains tied to his chariot.

The Achaeans compete with one another in footracing, boxing, chariot races, and other competitions. As Achilles awards prizes for the chariot races, he intends to give the second place prize to Eumelos instead of Antilochos, who originally deserved the prize. Antilochos addresses Achilles and asks him not to take his prize away from him, but to give Eumelos something else out of his tent. This situation is almost a repeat of the one at the beginning of the *Iliad*, only Achilles is in the role Agamemnon played. Instead of responding in indignation and obstinance, Achilles jovially agrees that he will give Eumelos a different prize and chooses a gift that will hold great meaning. By doing this, Achilles demonstrates a hint of growth and change that has taken place in his character over the course of the poem. He is quick to give honor where it is due and slower to react in anger. He is benevolent and willing to sacrifice one of his own possessions to avoid offending Antilochos. He has learned that self-sacrifice is the easiest way to assuage anger. His actions are catching; when Menelaos angrily accuses Antilochos of dishonorable racing, Antilochos responds calmly. He acknowledges that Menelaos is greater than he is and willingly gives him the second place prize. Menelaos, softened by the gesture, gives the horse back to Antilochos as a sign that he is not arrogant or stubborn. This passage, with all of its opportunities for anger, provides a suggested solution to the *Iliad*'s problem of rage. Where passion seeds destruction, humility makes room for peace.

### **How is the main problem solved? (9)**

Zeus takes issue with the disrespect shown by Achilles to slain Hektor. He sends Thetis to command her son to return the body to the Trojan's family. With a careless attitude, Achilles agrees to appease the god; his fury has already been expended on the corpse.

Meanwhile the gods send a messenger to inform Priam of their arrangement. At the risk of his life and against the wishes of his wife and children, the Trojan king disguises himself and sneaks into the Achaean camp.

Achilles's heart is finally softened by the sight of kneeling Priam. Reminded of his own father, Achilles has compassion on the old man and agrees to hand over Hektor's body with readier willingness. He is humanized by the vulnerability of a fellow creature, and in turn sees with new eyes his own vulnerability as a son of his father and a limited man unto death.

### **How does the story end? (10)**

In the end, Achilles's humility is the only right response to the devastation wrought. There is no moralizing, no explanations by way of gods or fate, no desire for vengeance – only tears. When Achilles's tears subside, he shows mercy and respect to Priam, promising him the return of Hektor's body and hospitably providing a meal for him. Hektor's body is then honored among the Trojans with a funeral. Sorrow dissolves anger and hatred and leaves fellowship in its place. Even penitent Helen is joined in her lament



# QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: THEME



## What does the protagonist learn? (11)

Achilleus comes to understand that pride and rage blinded him, leading to the destruction of many Achaeans and the death of his best friend, Patroklos. His arrogant desire for glory twisted his war fury, causing him to wallow in self-pity and self-indulgent grudges. Through grief and sorrow, he learns his own fallibility, to show respect to others freely, and to demonstrate human sympathy even to his enemies.

## What is the main idea of the story? (13)

The *Iliad* explores the destructive nature of rage, particularly prideful rage, on the individual and the society. In fact, the poem opens on a story concerning the anger of Apollo as he brings a plague to the Achaeans. Like Apollo, Achilleus is not simply angry, he is angry because he has been slighted and denied the honor and glory he believes he deserves. His acts of service and sacrifice for Agamemnon (and on behalf of Agamemnon's brother Menelaos) have not been appreciated as they ought to be, and in his anger he vows never to help the Achaeans again. His rage stems from his wounded pride, and he is blind to his own self-pity and the destruction he causes. When Patroklos dies, Achilleus makes a speech condemning anger:

“...I wish that strife would vanish away from gods and mortals, and gall, which makes a man grow angry for all his great mind, that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man's heart and becomes a thing sweeter to him by far than the dripping of honey.” (18.107-110)

However, strife and anger are revealed to be part and parcel of the human condition. A good deal of Achilleus's problem lies in his assumption that the eradication of passion is the only solution.

Tucked beneath the overarching theme of destructive anger is an exploration of the importance of piety. When Apollo strikes the Achaeans with a plague, the remedy lies in supplications and sacrifices. The Achaeans build a wall and do not pray over it. As a result, the gods allow the Trojans to penetrate that wall and crush the Achaeans back against their ships. Phoenix, rebuking Achilleus for rejecting Agamemnon's peacemaking offerings, tells him that

“The Prayers are all-powerful Zeus's daughters, / albeit lame, wrinkled, unsteady of gaze. / They struggle to dog the steps of Ate / but she is faster and stronger, so

all mortals / fall victim to her as she travels the earth, / spreading folly. The Prayers come behind. / When a transgressor welcomes Zeus's daughters / they hear his plea and readily assist, / but if a remorseless sinner rejects them / the Prayers approach Cronus' son and request / that Ate hound that man to make him pay. / So, Achilles, let the daughters of Zeus / sway you as they have other noble men.” (IX.502-513)

He reminds Achilles that one must make prayers to the gods to slow “Ate,” that is, destruction. The gods, who are superior to men, will listen and accept them, but first one must be humble enough to recognize his own need before the gods.

These prayers and supplications make up a sort of economy between gods and men. They set out what one might call Homer’s “theology” in the *Iliad*. Mortals can beseech a patron god or goddess who may intervene on their behalf. Lives can be spared, destruction can be slowed, and wrongful deaths can be avenged. This system of prayer is essential to the *Iliad*. Without it, the story does not extend past the first page. Chryses would have been powerless to get his daughter back, Apollo’s pestilence would never have entered the Achaean camps, and so on. The entirety of the story rests on the system of human prayers and divine responses.

But what does this tell us about Achilles? Is it related or connected at all? What does the anger of Achilles have to do with piety? Simply, Achilles violates the system which orders his world. Because even the gods can be convinced by prayers and offerings, mortal men have an obligation to follow suit. Achilles deviates from this standard and refuses to bend his will even when Agamemnon offers him lavish riches. He violates the ancient economy of prayer. As Phoenix tells him, prayers are wrinkled, lame of foot, and unappealing, but they can stave off destruction. Accepting the offerings of Agamemnon would have meant humbling himself and setting aside his wounded pride, an action as distasteful for Achilles as the appearance of prayers. Harmony is found only in repentance, forgiveness, and humility.

And yet all along we know Achilles is fated to die in this war. Is his path to that destiny fated as well? Whether the answer is yes or no, inasmuch as Achilles is the son of a human father he is destined to fall short of a perfectly honorable standard. His human ancestry opens him up to the world of passion and error. Relief will not be found by further striving and raging, but only when faced with the common humanity and vulnerability of a fellow creature. For Achilles, peace is the fellowship of shared brokenness.

**NOTES:**

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



The most important and foundational aspect to the art of Ancient Greek poetry, its meter, is simply untranslatable. Homer is a master of the epic meter (dactylic hexameter), but his subtleties do not make their way into English. Similarly, any alliteration or rhyme that you may find in your translation may be beautifully artful in its own right, but is incidental to the translator and how he or she has chosen to unite their own art of translating to Homer's art. One may wish to trace what the translator has chosen to emphasize by their own meter, rhyme schemes, alliteration, and other poetic devices, but it is important to remember that these are not Homer's own. Thus, it is better for the student to pay special attention to those poetic subtleties that do make it through the translation, and remain unique to Homer's style and genius. Some of these are listed below:

## **Does the author use common words and phrases in uncommon ways? (15)**

Perhaps for Homer, this question would better be phrased in the opposite way: "Does the author use uncommon words and phrases to describe common things or events?" For example, again and again throughout the work, Homer describes a character speaking with "winged words." This is a figuratively rich way of describing the act of speaking: not only do words spoken out loud travel through the air as if on wings, but the wings spoken of here can also denote the "wings" of an arrow – the "feathering" that aerodynamically guides an arrow to its target. Thus "winged words" are words that are not only spoken aloud, but also are spoken with such excellence that they hit their intended mark forcefully and piercingly.

**Stock epithets** (oft-repeated descriptions used to identify characters) are also used by Homer to identify the central quality or qualities of a given character (usually a god or hero.) In an epic poem like the *Iliad*, preserved by oral tradition, they help keep the poet's metrical composition with lines or half-lines to which he may often return while reciting such a long work. They are also helpful aids to the reader or listener's memory of all the different characters. Achilles is "swift-footed," Agamemnon is "shepherd of the people," Hektor is "of the shining helm," Poseidon is the "earth-shaker," Athene is "grey-eyed," and many others are referred to as "god-like" or "brilliant." One example of these stock epithets is of "rosy-fingered Dawn." This is less of a metaphor as much as a reminder for the modern reader that the entire cosmos for the Ancient Greek was brimming with life and personality. Dawn, the goddess Eos, would arise every day to open the gates of heaven for Helios, fingers dripping with the rich colors of the morning dew. An abundance of such images can be found throughout Homer. One of the most important

habits you can begin to inspire in your students is to not simply be struck by something strange and move on, but to be struck by something strange and to *pause*, to ask questions of it. It is not always fruitful to do so at first, but the riches that will begin to unfold for the reader once this habit begins to take hold, especially with Homer, are unparalleled – even and especially for the simplest things – in their beauty.

Though not essential to the plotline or any of the main themes, one fun little factoid is that the *Iliad* contains the first literary reference to cheese (Book XI, line 638). Doesn't that sound appetizing?!

### **Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader's mind? (16)**

One of Homer's most distinctive and masterful poetic strokes lies in his use of **extended similes**, and their beauty, from the quirkiest to the most poignant, is certainly not lost in translation. Rather than simply following the most basic formula of a simile (x is like/as y), an extended simile adds layer upon layer of detail to the comparison, enriching it and illuminating all the more the central subject. Homer's extended similes often provide the reader with important information about the subject they describe, and should always be carefully searched for implied meaning and possible foreshadowing.

For example:

“Now when the men of both sides were set in order by their leaders, / the Trojans came on with clamour and shouting, like wildfowl. / as when the cranes escape the winter time and the rains unceasing / and clamorously wing their way to the streaming Ocean, / bringing to the Pygmaian men bloodshed and destruction: / at daybreak they bring on the baleful battle against them” (III.1-7).

“He blew his life away, bellowing, as when a bull/ bellows as he is dragged for Poseidon, lord of Helike, / and the young men drag him. In such bulls the earth shaker glories. / Such was his bellowing as the proud spirit flitted from his bones” (XX.403-406).

“As when the lord of Hera the lovely-haired flashes his lightning/ as he brings on a great rainstorm, or a hail incessant, / or a blizzard, at such time when the snowfall scatters on ploughlands, / or drives on somewhere on earth the huge edge of tearing battle, / such was Agamemnon, with the beating turmoil in his bosom/ from the deep heart, and all his wits were shaken within him” (X.5-10).

There are two levels of literary analysis that can be attained by looking at these poetic devices: the first is learning to simply notice them; the second is then learning to discern what these devices *perform* for the narrative. This second step is where the true beauty and value of the story as story begins to shine, and this is especially true in Homer's work. This second aspect is always what we are working towards as readers, and to stop

at the first might risk unintentionally making these great works something like oddly patterned wallpaper in your student's mind ("Oh that's nice... what an interesting pattern!").

One of the most important literary questions one can learn to ask is "So what?" By asking variations of the "So what?" question, one can begin to make an ascent into this second level. For example, when Homer writes, "Stones fell to earth like snowflakes which some strong wind / pushing shadowy clouds drives downward in a storm, / so they strike the fertile earth, that's how thick and fast / flying weapons rained down then from Trojans and Achaeans" (Book XII), let yourself be struck by the strangeness of the metaphor. Do stones and weapons really fall like snowflakes? Why would Homer use this metaphor? The interpretations are endless, and endless interpretations should be encouraged! It could be that even the image of something so mundane and common as a snowstorm cannot be invoked without reminding the reader of the bloodshed and violence of war. One is brought for a moment into the familiar, to common weather which perhaps one used to watch silently develop through the window of a warm home, only to be wrenched back into the devastation of rage. Even the soft whiteness of a blanket of snow is disfigured into the blackness of steel and blood. In some terrible way, Homer breaks our whole imagination with rage. Or perhaps one could latch onto the fact that the "fertile earth" is not being planted by seeds, but by infertile weapons. All of this is pure waste, the irony of which is only compounded by the fact that what is harrowing the earth are not the tools of cultivation, but of death. What is the "strong wind?" Could it be the rage of Achilles or the desire of Alexandros or the laments of Helen that have driven these storms over the fields of Ilion? This is a simple exercise, but these kinds of questions are what begin to show to the inquiring mind Homer's work for what it is – a masterpiece. One may not immediately stumble upon the best interpretation of a passage right away (those given above certainly don't make any claim to be so!), but the point is that these metaphors don't only invite noticing, but also engagement, and through many centuries there has been no end to the immense riches that can be discovered in attempting such engagement. The *Iliad's* ability to resound with meaning in the face of these questions are what begin to show the careful reader that this is not in fact simply literary wallpaper, but a Mona Lisa.

The use of **personification** should also receive at least a brief note in passing, simply because in the Homeric imagination – growing as it does out of the rich Greek mythic tradition – personification is not simply a literary device, but a religious and cosmic reality. Almost *all* things are personified in some way, which is to say, they *actually* possess a sort of personhood in the work, and not that they simply *appear* to. Evil Dream plants ideas in Agamemnon's mind, the river fights with Achilles, and so on.

Finally, one astounding example of Homer's use of **imagery** comes as Patroklos takes Achilles's armor for himself. In this moment, Patroklos robes himself in the identity of his friend as he goes into battle, forming a parallel in which Achilles is symbolically struck down by Hektor in the rage of war. Although Achilles in actuality will later take up his own sword and strike down Hektor, in this poetic moment Achilles dies alongside

of Patroklos, and it is only in the death of his pride and honor that he is able to be resurrected to new humility and peace.

**Does the author use characters and events in their story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way? (17)**

Homer relies heavily on **allusions**, as he constantly draws on Greek history, myth, and the host of gods on Mount Olympus. More than simply writing a story, Homer is carefully navigating a broad tradition. He doesn't invent these characters; for the most part, he develops them. Thus one does not fully understand all of the subtleties of Helen's character as Homer himself composes it without knowing both the basic history of her character, and all the ways that history had been interpreted before his time. Similarly, as one reads through the *Iliad*, it is instructive for readers to make similar brief studies of other main characters who might have outside histories, especially as regards the Greek gods and various dynamics among them. Learning who sides with the Trojans and why, who dislikes whom among the gods, and what dominions belong to which gods will help readers execute informed readings. Whenever a reference to a person or place appears in the text that seems to reference some bit of assumed knowledge between Homer and the reader, this is always a great opportunity to encourage students to make a brief study of it. But remember, this is not just for the sake of knowing extra facts. Having that new information can open up deeper nuances and implications of the poem. Similarly, when a character tells a story in the *Iliad*, students should pay special attention to parallels that may emerge. The *Iliad* also is allusive to itself! What is the character telling us about the current situation through their story? How is it similar? How is it different? What would be our impression of the event if they hadn't told that story?

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# QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT



## Who is the author? (18)

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are traditionally ascribed to Homer, the most famous and earliest of Greek epic poets, who likely lived sometime between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, making these works the fountainhead of all Western Literature. Little to nothing is known concerning any specifics about “Homer,” sadly – so little, in fact, that most scholars believe it likely that “Homer” is simply a traditional name given to a collective authorship of multiple poets who each had a hand in the composition of the poems over the course of several generations.

### NOTES:

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# ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS



1. What is the difference between Achilles's rage and the fury the other men demonstrate in battle? Is there a difference? What observations does Homer make about rage and war?
2. What role does fate play in the *Iliad*? How do characters behave when they learn something about their fate? Is there a difference between fate and the will of the gods?
3. Who is the hero of the *Iliad*? Is there a character that fulfills the traditional ideals of a heroic figure? Whether yes or no, explain your answer with specific examples.
4. The story contains many violent deaths with very specific and gruesome descriptions. Why do you think these were included, even for minor characters?
5. Choose an extended metaphor to study. How does this metaphor enrich the text around it? For example, does the metaphor contain any descriptions or implications that provide extra information about the situation it is describing?
6. Research some of the allusions to other parts of Greek myth that seem important to the story, and show how they might clarify or bring light to one of the major themes in the work.
7. Why does Homer occasionally address the characters themselves? Why does he break the narrative to ask the Muse to help him remember the events of the story? What does this reveal about the narrator?
8. What does the work seem to say about the gods? Does it have a high view or a low view of them? What makes the gods different from men? What makes them similar?
9. What is the main conflict of the story? What does Achilles primarily struggle with, and how is this struggle resolved?
10. Reread the passage describing the shield of Achilles. What is the significance of the images on the shield? Since shields are primarily for defense, why is this shield so significant to the story?
11. Does Achilles demonstrate change at the end of the *Iliad*? Why or why not?
12. Is there a "good" side and a "bad" side in the Trojan War? Does the narrator express a bias toward the Achaeans or Trojans? Is one side portrayed as more honorable than the other?

# STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the **climax** and central **themes** of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central **conflict**. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected – even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

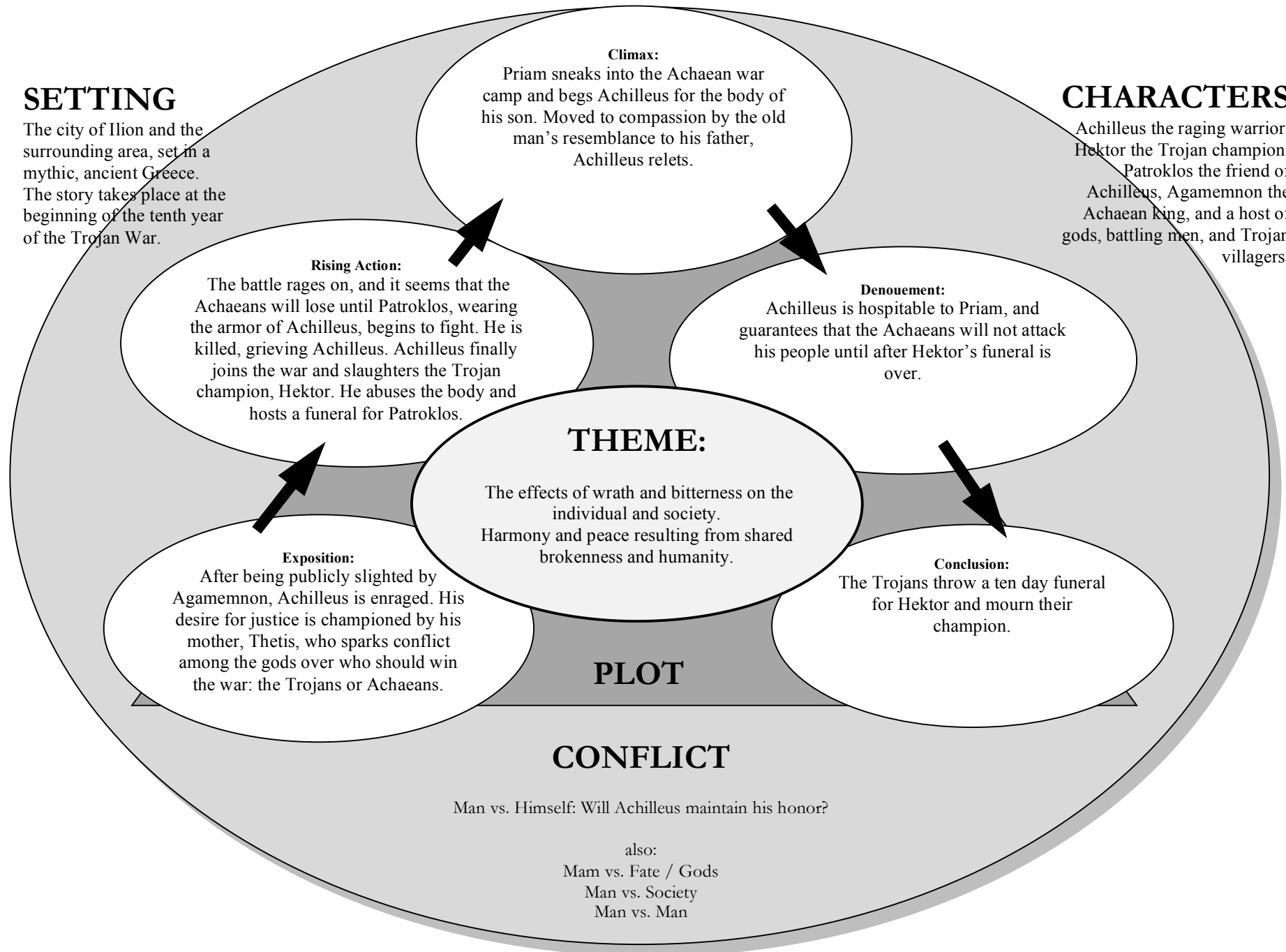
# Homer's *Iliad*: Story Chart

## SETTING

The city of Ilium and the surrounding area, set in a mythic, ancient Greece. The story takes place at the beginning of the tenth year of the Trojan War.

## CHARACTERS

Achilleus the raging warrior, Hektor the Trojan champion, Patroklos the friend of Achilleus, Agamemnon the Achaean king, and a host of gods, battling men, and Trojan villagers.





# Homer's *Iliad*: Blank Story Chart

