

The Death of Hector (The Iliad)

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Background

- Along with The Odyssey, one of the two major epic poems of early Greek literature.
- Traditionally associated with Homer, the blind poet, both works were probably oral tradition finally solidified by Homer into coherent texts. It is hypothesized by some that Homer was actually a group of people, or a woman.
- Homer is traditionally considered to have been a **rhapsode**, a member of a class of bards that were the primary means of transmitting important cultural stories.
- The poems were probably composed around 850 BCE.

The Story

- The Iliad is concerned with several weeks of action during the final year of the 10 year long Trojan War. It begins with an argument between the strongest Greek hero, Achilles and his Agamemnon, the brother of the Greek King Menelaus,
- The Iliad does not contain the background story about the cause of the war, which was the theft of Helen, the wife of Menelaus, taken away by Paris. Helen is known in literature as “the face that launched a thousand ships”, because almost the entire Greek world was involved in the war, either attacking, or defending, Troy.

Achilles

- Achilles was the son of Peleus and the sea nymph Thetis. She decided to make her son invincible by dipping him in the river Styx, but forgot to wet the heel she held him by, leaving him vulnerable so he could be killed by a blow to that heel. Interestingly, Homer never mentions this.
- Achilles is seen as a god-like figure (and described as such) by Homer. Both his physical ability and attitude are almost inhuman in their absoluteness. When Achilles fights, he creates “rivers of blood.” When he is angry, it is absolute. He represents an ideal hero in one sense, but an incomplete one, because he is not human.
- Some critics argue that one of the major themes of The Iliad is the humanization of Achilles, before his death at the hands of Paris.

Hector

- Along with Achilles, the central figure of The Iliad. He is an interesting character because, though he is the opponent of Achilles in the war, he is not a villain. In fact, in many ways, he is a more sympathetic and likeable character than Achilles.
- He is a defender of his homeland, and a powerfully human figure. His farewell to his son, his negotiation with Achilles before the battle, and his death mark him as a figure worthy of both praise and pity.
- At his defeat, he is dishonored by Achilles, dragged around the city and left for animals.
- The reaction of the parents of Hector (Priam and Hecuba) further humanizes his character, demonstrating him to be a man held in high regard by others.

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Literary Terms

- The poem is written in **dactylic hexameter**, a meter consisting of six stressed syllables per line. This structured, formulaic meter aided in memorization.
- **Stock epithets or Homeric epithets** are the combination of adjectives and nouns to make compound adjectives to describe a character or scene. Two famous examples include “swift-footed Achilles” and “white-armed Hera”. These epithets are repeated throughout the work, and define the character in simple, easy-to-understand terms
- **Epic Similes** are employed by writers of literary epics to enhance their narrative style. A formal, sustained simile, an epic simile elaborates the comparison between the primary subject (tenor) and the secondary subject (vehicle) beyond the close analogy of a standard simile. Often, despite their implicit character, epic similes accomplish a more effective portrayal of elements in the poem than explicit descriptions.

*As when the shudder of the west wind
suddenly rising scatters across the water,
and the water darkens beneath it, so
darkening were settled the ranks of
Achaians and Trojans in...*

- **In Media Res:** Homer jumps into the middle of the action in the Iliad, drawing the reader immediately into the events of the narrative
- **Invocation.** The Iliad begins with an invocation, or formal plea for aid to the Muse Calliope. The Muses were charged with the arts and sciences. The invocation serves to state the epic’s subject and theme.

