

Summer Reading for Great Books 2009-2010

Welcome to the Great Books Summer Reading Adventure! I commend you for choosing a challenging and, it is hoped, life-changing class. In Great Books we read, reread, annotate, discuss, and write about selections from the Greek classics to noted contemporary works, a combination of philosophy and literature. In addition, we will be reading, studying, and testing on chapters in a college philosophy text, as well as completing required Honors Portfolio components. The class is heavy on reading and writing, and writing will be evaluated as in an advanced composition class. NOTE: This is not a class for people who “just like to read”; it is a class which requires students to be open to new ideas and willing to consider perspectives which may differ significantly from their current views. If this describes you, read on; if not, another elective would be a better choice.

Obtain a copy of Homer’s *Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles. This is one of the great epics bequeathed to us by the Greeks. The Fagles translation is the Penguin edition, and it is available at online bookstores and at Amazon.com (where you can buy it used for not very much). Local bookstores know that students need this edition and have agreed to have some in stock.

As you read the epic, follow the study guide below. It will help focus and direct your reading, and I truly believe reading *The Iliad* will be easier for you. You do not have to **write** answers to the questions, but **consider** them because they will enhance your understanding of the epic. We will discuss some or all of them, so be prepared to answer them in class. Be sure to complete your reading before the beginning of school in August as you will take an objective reading check test the **second** week of class after preliminary work on the Great Books method. I am really looking forward to rereading *The Iliad* myself and discussing it with you.

Study Guide for Reading Homer's *Iliad*

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The most important parts of the *Iliad* are Books 1-3, 6, 9, 15-24. Spend the most time on those books, but read the others as well. Keep notes as you read, especially marking what seems important or confusing. I will check your marking of the book and your notes.

Bernard Knox's introduction to the translation will help introduce important themes, concepts and controversies. Read it!

Book 1

(Note that numbers refer to lines in each book, not page numbers. Words in bold designate important characters and concepts.)

The **proem** consists of the first 8 lines. It is a masterpiece of poetic compression; every word counts. What does invoking the **Muse** entail? What is the epic about? What thematic concerns are introduced?

The theme of the mutilation of the corpse will be important throughout the epic.

What, exactly, is the **will of Zeus**?

Mark Edwards writes (in *Homer: The Poet of the Iliad*, p.21): "From the very first lines, Homer will raise the origins of human suffering." What are these origins?

Throughout the first two books, look for details that provide basic information about the war.

8 The descriptive phrases "lord of men" and "brilliant" are verbal **formulas** called **epithets** that regularly accompany the names **Agamemnon** and **Achilles**. Epithets always denote some essential quality. Look for other such epithets. We will discuss formulaic composition in class.

9 What kind of god is **Apollo**? To what does he respond?

29 Study the words and actions of Agamemnon carefully. What is the basis of his authority?

61 Achilles calls an assembly. What is his function in society? Is he usurping Agamemnon's authority? What motivates him here?

100 Note how Agamemnon and Achilles bait each other. Note how they talk about women. With which combatant do you side? Does either have justice on his side? Why is **Briseis** important?

240 Note the way Homer describes Achilles' inner conflict. What kind of psychology is this? **Athena** intervenes. Why? Note how she restrains him. Why does he obey her? Achilles swears by a scepter that he will not fight again; why does he compare himself to the scepter?

290 What is **Nestor** like? What does he urge and why? Do they listen?

420 Achilles calls for his mother, the goddess **Thetis**. Their relationship is extremely important, so study their action carefully. Note what he requests, and keep it in mind later, because his request is not granted in precisely the way he intends. Remember also that in the first line Achilles is called the son of **Peleus**. Through the course of the poem, consider whether his mother or father is more important to him.

490 Thetis first mentions his fate. Consider why this fate is appropriate to Achilles in particular.

590 Homer moves the action to the gods. Do the interactions among the gods parallel those among the humans? In what ways? What do the gods do here that the humans do not? Is there a function in the story for the gods' 12-day absence? You will need to consider the role of the gods throughout the epic.

Book 2

Note the general crisis of indecision in Agamemnon and the consequent crisis of authority, giving rise to the rebellion of the lowly **Thersites**. In what ways is Thersites different from the other Achaeans? Who restores order?

102 The Achaeans are compared to bees in the *Iliad's* first **simile**, a poetic figure comparing two different things. The *Iliad* is famous for its extended similes, also called **epic similes**. What effect do this and other similes have?

Only skim the catalog of heroes towards the end of Book 2. What function does this catalog serve?

Book 3

One feature of Homer's genius is how he manages to include events before and after the war through allusion and symbolism. Throughout this book and the next one Homer alludes to the background and causes of the war, without going into much detail. Look for specific techniques he uses to do so.

The two sides are massed for a mighty conflict, but the poet turns to a single duel between **Menelaus** and **Paris**. Why hasn't this duel occurred before? What function does it have in the story?

145 **Helen** appears. What is she like? Why can't King **Priam**, after nine years, identify the Greek warriors? Note how Homer develops the Trojan character. Are the Trojans presented sympathetically?

428 Why does **Aphrodite** save Paris? What is he like? Study carefully his interaction with Helen, and consider the way she talks about herself.

Book 4

Concentrate on the breaking of the truce by Pandarus. Why and how does he break the truce? Beyond the obvious, what is Homer's point here?

257 Agamemnon begins a minor **aristeia**. **Aristeia** is Ancient Greek, literally: "A warrior's prowess; excellence." In the dramatic conventions of such works as the *Iliad*, this is a scene in which a hero in battle has her or his finest moments (*aristos* = best). It is usually associated with men but can be expanded also to encompass women (as in the

case of Andromache). In the latter case, the *aristeia* is of a different sort, grief. The elements of the scene and the order in which they appear in the *Iliad* are:

1. Arming scene
2. Brilliance of armor/hero
3. Exhortation to followers
4. Initial exploit
5. Setback (wounding)
6. Divine inspiration
7. Renewed exploits
8. Double simile
9. The kill
10. Every major hero will have an *aristeia*, though Agamemnon's comes later. Look for a pattern of action after a couple of instances; because the traditional nature of Homeric poetry tends to use such patterns; these moments are called **typical scenes**.

Book 5

Diomedes has his *aristeia*, under the protection of Athena. Does her help detract from his glory or magnify it? Why can Diomedes now recognize other gods on the battlefield? Why does Athena want Aphrodite injured? (How can a god be injured, anyway?)

680 **Hector** intervenes. Given that Hector is the most important Trojan fighter, why does Homer keep him in the background for so long? Keep track of his epithets. Note the simile comparing Hector to a roaring river and remember it the next time a river is involved in a simile about Hector.

800 Note how the gods are becoming more directly involved in the fighting. What does this signify?

990 Diomedes wounds **Ares**. Compare the reactions of humans and gods when they are injured.

Book 6

140 Study the exchange of Glaucus and Diomedes, who agree not to kill each other. Why? What is the ethic here? Note Homer's comment on their armor trade.

290 This is Hector's book. Here we see who, what, and why he is. How does the narrator seem to feel about Hector? Compare and contrast his heroism with Achilles. Consider his relations with women. Note his self-consciousness about the inevitable fate of Troy and his family (520). What, exactly, motivates him to keep fighting? Do you see anything potentially wrong or self-contradictory with his reasoning? Don't sentimentalize his hopes for his son too much.

Book 7

Hector and Paris return to battle. Two further abortive attempts to end the war. Hector and Ajax duel, the latter having been chosen by lot; note how chance matches nature, since Ajax is the best fighter after Achilles. Apollo and Athena watch "like vultures" (65). Note Hector's bargain concerning the return of corpses, for this will be important later. Do you think Hector is growing or shrinking in stature? Afterwards, the Trojans consider returning Helen (400), and a truce is called to burn the bodies of the fallen warriors. Divine discussion of the battlements built on the pyre (500) raises the theme of **human arrogance and weakness**.

Book 8

Zeus bans further divine intervention. Note the magnificent image of Zeus' scales (80); this will return later. Zeus signals the Greeks' collapse, but still pities (280 ff.); is he confused? Given that the proem told us that these events are the will of Zeus, what does Zeus really want?

400 Athena and Hera rebel, but Zeus recalls them, with the sudden first account of the **fated death of Patroclus**. Is this what Achilles and Thetis had in mind? Why "must" Patroclus die?

580 Hector, flush with glory, decides to camp on the plain; is he being reckless here? Note the beautiful, yet somehow ominous, simile at the end of the book. What effect does this simile have?

Book 9

An important book. Agamemnon admits his error and sends an **embassy to Achilles**, consisting of Odysseus, Phoenix and **Ajax**. Consider why these three in particular go. Compare Agamemnon's instructions with what actually happens, focusing in particular on the conduct of **Odysseus**.

This book is so dramatic, tense and emotional that one could stage it as a play. True to Zeus' promise, the Greeks are begging Achilles to return. Agamemnon offers boundless riches, yet Achilles feels it is not enough to repair his honor; why? Do you think he is right? Odysseus repeats Agamemnon's speech verbatim except for the last lines: why? Study closely to what values the warriors appeal in trying to persuade him. Note the graciousness with which Achilles receives them, but the rage he displays in his response. His speech ranges brilliantly, at times almost incoherent, often returning to the same point obsessively. How, if at all, has he changed from Book 2? He says he will go home, but is this a real option? Note that he is easily convinced to hold back until the Trojans reach his ships. In general, do you feel that Achilles is being unjust in this book?

Phoenix attempts to persuade Achilles by telling him a story about Meleager. Do you see any parallels between the myths of Meleager and Achilles? Do you see any potential significance in the name Cleopatra? Ajax's speech, given what happens to him after the war, is filled with irony. Note that Ajax seems to have the most impact on Achilles.

Book 10

To boost morale, Diomedes and Odysseus go out on a night raid against the Trojan camps. Consider how this episode could foreshadow the later fall of Troy. Note also how Hector's arrogance has placed his men in danger.

Book 11

Agamemnon's *aristeia*. Compare it to Diomedes' in Book 5, and try to discern a pattern. Note also that when he is finally wounded his pain is compared to a woman in labor !! (310) Diomedes wounds Hector and Paris wounds Diomedes. Odysseus fights alone, but is saved by Ajax and Menelaus. Paris wounds Machaon. This will become very important, so watch for its consequences, beginning at 705. Nestor gives Patroclus the idea of wearing Achilles' armor. One by one, the Achaeans are falling.

Book 12

Look for ways in which this book and the next set the stage for Hector's fall, as his success makes him progressively more reckless. Look for warnings **Polydamas** gives Hector, and note where and why he stops listening.

1-40 Again, Homer extends the poem's range beyond its plot, thus imparting a greater sense of inevitability to its action.

320 Pay close attention to this simile and its effect.

340 **Sarpedon** and Glaucus (compare this scene with Glaucus and Diomedes in Book 6) give the most complete statement of the heroic code. Why do heroes risk their lives? Note how the awareness of mortality changes everything. Compare their ethos with Achilles' speech in Book 9.

530 Hector crashes through the gates. Note how Homer shows us Hector is simultaneously totally victorious and totally out of control.

Book 13

Poseidon intervenes for the Achaeans

160 Compare this simile to the earlier one comparing Hector to a river. What has changed?

780 Hector is ignorant that the Achaeans have fought back.

840 Polydamas warns Hector for the third time, stopping, temporarily his recklessness.

Book 14

Amid the carnage, Homer breaks the tension with this amusing interlude.

First, Agamemnon proposes leaving, and in response Odysseus and Diomedes revile him.

375 Note Zeus' rather odd idea of flattery to his wife.

490 Zeus asleep, Ajax knocks out Hector. What does this tell you about Hector?

Note the pattern: Greeks win in Bks 11 & 14, Trojans win in Bks 12 & 15, leaving Bk 13 as an interlude.

After Book 13, concentrate on Bks 16-18, 22, and 24, although all of the Books after 16 are important.

Book 15

Zeus wakes up and is not happy, and thus cleans up the mess. Apollo helps Hector recover. Following the forecast of Patroclus' death in Book 8, Zeus now augments his prophecy to include, for the first time, Hector. Why does this happen here? Ajax thwarts efforts to burn the ships.

Book 16

Patroclus convinces Achilles to let him enter battle wearing his **armor**. Why doesn't Achilles go himself? If he is so insistent on not participating, why send Patroclus? This is the fourth time someone has begged him (Book 9), and, as usual, the fourth time is the charm. Think about the potential symbolism of the armor. What part of Achilles' armor does Patroclus leave behind? Note the description of his armor compared to those of Diomedes, Agamemnon and Hector before their *aristeiae*. Pay careful attention to Achilles' instructions to Patroclus, and the similes describing the Myrmidon warriors.

Patroclus kills **Sarpedon**, Zeus' son, whom Zeus considers saving. Why doesn't he? What happens to Sarpedon? This is the first important death in the epic, beginning the sequence that leads to Hector's death. Look for changes in the narrative tone and level of elaboration.

What happens to Patroclus after killing Sarpedon? Look at the descriptions of his mind and emotions.

As Patroclus approaches the wall, the tone of the poem begins to take on a surreal tone it will keep until the end of the epic. Note the heavy stress on the future, on inevitability.

Is Patroclus diminished in the end or exalted? Is Hector's conquest of him glorious? Note that, despite the intention of tricking the Trojans to think that Achilles has returned, they never think that. Why do you think this is so? What effect would it have had on the story if Hector had bent over the dead Patroclus and said, "It's only Patroclus."

Hector says he will give Patroclus' corpse to the vultures; consider the ramifications. And does Hector have a realistic idea of his role in the death of Patroclus?

Book 17

The battle over the hero's corpse. Do you see any significance in Menelaus being the first defender of Patroclus' body, "braced like a mother cow lowing over a calf" (5)? Menelaus himself talks about this.

Is Zeus' attitude to Hector changing? Why or why not?

Hector dons the armor of Achilles; symbolism? (220)

305 Zeus draws a mist over the scene.

500 Zeus laments Achilles' immortal horses, who mourn Patroclus, and Zeus launches into a meditation on human mortality. Ajax, once again, is the main defender. The Achaeans worry about Achilles' reaction and send Nestor's son Antilochus.

Book 18

Achilles has sensed his friend's death, recalling an earlier prophecy about living to see the death of the best of the Myrmidons. Zeus' plan has now been fulfilled and the story changes from Achilles' anger and withdrawal to his revenge. The different scenes in this book are alternated to show the events that will finally bring Achilles and Hector together.

How does Homer evoke not just Patroclus' death, but Achilles' as well? Note that his mother begins to lament him while he is still alive (as the Trojan women did for Hector).

The need for armor serves the function of preventing Achilles from merely charging out, saving Patroclus, and killing Hector immediately. How would the story be different to you if this had happened?

Does Achilles accept responsibility for his friend's death?

Achilles does not even need to appear for the battle to turn. How?

Is Hector's attitude after killing Patroclus like Patroclus' after killing Sarpedon?

Note the anger of the gods.

Thetis' visit to Hephaestus is a welcome interlude. She gives the full story of her marriage (finally!) and says Apollo, not Hector, killed Patroclus; is this the way you see it? She asks for new armor for her son. The divine armor gives a further poignancy to her son's mortality. The new shield of Achilles allows Homer a delineation of normal human life, of which the heroic is an exceptional part.

Think about the shield and what is represented. What image of life does Homer provide? What does the shield evoke? Can you draw the shield based on Homer's description?

Book 19

Thetis brings new armor to Achilles, which terrifies everyone else. Achilles announces the end of his anger, and Agamemnon attributes his error to *Ate*, "folly"; is he being serious, or making excuses? Does Achilles really care about the gifts?

What does his refusal to eat signify? Note that the gods put **ambrosia** in him; where else has ambrosia appeared?

Briseis has essentially been exchanged for Patroclus; does Achilles seem to realize this? Note her lamentation for Patroclus. Achilles has re-entered battle, but has he re-entered the society of warriors?

Achilles, entering battle, talks to his horses, and the narrative re-enters the realm of the fantastic.

Book 20

Having fulfilled his promise to Thetis, Zeus unleashes all the gods. Why?

Note how the other Achaean heroes disappear for several books. Achilles begins his wholesale slaughter, and a premature meeting with Hector is aborted by Apollo.

How is Achilles' *aristeia* similar to and different from others'?

Book 21

Achilles fills the river Xanthus with corpses, and the river god rebels and attacks Achilles, who is only saved by Hephaestus. This cosmological conflict is quite different from other divine petty quarrels. Note that Achilles is bathed in both fire and water.

Athena and Ares fight; does Homer's description of this fight sound familiar? What is the function of this scene?

Agenor attempts to hold off Achilles, but Apollo saves Agenor and assumes his form, leading Achilles astray.

Book 22

Pay close attention to the descriptions of Achilles and Hector in this book. Note that Homer generally presents Achilles here through the eyes of others.

How do Hecuba and Priam attempt to persuade Hector to withdraw? Why does he refuse? What does Hector realize about himself?

Study carefully the conduct of the gods from line 220 on. Again, do the gods lessen Achilles' victory or do they merely confirm it?

How do you feel about Hector, Achilles, and the other Achaeans during Hector's death and shortly after?

Achilles' vengeance is now complete, but the book has shown us little of his thought and much of Hector's. The plot is now complete, and thus Achilles' continuing rage is stressed even more. Why is Achilles still angry?

Book 23

How does Homer suggest Achilles' separation from humanity here, his symbolic death? The funeral games for Patroclus attempt to re-integrate Achilles into society. Is this successful? They also foreshadow events after the war. Has Achilles grown? Has he learned?

Book 24

This consists of three type scenes: the divine visitation of Thetis to Achilles; the suppliant scene of Priam to Achilles; and the burial of Hector. Compare gods and humans in terms of emotions and morality in this book.

Some scholars have seen Priam's trip to Achilles' tent as a symbolic journey to Hades; how so?

Why does Achilles surrender Hector? How do Priam and Achilles console one another and bring each other back to humanity? Do you think that Achilles has grown as an

individual and learned wisdom about himself and the world, or is he the same Achilles as before?

Think about this book on your own. It is one of the most profound and moving episodes in all of literature. In what ways is it cathartic?

Organization and structure of the Iliad

Iliad Book	Time	Event
Book One	1 + 9 + 1 days	Supplication + Plague + Quarrel
	12 days	divine absence (inert time)
Books 2-7	Day 1	1st battle (7.475 night falls)
Book 8	Day 2	2nd battle; Greeks beaten back
Book 9	Night 2	Embassy, Doloneia (Hector warned)
Books 11-18	Day 3	3rd battle; the big one; mist changes tone at end 17 Death of Sarpedon 18 Death of Patroclus
Book 18	Night 3	Thetis and Achilles; shield
Books 19-22	Day 4	19: reconciliation with Agamemnon 20: Theomachia 21: River 22: Death of Hector
Book 23	Night 4	<i>psyche</i> of Patroclus visits Achilles
Book 23	Day 5	Funeral Games
Book 24	Night 5	Achilles sleepless
	12 days	Hector exposed, Priam visits Achilles at night
	9 days	mourning for Hector (inert time)
		Hector buried
