

In the Pursuit of Perception: The Epic Education of Achilles

Sean P. Kerrigan

Course: ENGL 351

Instructor: Dr. Mary Sue Ply

Essay Type: Research Paper

Within the annals of epic literature, the celebrated role of "epic hero" has always been present, heralding the poem's themes through the actions of a single, extraordinary protagonist. Strong and courageous, he is caught within the nets of mortality, and, at times, he may struggle to replace his worldly desires with celestial knowledge. In profound ways, he can even embody the mythological ideals of a civilization, and, through his many perilous adventures and profound encounters, the course of his identity may shift in focus towards something greater than himself. Through this change in his character, one can observe the universal plight of humanity in greater detail and discover how one must overcome certain obstacles to understand the complex nature of the gods. In Homer's *The Iliad*, such an "epic education" can be found within the account of Achilles, who, through his slow transition from an excessively angry brooder to a compassionate symbol of self-sacrifice, matures into a character that is more in tune with divine enlightenment.

At the beginning of *The Iliad*, Achilles is observed as being insulted by Agamemnon and getting caught within a web of anger; this state of rage distinguishes the ignorance of his character at the beginning of his "education." The pinnacle of this ignorance can be observed when Achilles is about to kill Agamemnon, "his spirit racing... drawing his huge blade from its sheath" (1.227-228). With this action, Achilles demonstrates his complete reliance on brutality and the more violent, primitive forms of justice, giving credence to his association with a "lion... [whose] deadly energy... [is] the brute force of beasts..." (King 19). At this stage of his development, he is shown as being susceptible only to his anger, and the goddess Athena has to

swoop down from the sky to remind Achilles that he is not acting in accordance with divine virtue: "check your rage if only you will yield... Obey [the gods]" (1.242-251). In this scene, "Achilles has spoken and acted thoughtlessly...he sees a point and goes straight to it, feels an emotion and gives way to it immediately" (Redfield 90). This incident, however, also marks the beginning of his journey to overcome this pride as he acknowledges the words of the goddess in the noble response: "If a man obeys the gods they're quick to hear his prayers" (1.256-257). This simple statement signifies that Achilles is able to understand the knowledge of the gods and that he has an ability to decipher and accept these divine virtues.

However, this type of development will come much later in the poem. Throughout the first half of *The Iliad*, Achilles is an arrogant and selfish character, especially when he reacts negatively to the Achaean embassy that has been sent to persuade him to rejoin the battle and displays "an irrational impulse of anger" (Schein 115). Odysseus begs Achilles to "at least take pity on all our united forces mauled in battle" (9.365-366), providing a reasonable request for Achilles to look past his own petty dispute with Agamemnon and, instead, fight for the honor and safety of his dearest comrades whose trust should not be betrayed. However, paralyzed in his anger over the insults of Agamemnon (Schein 115), he will not budge from his views: "Not for all the world," he insists, "nor will all the rest of Achaea's armies [persuade me]" (9.381-382). His selfishness is made even more apparent when he agrees to fight only if his own ships are attacked. This absence of sympathy for his innocent countrymen, who had no involvement in his quarrel with Agamemnon, shows that Achilles is still concerned only with himself. This notion is confirmed in his response to the words of another ambassador, his old friend and mentor, Phoenix. When Phoenix tries to persuade Achilles with images of familial duty, exclaiming, "I made you my son, I tried, / so someday *you* might fight disaster off my back" (9.599-600),

Achilles is still not moved to acknowledge his own excessive pride, shunning the value of the father-son relationship because his "heart still heaves with rage... [at] that arrogance of his... that son of Atreus treating [him] like some vagabond" (9.789-792). At this stage of his education, Achilles is still overpowered by his need for glory and vengeance, and he continues to be an "isolated, inhibited, and dislocated figure"(Schein 115).

The significant shift in Achilles' character occurs with the death of his dearest friend Patroclus (Van Nortwick 58), which directs his anger to produce a more altruistic objective for his actions that involves restoring the honor of this fallen companion before his own. The notion that Achilles grows as a character before his selfless re-entrance into the war, being only interested in avenging the spirit of Patroclus, can first be seen in Achilles' refutations of his glory-seeking acts from the beginning of the poem. Acknowledging his unnecessary pride, Achilles states that "[Patroclus] perished, / lacking me, my fighting strength, to defend him" (18.116-117), and realizes that he did not "bring one ray of hope to [his] Patroclus, / nor to the rest of all [his] steadfast comrades" (18.119-120) when he was needed most. This initial realization of his past destructiveness allows him to temporarily look past his individual pursuits for glory and focus on a more enlightened path of action that acknowledges the thoughts and feelings of others before focusing on personal, material triumphs.

This crucial step in Achilles' education is realized more specifically in his words spoken to the body of Patroclus before entering the battlefield: "Here in front of your flaming pyre I'll cut the throats / of a dozen sons of Troy in all their shining glory, / venting my rage on them for your destruction!" (18.392-394). This short proclamation perfectly exemplifies the new feelings of an evolving Achilles; at the beginning of the poem, "Achilles [saw] the world through the heroic prism, valuing individual honor above the common good" (Van Nortwick 62), but, with

this new perspective, Achilles has begun to look past his own needs in order to preserve the honor of Patroclus. The fact that he is receiving no rewards for this action and is actually acknowledging it as a means for self-sacrifice (King 7), recognizing that "this alien earth I stride / will hold me down [in death] at last" (18.386-387), shows that he is even willing to forgo his glory and worldly desire indefinitely to defend this principle, since he knows that returning to battle will result in his imminent death. In forfeiting his life, Achilles exemplifies a great selflessness, and advances as a character to a large extent. Even if Achilles indulges in excesses of pride during battle, such as arrogantly fighting the river Xanthus or unnecessarily defacing the corpse of Hector, the severity of these actions stems not from his need for glory but from his overwhelming desire to preserve the honor of Patroclus. For example, the fact that Achilles' action of gathering twelve Trojans in a cage to be slaughtered at a later time was performed "as the blood price for Patroclus' death" (21.32) shows that such a deed, normally considered to be nothing but a selfish and heinous means for Greek triumph, has a more noble and selfless purpose in the eyes of the "educated" Achilles.

The character of Achilles continues to progress positively over the course of the poem, as he overcomes the pride that plagued him throughout his fight with Agamemnon to reconcile with this former enemy in Book 19. As Achilles speaks to Agamemnon, who came to urge Achilles to rejoin the battle, he questions "was it better for both of us, after all, for you and me to rage at each other, raked by anguish, consumed by heartsick strife, all for a young girl?" (19.63-64). He finally comes to the realization that, while he was acting selfishly in response to Agamemnon's insult, he was actually providing support "for Hector and Hector's Trojans...not for the Argives" (19.71-72), allowing his comrades to be "brought down by enemy hands while [he] raged on and on" (19.70). This mature understanding of his fault reveals a more responsible Achilles, where

"despite [his] anguish [he] will beat it down" (19.75) and recognize that it is "wrong to keep on raging, heart inflamed forever" (19.78).

The elaborate funeral games held for Patroclus also display a further change in Achilles as his "mood seems to change to a controlled, detached sociability" (Schein 156). He continues to exercise his new selfless nature as a proper and gracious host of the funeral games, solving petty disputes between competitors like Ajax and Idomeneus, "[standing] up to calm them" (23.548). This simple action shows a more refined and courteous attitude towards violence within Achilles, who simply wishes to find peace in the midst of Patroclus' memorial service. He even conquers his past reliance on prizes, as symbols of the worldly glory he was once a slave to, by not competing in the games and by "award[ing] extra prizes and honor to Nestor and Eumelos, and a first prize to Agamemnon, in a courtly considerate fashion" (Schein 156). This observance of Agamemnon's authority, especially, signifies Achilles as having radically shifted in character, from a self-centered warrior that pouted by his ships, to a more mature leader.

However, the completion of Achilles' epic education can be observed in "the final reconciliation with Priam, which in Homer's version profoundly alters the reader's understanding of what it means to be both human and 'best'" (King 2). Looking upon Priam, who has come to him to beg for the body of his fallen son Hector, Achilles is "stirred...to grieve for his own father" (24.592-593) and is "filled with pity now for [Priam's] gray head and gray beard" (24.603). Achilles, in order to become enlightened, must "not simply feel his [Hector's] father's grief but... use such feelings as a means of understanding the emotions that characterize the relationship between other fathers and sons as well" (Clark 10). With this acknowledgment of the father-son relationship and the sanctity it represents, Achilles finally reaches an understanding of divine virtue - an understanding that was previously absent in his rejection of Phoenix's speech in

Book 9, which professed the need for Achilles to return to battle out of a filial duty for him as a surrogate father.

Priam's display of humility also moves Achilles and "enables him to feel the generosity and humanity, the *philotes*, that his sorrow and anger had suppressed" (Schein 159). Priam, in fulfilling the wish of the goddess Iris, who directed him to retrieve Hector's body, and Achilles, in showing compassion and acknowledging the gods' desire for him to return the corpse, show a parallel acceptance of moral duty that signifies a respect for the divine (Clark 9). It is this respect that now shines in Achilles, and his self-control around Priam signifies that he no longer "merge [s] with the lion," and instead \ allows his "humanity [to win] victory" (King 43). In fact, this virtue is so dominant in the "educated" Achilles that he overrides his "sense of loyalty to Patroclus, to whom he apologizes passionately... [as he releases] Hector's corpse" (Schein 160-161) to Priam. This self-sacrifice is performed in the name of the gods, as Achilles obeys their wishes and completes his cycle of selflessness with a greater comprehension of divine presence; with this recognition of the gods, Achilles displays that he is willing to abandon his most important personal goal on earth (avenging Patroclus through the punishment of the Trojans) to obey the gods. Achilles is no longer an egocentric individual - since the death of Patroclus, he has been thoroughly "educated" in selflessness, and it is only through this trait that Achilles could have successfully "broken bread" with Priam, recognized this enemy's humanity, and found his own maturity in the process.

Within Homer's classic *The Iliad*, the character of Achilles fulfills a common convention within epic literature with his movement in perspective throughout the poem from ignorant man of superficial thought to sensitive arbiter of divine will. By examining this path, leading to an understanding of nature, with all of its twists and turns of glorious distraction, one can possibly

gain insight into his or her own road of life and its multi-faceted approaches to celestial virtue. For Achilles, reaching this epiphany was a process that involved giving up his own humanity to perceive the individual needs of others. By exercising this pity, most notably for Priam, Achilles became far less selfish and self-absorbed than he had been in the past and discovered the possibilities within himself that lay beyond the superficial weaknesses that plague the journeys of all men.

Works Cited

- Clark, Matthew. "Chryses' Supplication: Speech Act and Mythological Allusion." *Classical Antiquity* 17 (1998): 5-20. *Expanded Academic ASAP*. Online. LOUIS. 28 Nov. 2001.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1991.
- Redfield, James M. "The Wrath of Achilles as Tragic Error." *Essays on The Iliad: Selected Modern Criticism*. Ed. John Wright. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978. 85-92.
- King, Katherine C. *Achilles: Paradigms of the War Hero from Homer to the Middle Ages*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.
- Schein, Seth L. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984.
- Van Nortwick, Thomas. *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled: The Second Self and the Hero's Journey in Ancient Epic*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Sean P. Kerrigan is an English and Biology major. Dr. Mary Sue Ply was his professor.

Dr. Ply's Comments: *I recommended that he submit the paper for inclusion in The Pick because it was well-organized and developed; the thesis was argued in a logical fashion; material from primary and secondary sources was well-documented and integrated smoothly into the text; his style was clear, with varied and sophisticated sentence structures and concrete vocabulary; and the paper demonstrated excellent command of grammar and mechanics. I have no doubt that Sean's ability to read, analyze, and write about literature will continue to mature.*